

**When the source country becomes the host country:
International students' motivations for studying in China**

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Abstract

Currently over five million students migrate overseas to complete their tertiary education. With more than 50 countries vying for international students and the number of mobile students expected to increase to 8 million by 2025, the international education industry is extremely competitive. As China is the largest source country of international students in the world, international education scholarship has focused on exploring the unidirectional, vertical flow of Eastern students, particularly students from China, studying in Western, English-speaking countries. Despite China's rise to become one of the leading host countries of international students, little research has investigated the reverse flow of students selecting an Eastern country, specifically China, as a study destination.

Existing literature depicts the decision to study overseas as a high-risk, research extensive decision-making process, which requires host destinations to provide a wealth of information in order to feature in students' consideration set. Students are influenced by various push-pull factors, interpersonal sources and information sources. Previous research has shown that the pull factors which attract students from developing countries to study in a developed country include the country's reputation, the perceived standard of the education system, safety, geographic proximity to home, cost of living, overseas programmes being considered as superior to the programmes available in their home country and social influences. However, extant minimal research which has explored motivations for international students choosing to study in developing countries, such as China, has produced conflicting results.

To address these aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to provide a detailed understanding of why international students choose China, how they make their decision and their experiences of studying in China. Adopting an exploratory, qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 international students from a range of different nationalities. Interviews discussed students' motivations for choosing China as a study destination, the factors which influenced their decision, and their experiences of studying in China. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data to reveal 14 key themes.

The findings revealed that university reputation is the most influential factor in international students' decisions to study in China. Therefore, education quality is of

paramount importance to students considering China as a study destination. Economic factors, specifically perceived increased career prospects and China's rise as an emerging superpower also exerted a strong influence on students' decisions. Undergraduate students' decision to study in China was heavily influenced by their parents, particularly for students of Chinese descent, whereas postgraduate students were influenced by their teachers. Scholarships and low cost of tuition played a contributing factor in students decision to choose China as a study destination.

Students conducted minimal research prior to deciding to study in China and adopted a "give it a shot" attitude. Nevertheless, they reported their experience of studying in China as positive. The opportunity to overcome the challenges of studying in China is considered advantageous and results in enhanced self-esteem and the creation of a unique identity that differentiates students from their peers who study in more traditional host destinations.

This research contributes insight into the multidirectional flow of international education, specifically, international students' decision to study in China. Contributions towards both theory and practice are provided. A theoretical model describing the factors which motivate international students to choose China as a host destination is presented. Managerial implications and recommendations to assist the Chinese government and universities in achieving their international education goals are provided.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Signature

22/10/2019

Date

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Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was received from Auckland University Ethics Committee on 23 July 2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/281.

List of definitions

<i>BRI:</i>	The Belt and Road Initiative is a global development strategy being implemented by the Chinese government to develop trade and infrastructure with many countries across Asia, Europe, Oceania and Africa. This initiative was formerly named One Belt, One Road (OBOR).
<i>Gaokao:</i>	The standardized national university entrance exam in China.
<i>Home country:</i>	The country where the international student permanently resides.
<i>Host country:</i>	The overseas country where the international student studies.
<i>Host university:</i>	The overseas university where the international student is enrolled in an education programme.
<i>HSK:</i>	Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi is China's standardized test of Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers.
<i>International student:</i>	A student who studies in a country of which they are not a citizen.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The education industry is the second largest market in the world, with an estimated global expenditure of USD\$4.5 trillion in 2012 (Her Majesty's Government [HM Government], 2013). International education is a multi-billion dollar industry which receives enormous investment (Maringe, 2006). The number of tertiary international students studying overseas has risen dramatically in the past few decades, increasing from 2 million in 1998 to over 5 million in 2017 (OECD, 2019). The demand for international education is predicted to continue to increase exponentially, with an anticipated 8 million international students in 2025 (Altbach, 2004).

With more than 50 countries competing for market share, the international education industry is extremely competitive (Abubakar, Shanka & Muuka, 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Gatfield & Chen, 2008). International education is of interest to universities, business leaders and the government, primarily because it provides economic benefit and serves national agendas. For leading study destinations, the economic advantages of education exports are substantial. For example, education exports in the U.K. alone contributed approximately £20 billion to the economy and supported almost 1 million jobs in 2016 (HM Government, 2019). International student mobility also mitigates skill shortages in the labour force, strengthens soft power across borders, enhances research capacity and allows the exchange of ideas for mutual benefit (HM Government, 2019; ICEF, 2015; King & Sondhi, 2018). Therefore, traditional source countries of international students, such as China, are also vying for inbound students and governments are contributing significant investments to grow their market share (Parr, 2018; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

The choice of China as a study destination is a fascinating and understudied area of research for international education marketing. Though international education scholarship has long examined the determinants driving the vertical flow of Eastern students, particularly students from China, to study in Western countries (Chen, 2007; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Tan, 2015; Yang, 2007), scant research has examined what motivates students to reverse the flow and select an Eastern country, specifically China, as a place to complete their education.

1.1 Background of the research

China has recently become the third most popular host destination for international students in the world and is expected to compete with the U.K. for second place in the next few years (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018; Pemberton, 2016). Despite China's rise as an international student destination, little research has explored the consumer behaviour which motivates this decision (Jiani, 2017). In contrast, there is a wealth of research that has investigated the factors which influence the traditional, unidirectional flow of students from developing countries studying in developed countries (Bista, Sharma & Gaulee, 2018). The majority of research has focused on identifying why Asian students choose to study in the U.S., U.K. or Australia (Abubakar et al., 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2005; Tan, 2015; Yang, 2007). However, recent trends show that international student migration is multidirectional, therefore, research is required to understand why students from both developing and developed countries select a developing country such as China to be their host destination (Jiani, 2017).

The dominant theoretical framework in international student migration research is the push-pull model (Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wadhwa, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2018). Push factors are political, social and economic forces which are typically negative and operate in students home country motivating them to study overseas. Whereas, pull factors are positive aspects of a study destination which influence students to study there (Mazzarol, Kemp & Savery, 1997). Recent research has found that intrinsic factors also motivate international students to study in a foreign country (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Lee, 2014).

The selection of study destination is often the most important decision that students have made to date (Cai & Loo, 2014; Mazzarol, 1998). As an overseas education is an intangible service which cannot be experienced in advance of purchase, it is considered a high-risk purchase which entails extensive decision-making (Cubillo, Sánchez & Cerviño, 2006). Previous research has provided conflicting results regarding international students' decision-making process. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed that the decision to study overseas is a three-stage sequential process, whereby students first decide to study locally or overseas, then they choose the host country, followed by the host institution. However, recent research has discovered that the decision-making process is more intertwined, and some decisions are made simultaneously (Cai, Wei, Lu & Day, 2015; Jiani, 2017). Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between the

perceived risk of a purchase and the effort invested in problem-solving and searching for information. Students aim to mitigate the risk of their decision by conducting an extensive information search to reduce post-purchase dissonance (Galan, Lawley & Clements, 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Shu & Scott, 2014). However, there is a lack of research which has explored how international students make their decision to study in China and the information sources required. This study aims to address this gap by presenting a deeper understanding of students' decision-making processes, including the information sources and factors which influence their decision. This insight is useful for universities and governments to ensure that they are meeting prospective students' information needs and targeting their promotion to the decision-maker.

A challenge which accompanies the benefits of an influx of international students is ensuring sufficient support services to assist students to assimilate in their new environment. Despite universities and government investment in international education, student support provision and academic standards often fail to meet students' expectations (Bista et al., 2018; Ding, 2016). For universities and governments to be successful in achieving their international student recruitment goals, it is essential that students' experience of studying overseas is positive. Therefore, research is required to determine students' perceptions of their experiences and whether their expectations are being met, as the expectation-confirmation theory posits that consumers' evaluation of their post-purchase satisfaction is dependent upon how their experiences compare with their expectations (Kim, 2012). Furthermore, satisfied students are more likely to recommend a study destination to other prospective students (ICEF, 2018; Kaur & Singh, 2016).

1.2 Research aims and objectives

As limited research has explored the factors which influence international students to study in China, and the little research which has been conducted has produced contradictory results, it is important to undertake further research to understand international students' decisions (An, Zhang & Hao, 2008; Ding, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2018). In addition to understanding why students choose China, it is imperative to understand how they choose China. Obtaining an in-depth insight into how students make their decision is imperative to ensure that students have sufficient information from trustworthy sources at appropriate stages in their decision-making process. It is also helpful for universities and governments to know who influences students' decisions so they can ensure their promotions are targeting the correct audience. As China has

ambitious plans to grow the country's international student population, it is important to learn about students' experiences of studying there. For China to compete with leading host destinations, such as the U.S. and U.K., and to strengthen their soft power via international education, international students must have positive study experiences (ICEF, 2018; IIE, 2018; Kaur & Singh, 2016).

Few studies have explored students' experiences of studying undergraduate or postgraduate programmes in China. The limited existing research has focused on quantitative methods and suggests that international student satisfaction with university education in China is low (Ding, 2016; Wen, Hu & Hao, 2017). Thus, additional research is required to gain a deep understanding of students' expectations and experiences of studying in China.

This study aims to address the following questions regarding international students' decision to study in China:

1. What factors influence international students' decisions to study in China?
2. How do international students decide to study in China?
3. What are international students' experiences of studying in China?

The objectives of the research are to explore the decision-making processes of international students who decide to study tertiary programmes in China, to identify the factors and information sources which influence their choice of host destination, how they make their decision and to learn about their experiences of studying in China.

An interpretative paradigm is adopted using a qualitative research methodology to afford students the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words (Gray, 2014). As prior research has relied primarily on quantitative, survey-based methods, it is argued that an exploratory, qualitative approach will provide a deeper understanding and allow multiple perspectives to be considered. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews enable students to speak freely to describe their experiences and provide researchers with the opportunity to delve deeper into the research topic (Bryman, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, this research aims to provide a rich understanding of China as an international study destination.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 provides a review of existing literature that has explored international students' decisions to study overseas and their experience of tertiary education in a foreign country. The key concepts and theoretical framework which underpin the research are also depicted. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the impact of self-identity on students' decisions.

Chapter 3 commences with a description of the research paradigm which influenced the thesis, as well as a justification for the research design and qualitative methodology adopted to meet the research aims. The processes of data collection and analysis are described in detail, followed by an explanation of the validity measures and reflective processes to verify data credibility.

Chapter 4 outlines the main findings of the interviews. All 14 themes are described with direct quotes from international students. This chapter provides an insightful contribution to the research aims by identifying the factors which influence international students to study in China, their decision-making process and their experiences of studying in China.

Chapter 5 reflects on the study findings and provides answers to the research questions. Comparisons between the findings and existing literature are discussed. Limitations of the study, opportunities for future research and practical and theoretical implications are presented. Recommendations for the Chinese government and Chinese universities to reach their international student recruitment targets are also proposed.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter aims to review existing literature on the factors which influence international student migration, with a particular focus on the motivations of international students choosing to study in China. The importance and benefits of international education are discussed as well as China's history and goals for international education. Factors which influence students to study outside of their home country and choose particular host destinations are explored, followed by a review of international students' decision-making process and the impact of various influences on their decision.

2.1 The competitive international education market

The international education industry is extremely competitive (Abubakar et al., 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Maringe, 2006) with over fifty countries competing for their market share (Gatfield & Chen, 2008). International students provide a valuable contribution to host countries' economies and institutions, in the form of tuition fees and living expenses. They also advance the research capacity and contribute towards a skilled labour force while mitigating skills gaps (ICEF, 2015; King & Sondhi, 2018). Due to international students' growing demand and their valuable contribution to host countries, the international education industry has become increasingly competitive (OECD, 2019).

The vast majority of international students are from developing countries. The traditional, unidirectional flow of international student migration is students from developing countries studying in Western, English-speaking countries (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017). Nevertheless, as traditional source countries governments, such as China, Malaysia and Singapore have implemented strategies to increase their international student population, the direction of student migration has started to change in recent years (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Traditional source countries such as China have also executed plans to reverse the 'brain drain' they have experienced from their talented youth studying overseas, and to encourage 'brain return' by incentivising their foreign-trained nationals to return home (Marginson, 2006).

It is proposed that international education is positively associated with economic competitiveness. Sending students and receiving students from overseas is a long-term investment which enhances trade and diplomatic relations between countries. International student migration also stabilises and strengthens economies and enables skills, knowledge and capital to be shared between countries (ICEF, 2015; King &

Sondhi, 2018). While it has been focusing on improving its education system and creating top ranked universities in an effort to attract high numbers of international students, China has also become the second largest economy in the world (ICEF, 2015).

Despite many countries competing to attract international students, each country has different strategies and rationale. Western countries such as the U.S., U.K. and Australia have adopted a neo-liberalism, market-oriented approach to international education, and are actively recruiting international students to mitigate the financial impact of decreasing public funds for tertiary education (Pan, 2013). The revenue generated from international students' tuition fees often subsidises domestic students (Choudaha, Orosz & Chang, 2012). In contrast, the Chinese government has increased its investment in universities and established the Chinese Scholarship Council to provide scholarships for international students studying in China. The government recently increased their scholarship contribution from 80 million RMB in 2010 to 1950 million RMB in 2014 (Wen, 2017). China has adopted a developmental state and soft-power approach in its international education strategy (Pan, 2013). Nye (2004) defined soft-power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction, rather than coercion" (p. 59), which can be cultivated through international relations, political ideology, economic assistance and cultural exchange (Nye, 2004; Pan, 2013). Chinese government-directed efforts have included establishing transnational educational services, promoting Chinese language and culture globally, financial investment in universities to increase the teaching quality, research outputs and resources, as well as financial incentives for international students to study in China (Pan, 2013; Wen, 2017). Rather than directly benefitting economically from international students, China aims to be a leading host country of international students for diplomacy benefits and to improve international relations (Pan, 2013).

2.2 China's rise in international education

China is the world's single largest source of students who study overseas (Bodycott, 2009; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Tan, 2015). However, China has also recently become one of the largest host countries for international students. The country has recently experienced rapid growth in its international student population and has surpassed France, Germany and Australia to become the third largest destination for international students (IIE, 2018). Figure 1 shows the growth of international students in China since 1978. As a result of several Chinese government initiatives, there has been a steady, substantial increase since 2003.

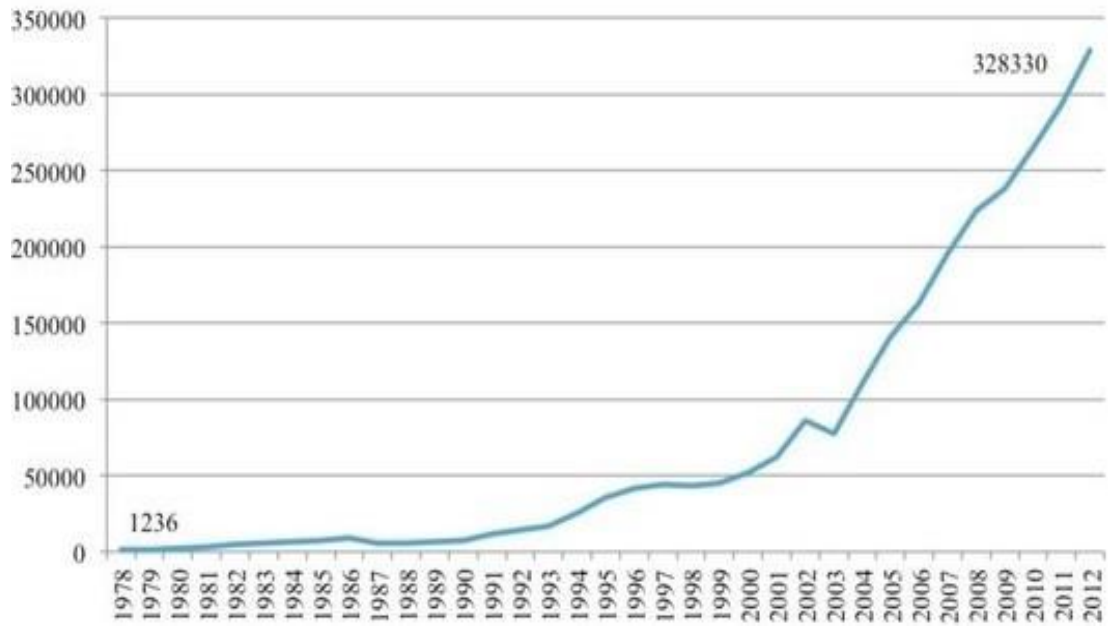


Figure 1. International student population in China (1978-2012). Source: Hu, Wotipka & Wen, (2016).

Furthermore, Table 1 depicts China's growth in comparison to other leading host countries. In 2001, China was not a popular international student destination. However, by 2017, China hosted 10% of the world's international students (IIE, 2018).

Table 1. Comparison of leading host destinations of international students

2001		2017	
Host country	Percentage of international students	Host country	Percentage of international students
United States	28%	United States	24%
United Kingdom	11%	United Kingdom	11%
Germany	9%	China	10%
France	7%	Australia	7%
Australia	4%	France	7%
Japan	3%	Canada	7%
Spain	2%	Russia	6%
Belgium	2%	Germany	6%
All others	34%	All others	23%

Source: IIE (2018)

Although the United States has lost some market share, it remains the dominant international student destination and accounts for almost one-quarter of international students worldwide (IIE, 2018). Both the United States and the U.K. have maintained

their positions as the main destinations for international students for decades (Choudaha, 2017; HM Government, 2019). However, China is expected to overtake the U.K. by 2020, and it is anticipated to compete with the U.S. for the position of the largest host country in the future (Pan, 2013). Table 2 depicts host destinations' percentage growth from 2017 to 2018. The percentage of international students studying in China increased by more than 10%, in comparison to the U.S. and U.K., which encountered over 1% growth (IIE, n.d.).

Table 2. International inbound student numbers in the top ten host countries

	2017	2018	% Change
United States	1,078,822	1,094,792	1.5%
United Kingdom	501,045	508,480	1.1%
China	442,773	489,200	10.5%
Australia	327,606	371,885	13.5%
France	323,933	343,386	6.0%
Canada	312,100	370,710	18.8%
Russia	296,178	313,089	5.7%
Germany	251,542	265,484	5.5%
Japan	171,122	188,384	10.1%
Spain	94,962	109,522	15.3%

Source: IIE (n.d.).

2.3 History of international education in China

Since the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, international student education has experienced varying stages of development. China's relationship with the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in the 1950's led to international student exchanges (Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017). Following the Bandung Conference in 1954, which was attended by government representatives from Asian and African countries, large numbers of students from developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America started studying in China. However, China's low-quality tertiary education system restricted international students from studying at tertiary level (Jiani, 2017). In 1958, China's Communist Party Leader, Chairman Mao Zedong initiated 'The Great Leap Forward' campaign which intended to rapidly develop the country's agricultural and industrial sectors. Unfortunately, this initiative failed and resulted in famine with millions of people dying. Subsequently, Chairman Mao implemented the Cultural Revolution of 1966, which focused on protecting the Communist ideology and aimed to strengthen his weakened authority in government. The Revolution had a drastic effect on the people of

China, the economy and the education system. The youth formed ‘Red Guards’ paramilitary groups which tortured and killed intellectuals, the elderly and ‘class elites.’ Schools were closed and the educated urban youth were sent to the rural villages to be ‘re-educated’ by peasants. ‘Re-education’ involved farm work and torture for many. The Revolution severely affected universities and international student exchanges ceased. When the Cultural Revolution ended following Chairman Mao’s death in 1976, China’s economy had plummeted. Therefore, the Chinese government’s goal was to achieve material prosperity (Kraus, 2012; Zhou & Hou, 1999). They re-established diplomatic relations with over 100 countries and started accepting international students again. Since 1978, when China adopted reform and an open-door policy, China became accessible to self-funded international students. These developments facilitated progress in the higher education system and international education (Jiani, 2017; Pan, 2013). Developments included establishing a national standardised Chinese proficiency test for non-native speakers in the 1980’s, named Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) (Hu et al., 2016). In 1995, President Zemin introduced Project 211, which planned to enhance the academic rigour of more than 100 universities across China (Huang, 2015). Subsequently, in 1996, the Ministry of Education in China implemented the China Scholarship Council to facilitate Chinese students studying overseas and international students studying in China. The Ministry hoped that this would lead to international students who were educated in China becoming their future political and business partners (Wen et al., 2017). This initiative resulted in a rapid development of the number of international students studying in China (Jiani, 2017). In 1999, China’s Ministry of Education implemented Project 985 to create world-class universities. Initially, nine universities were selected to participate in the Project but this extended to 39 universities by 2013. Each university was required to develop an individual strategy for achieving world-class status and both central and local governments provided financial support to the universities to help them achieve their goals (Huang, 2015; Li, Whalley, Zhang & Zhao, 2011). It is argued that Project 985 had a positive effect on the publication outputs of participating universities (Zong & Zhang, 2017). However, the Project has been criticised because half of the government’s annual budget for research was invested into a small percentage of universities which has resulted in a significant imbalance between Chinese universities (Li et al., 2011).

In 2015, China launched the Double First Class University strategy which aims to create world-class universities and disciplines by 2050. China currently has 7 universities ranked in the top 200 of the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2020

and it intends to have 42 “world-class” universities by the end of 2049, which marks 100 years since the establishment of the People’s Republic (Peters & Besley, 2018; THE, 2020). It is unclear what the Chinese government constitutes as a “world-class” university, however, universities ranked in the top 200 of the World University Rankings are generally regarded as world-class universities (Huang, 2015). In comparison, the U.S. which is considered to be the elite destination for higher education has 60 universities ranked in the World University top 200 rankings (Grove, 2017; Huang, 2015; THE, 2020).

Chinese authorities have chosen 42 universities which will participate in the Double First Class University strategy to achieve world-class status, and they have selected 95 institutions which will be supported to develop world-class programmes. The universities which participated in the previous projects are included in the new strategy. Other countries such as Russia, Japan and Malaysia are also strategising to increase their number of world-class universities in the global rankings (Kaur & Singh, 2016; Peters & Besley, 2018).

Another government initiative to attract international students to China is the relaxed criteria for work rights post-graduation. It is proposed that China has eased the requirements for work visas to retain talent and encourage these students to remain in the country. In 2017, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security announced that international students who had achieved a master’s degree qualification or above from a Chinese university within the past year were eligible for work permits of up to five years. Previously international students were required to have a minimum of two years’ overseas work experience before being granted a work visa. Similarly, in 2016, regions such as Beijing relaxed their visa regulations to allow international students studying there to work part-time or as entrepreneurs in the city’s tech district (Custer, 2017; Parr, 2018).

As a result of the government’s strategies in recent years, many Chinese universities have developed partnerships with foreign universities and implemented joint programmes, as well as recruiting scholars from overseas (Pan, 2013). Although China’s higher education system has experienced rapid development in the past 30 years, the internationalisation of the country’s higher education system has faced criticism, as many people are concerned that the country’s higher education will become westernised and adopt the style of another country. Moreover, the number of Chinese student enrolments is significantly fewer than other developed and developing countries. This problem is

particularly evident in rural provinces (Bie & Yi, 2014). Another concern is that the Chinese government's aim to create world-class universities has resulted in universities prioritising research publication, arguably at the expense of quality teaching (Wen et al., 2017). Domestic students at Chinese universities have also criticised universities for easing the entry requirements for international students while enforcing rigorous entrance exam results for domestic students (Marsh, 2017).

Furthermore, in the past year the Chinese government has become concerned about the potential Western influence on their education system and has therefore implemented initiatives to command ideological control among university students. One of the new initiatives is stricter control on internet access, particularly on virtual private networks which academics and students use to access websites for foreign research resources, which are banned in China. Many universities including the highest ranked in China have endured multiple government inspections in the past few years. Researchers have urged the government to relax the laws on internet access as they have stated that it is exceedingly challenging to satisfy the government's strategy of producing world-leading research if they are unable to access other countries' research. Academics have recently been travelling to Hong Kong or requesting online information from their contacts overseas (Sharma, 2017). Additional initiatives involve restrictions on religious and political activities on campus and international students being mandated to take classes in Chinese culture, law and politics (Schulmann & Ye, 2017). As these developments could deter students from choosing to study in China, it could be argued that these initiatives are counteractive to the government's aims to attract more international students.

The Chinese government has set ambitious targets for international education and aims to have 500,000 international students studying in China by 2020 (17th Communist Party of China National Congress, 2010). It is expected that the Chinese government will easily reach this target, as more than 490,000 students chose to study in China in 2018, which was an increase of over 10% from the previous year (IIE, 2018; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2019; Parr, 2018).

2.4 International student population in China

The international student population in China has become extremely diversified (Jiani, 2017). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, China attracted international students from almost 200 countries and regions in 2018. The majority of international

students studying in China were from South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, India, United States, Russia, Indonesia, Laos, Japan and Kazakhstan. With over 50,000 students studying in China in 2018, South Korea was the main source country. This is significantly higher than the second largest source country, Thailand, which sent more than 28,000 students to study in China (MOE, 2019). The U.S. is typically the main study destination for South Korean students. However, in recent years more South Koreans have studied in China than in the U.S. (Choi, 2016). It is proposed that more South Koreans are choosing to study in China because it is less expensive than the U.S. and learning Mandarin is considered to be a coveted job skill (Kou, 2013).

In contrast, South Korea's close neighbour, Japan sends significantly fewer students to study at Chinese universities (ICEF, 2015). Japan was previously the second largest source market for international students studying in China, however, this number decreased significantly from over 28% in 1999 to less than 5% in 2013 (Wen et al., 2017). The overall number of Japanese students studying overseas declined drastically during these years (Japan Times, 2012). To counteract this downward trend, the Japanese government implemented an initiative in 2013 to double the number of Japanese students studying at universities overseas by 2020. Consequently, the percentage of Japanese students studying overseas increased by 15% between 2015 and 2016 which is arguably attributed to the Japanese government's initiative. While the majority of Japanese students studying overseas choose English-speaking host destinations, the proportion of students studying in Asian countries is increasing (ICEF, 2018). As many Japanese students cited cost as a barrier to studying overseas (Hassett, 2018), it is anticipated that China will become an increasingly popular study destination due to China's growing interest in the Japanese education system, Chinese institutions' low tuition fees and the availability of scholarships (ICEF, 2015). On the other hand, the Japanese government's national strategy to improve English language proficiency could result in more students studying in English-speaking countries (ICEF, 2018). Therefore, it is important to consider the role that source and host governments play in international student migration, as this influences international students' motivations to study overseas.

Sixty percent of all international students studying in China in 2018 were from Asia (MOE, 2019). In fact, China is the most popular study destination in the world for Asian students (MOE, 2018). It is proposed that regional mobility often has a greater impact than global mobility (OECD, 2011). Asian students may choose to study in China because it is near to their home country, as well as having a similar culture and commonalities in

language, food and religion (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Kaur, Singh, Schapper & Jack, 2014; Wen et al., 2017). It is anticipated that students would find it easier to assimilate to study environments which have similar cultures to their own. However, research has shown that Asian students' expectations of similarities have not eventuated and there have been more differences between their home country and host destination than they expected (Wen et al., 2017). Japanese and South Korean students studying in China had significantly lower adjustment levels in communication, culture, values, and environment in comparison to students from Western countries. It is posited that this effect occurs because Korean and Japanese students tend to socialise with other compatriots, rather than integrating with local and other international students. Moreover, English is more commonly spoken than Korean or Japanese in Chinese universities (Wen et al., 2017). Nevertheless, if the main motivation for Asian students choosing to study in China is because of perceived similarities and expectations to easily adapt, it is imperative that these students' expectations are managed prior to commencing their study to prevent dissatisfaction, buyers' remorse and negative word of mouth (Nikbin, Hyun, Baharun & Tabavar, 2015). Furthermore, the Chinese government and institutions should assist students with cultural assimilation. As word of mouth and recommendations from family and friends are extremely influential to many students, it is important to ensure that students have a positive experience and encourage future students to study in China (ICEF, 2018; Kaur & Singh, 2016).

In contrast to the increasing numbers of Asian students studying in China, the number of students from Europe and the Americas slightly decreased between 2014 and 2015, by a decrease of over 1% and 3% respectfully. In 2015, Europe was the second largest source region for China's international student population (MOE, 2016); however, Africa is now the second largest source region with over 81,000 students (MOE, 2019). In contrast to Europe and the Americas, the number of African students studying in China has rapidly increased. Between 2014 and 2015, China experienced an increase of almost 20% in African student enrolments (MOE, 2016). It is proposed that the growth in the African market is a result of the Chinese government's Africa talent programme which provides dedicated scholarships to African students and training for African professionals (Ng'wanakilala & Obulutsa, 2013).

Most international students studying in China in 2015 were enrolled in non-academic programmes (MOE, 2016), however, by 2018, more than half of the international students studied an academic programme, and this percentage is increasing each year (MOE,

2019). Although the majority of degree-seeking students are currently undergraduate students, there was a 12% increase in the number of postgraduate or doctoral students between 2017 and 2018 (MOE, 2019). This increase could be attributed to Chinese universities increasing their research outputs and subsequently their rankings (THE, 2020; Zhang, Patton & Kenney, 2013). It could also be attributed to the increase in scholarships the Chinese government is allocating to foreign degree-seeking students. In 2018, more than 63,000 international students received a scholarship, with the vast majority of these awarded to degree, postgraduate or doctoral students (MOE, 2018; MOE, 2019).

Almost half of all international students studying in China are enrolled in liberal arts degrees, with the number of students studying engineering, management, science, art and agronomy increasing by 20% year on year (MOE, 2018). Furthermore, the majority of international students studying in China choose to study in Beijing (MOE, 2019).

2.5 International education recruitment initiatives

China's recent increase in international student numbers is partially attributed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), which is considered to be one of the largest trade and infrastructure projects in the world (Parr, 2018). This initiative aims to link China with over 70 countries, which have a collective population of over 4 billion people and accounts for one-third of global GDP (Ferdinand, 2016). China has invested approximately \$900 billion to connect countries across Asia, Europe, Oceania and Africa, both physically and financially. The countries will be connected via physical roads, otherwise known as "the belt," and shipping lanes which are reminiscent of the maritime Silk Road (Parr, 2018). This project shows that China is committed to globalisation as it will strengthen relationships between China and other countries, as well as ensuring the development of Asia.

Education is considered to play an important role in this initiative. In 2015, China implemented the University Alliance of the Silk Road, which unites over 130 universities in five continents. Furthermore, the BRI has led to Chinese universities opening campuses overseas in Malaysia, Laos and Thailand (Liu, 2017; OBOREurope, 2017). In addition, the BRI can facilitate the Chinese government's goal to enhance their soft-power resources and public diplomacy significantly through increasing internationalisation within their universities. In 2016, the Chinese Ministry of Education released a plan to "strengthen the propagation of the Chinese dream abroad." They propose establishing a

network of domestic and international students to share positive information about the development of China and cultivate the patriotic capabilities of international students, so they adopt the role of people-to-people ambassadors (Bislev, 2017; Wen, 2017). While hundreds of global leaders are alumni of U.S. universities, there are only a few world leaders who studied in China. Therefore, China intends to attract more future leaders to study in China and increase their soft-power (Parr, 2018).

Although this project will take decades to complete, the BRI has already started contributing towards increasing international student numbers. Enrolments from countries involved in the project such as India, Pakistan and Southeast Asia, grew by more than 20% between 2016 and 2017, and accounted for almost 65% of all international students studying in China in 2017 (MOE, 2018; Parr, 2018).

Another recent government-led initiative is the establishment of a global educational network of Confucius Institutes to promote and teach Chinese language and culture all over the world (Pan, 2013; Wen et al., 2017; Yang, 2010). With over 500 Confucius Institutes globally, the advancement of Institutes has been rapid since the first Institute opened in 2004 (Cai, 2019). As Confucius Institutes are generally hosted in overseas universities, professors have expressed concerns about academic freedom for years. However, since 2018, criticism for Confucius Institutes has increased as they have been accused of eliciting espionage and political surveillance and promoting Chinese ideology. At least 10 U.S. universities have closed their Institutes in the past year (Cai, 2019; Redden, 2019).

An additional strategy implemented by the Chinese government was the implementation of joint sino-foreign programmes and hosting overseas universities branch campuses. Universities from the U.S. and U.K. were approached to establish branch campuses in China, which enrol both domestic and international students (Pan, 2013; Wen et al., 2017). China is now the largest host country of international branch campuses in the world (Schulmann & Ye, 2017).

Moreover, the government motivates Chinese universities to enrol international students by providing financial incentives (Pan, 2013; Wen et al., 2017). This has contributed to a significant increase in the number of Chinese institutions accepting international students. In 2017, over 900 institutions enrolled international students in comparison to just over 20 institutions in 1979 (Jiani, 2017; MOE, 2018). Furthermore, Chinese universities have recently increased their presence at education exhibitions in the U.K., with the aim of

attracting British students to study in China. In 2018, 36 Chinese institutions attended education exhibitions in the U.K., in comparison to the past two years when only one Chinese institution attended (Atack, 2018). Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China, is encouraging the facilitation of student mobility, for both Chinese students to study overseas and for international students to study in China. In 2015, the government set a target for a number of Chinese universities to become ranked amongst the best universities in the world by 2020. As part of the plan, universities must focus on providing high-quality teaching and research environments that will appeal to international students. The overall aim is for China's higher education system to be perceived amongst the best in the world by 2050 (Wen et al., 2017).

The Chinese government is not alone in their desire for international students to experience a Chinese education, as many other countries have also developed initiatives to encourage their students to study there. For example, in 2009, the U.S. government launched an initiative to send 100,000 students to study in China by 2013 (Cai et al., 2015). Moreover, in 2013, the British Council set a target to send 80,000 students to complete an internship or an academic programme in China by 2020 (British Council, 2018).

Despite the growth in international students studying in China, the majority of research has focused on why international students choose to study in western countries such as the U.K., U.S. or Australia (Abubakar et al., 2010; Chen, 2008; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Helmsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Shanka et al., 2005). Little research has explored the reasons why international students choose to study in China or the East (Jiani, 2017; Wen et al., 2017).

2.6 International students' decision-making

The decision to study overseas is one of the most important decisions that a student will make (Cai & Loo, 2014; Mazzarol, 1998). International education is an intangible service which cannot be experienced in advance of purchase, therefore, it is considered a high-risk purchase. Studying abroad is a high-risk, high-involvement decision which encompasses financial risk, social risk, academic risk and psychological risk (Cubillo et al., 2006). Furthermore, the geographical distance between students' home country and the host country can preclude students from visiting universities before enrolling (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011). Due to the high-risk associated with this decision, existing literature assumes that students typically engage in extensive research, thought

process and complex problem-solving to ensure that the selected study destination is the best choice (Galan et al., 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Shu & Scott, 2014). Family members are often involved in the decision-making process too (Bodycott, 2009; Pham, 2019; Tan, 2015).

Studying abroad is a high-risk decision because there is often a high financial risk involved, both in terms of tuition fees and living costs. There are also opportunity costs such as missing out on promotions, which is more relevant to mature students who resign from their jobs to undertake study overseas. Other risks include family/socio-cultural risks, including family and friendship disruption, and loss of cultural heritage, especially for mature students' children as they tend to accompany their parents overseas while they study. Additional risks which have been identified are academic risk, such as fear of failure and functional risks, for example, whether the university and course will enable students to attain their desired job. There are also psychological risks if the student perceives that they have made the wrong decision and social risks, such as other people's opinions of students' study destination, institution or course (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Simões & Soares, 2010). As courses in China are typically less expensive than other study destinations, it could be argued that the financial risk is not as significant for international students who choose to study in China. However, it is proposed that functional risks and psychological risks could be more prevalent as China is a relatively new international education host country, therefore, it may not be perceived as being as prestigious as other Western study destinations (Parr, 2018).

The three-stage service consumption process commences with the pre-purchase stage, followed by the service encounter stage, otherwise known as purchase and consumption, and finally post-purchase (Lovelock, Patterson & Wirtz, 2015). Previous research has demonstrated that there are also three sequential phases in the study abroad decision-making process for consumers of education services (Cai et al., 2015).

The first phase is pre-evaluation, which is followed by decision-making, then post-participation. Pre-evaluation involves awareness of the option to study abroad and is also known as need recognition. This phase includes searching for information from official sources such as websites and social sources, including family, friends, lecturers, and other students who have studied overseas.

The decision-making phase consists of push factors of motivation, pull factors of motivation, influencers and barriers (Cai et al., 2015). It is proposed that students'

decision to study overseas is influenced by varying push factors. Push factors operate within the students' country of origin and initiate the students' desire to study abroad. The choice of host country is impacted by pull factors that attract students to the host destination. Pull factors operate within the host country. The selection of host institution is also influenced by pull factors, such as an institution's reputation for quality (Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010; Kaur & Singh, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Influencers can be parents, friends, relatives, education agents, and school or university staff. Research has found that some cultures are more heavily influenced than others, and some influencers have more power than others (ICEF, 2015; Lee, 2017). For example, Asian students' decision-making is more likely to be influenced by others' recommendations, and parents tend to be more influential than friends in the study abroad decision. Many parents provide financial support to enable students to study overseas, therefore it is unsurprising that they are extremely influential in the decision. In addition, parents often suggest the proposition of studying overseas prior to students considering this option (Bohman, 2009; Cai et al., 2015). However, other research has found that friends are extremely influential in African students' decision to study in Malaysia (Kaur et al., 2014). Students also consider the barriers when deciding to study overseas. Common barriers are language, safety, cost and feelings of uncertainty (Cai et al., 2015).

The final stage of the decision-making process is post-participation. This phase consists of evaluation, impacts and future behaviour (Cai et al., 2015). After studying overseas, students evaluate their experience and reflect on the aspects which met their expectations as well as the aspects that did not (Kim, 2012). Students also reflect on the impact that their study abroad experience has had on their lives. For example, students often report that they are more open-minded and empathetic to other cultures after studying overseas (Cai et al., 2015). Furthermore, students' future behaviour is often determined by their experiences studying overseas. They may encourage others to study overseas or decide to return to their host destination in the future (Bohman, 2009; Cai et al., 2015).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also proposed that the decision to study overseas is a three-stage sequential decision-making process which commences with students first deciding whether to study at a local university or overseas, then choosing a host country, followed by selecting a host institution. However, another study revealed that students first decide to study overseas, then select the host country, followed by the course and then the institution is selected (Wadhwa, 2016). Contrary to this, Chen (2007) discovered that students choose their programme first and then select their host country and university

concurrently. This finding is supported by other research which has identified that the stages of the decision-making process are more intertwined and not sequential. The selection of a host country is often made at the same time as students' decision to study overseas (Jiani, 2017). The programme of study and the destination can also be chosen at the same time (Cai et al., 2015). Furthermore, the decision of a host institution can also be made prior to students choosing a host country (Jiani, 2017). In addition, although several previous studies have excluded the importance of host cities in students' decision-making process, this was found to be an influential factor in recent research (Abubakar et al., 2010; Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017). Therefore, this conflicting evidence suggests that additional research is required to better understand international students' decision-making process.

Moreover, when students are selecting a host country, they are not only choosing a destination for its educational attributes. They may choose a destination based on religion, culture, low cost of living, safety, employment prospects, migration opportunities, ease of visa processes or tourism opportunities (Cubillo et al., 2006; Eder et al., 2010; Jiani, 2017; Lee, 2017; Mazzarol, Kemp & Savery, 1997; Rafi & Lewis, 2013; Wilkins, Balakrishnan & Huisman, 2012). International students deliberate the costs and benefits of studying overseas and compare the positives and negatives of selected destinations, while considering their main motivations and goals. They aim to maximise their benefits, which can be economic, emotional or cultural (Jiani, 2017). This indicates that students apply the theory of bounded rationality in their decision-making. As international students are constrained by geographical distance, they often have limited access to information about overseas study destinations. They may also have limited time and cognitive capacity to evaluate the intricacies of all possible host countries and institutions and are unable to determine the consequences of choosing each destination. This results in students satisficing and selecting the destination which meets their aspiration levels and negates barriers (Cristofaro, 2017; Simon, 1978).

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that international students' image of a country creates a halo effect on their perception of the country's tertiary education system (Beech, 2014; Bourke, 2000; Cai & Loo, 2014; Cubillo et al., 2006). For example, if students believe that China has a good reputation for education, it is likely they will have a favourable opinion of all universities in China. This finding is consistent with previous research which revealed that for many African students the destination country is significantly more important than the institution. It is proposed that the positive brand

association with the U.K. higher education system is based on the Oxbridge perception, therefore, all U.K. universities are viewed favourably (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Similarly, the economic strength of a country is positively correlated with students' perception of its education system. Strong economies are associated with high quality education; therefore, it is argued that students typically prefer to study in wealthy countries (Bista et al., 2018; Mpinganjira, 2009).

2.7 Theoretical framework

The majority of existing research has utilised the push-pull framework to investigate the factors which influence international students' decision-making process. This research has argued that push factors for international students relate to the political, social and economic forces within their country of origin (Eder et al., 2010; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Mazzarol, Soutar, Smart & Choo, 2001). A common push factor for international students is the inability to access quality education in their home country (Kaur & Singh, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012). In more recent research, push factors have been considered to be students' intrinsic needs and desires and therefore, intangible (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Lee, 2014). For example, Indian students' fathers' level of education has a significantly positive effect on students' likelihood to study overseas, particularly for postgraduate study (Wadhwa, 2016). Conversely, it has also been proposed that mothers are more influential in Indian students' decision to study overseas and that the mothers' education has a positive effect on students' likelihood to study overseas, especially for female students (King & Sondhi, 2018). The conflicting findings suggests that more research is required to explore the impact of intrinsic factors and social influences in the study abroad decision-making process. Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that a variety of both intrinsic and extrinsic push factors influence students to study overseas.

Pull factors are perceived to be tangible external factors that attract students towards a study destination (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Eder et al., 2010; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Oliveira & Soares, 2016). Contrary to this view, recent research has found that some students choose to study in China to impress their peers and create a desired identity, which demonstrates that pull factors can also be intrinsic and intangible (Cai et al., 2015; King & Sondhi, 2018; Lu, Reddick, Dean & Pecero, 2015).

Mazzarol et al. (1997) identified six factors that influence students to choose a host country. The first factor was cost issues, including tuition fees, living expenses, travel costs and the ability to source part-time employment. This factor also took social costs into consideration, such as crime rates, level of safety, racial discrimination and entry difficulty, e.g. ease of obtaining a visa and meeting overseas universities' entry criteria. Additional social costs were whether institutions were government-administered and whether an established group of students from their home country lived there. The second pull factor was related to the knowledge and awareness of the host country in the students' country of origin. This was influenced by the availability of information about the host country and the ease of obtaining such information. Recognition of the host country's qualifications in the students' home country and the overall reputation for quality were also included in this factor.

Environment was the third factor, which included perceptions of the host country as being a studious environment, having an attractive climate and the ability to lead an exciting lifestyle. The fourth factor was recommendations from parents, relatives or education agents and the reputation of education institutions in the destination country. The fifth factor was social links which referred to whether the student had family or friends living or studying in the host country or had previously lived or studied there. The final factor was geographic proximity of the destination country from the students' country of origin.

It is argued that tourism push and pull factors also influence students' motivations to study overseas (Cai et al., 2015; Lee, 2017). Lee (2017) found that a desire for international travel and experience was the most influential factor in international students' decision to study abroad. Furthermore, tourism attractions were the most important pull factor in international students' decision to study in Taiwan (Lee, 2017). Moreover, universities and government agencies use promotional tourism images which depict the positive global perceptions of countries in their advertisements to international students. For example, promotional material to attract international students to study in Australia typically shows surfing and beaches; however, this may not be the reality for students once they start studying there (King & Sondhi, 2018). Students also have imaginative geographies of host destinations which are based on stereotypes and often superior to the reality. For example, students studying in Nottingham had preconceived ideas of the city being like London and were disappointed when they arrived in a small, quiet city. It is suggested that when this occurs, international students seek evidence to support their imaginative geographies and attempt to ignore the negative experiences (Beech, 2014).

The traditional push-pull model has been criticised for focusing on external factors and overlooking internal motivations which may also influence international students' decision-making. Additional research has found that individual internationalisation and enhanced social status are important factors which affect students' decision to study abroad (Li & Bray, 2007). Furthermore, Li and Bray (2007) extended the unidirectional push-pull model created by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) to include a bidirectional push-pull framework. The researchers proposed that positive forces in students' home countries such as superior education quality, can act as reverse-push factors and negative forces in host countries are reverse pull-factors. An example of a reverse pull-factor is restrictive immigration policies and low likelihood of obtaining a visa. In the competitive international education industry, push-pull factors are intertwined across markets, therefore, a change in push-pull factors in one study destination can create push-pull factors in an alternative host country (Li & Bray, 2007).

Nevertheless, the majority of existing research which has utilised the push-pull framework has investigated the factors which influence international students to study in developed countries (Abubakar et al., 2010; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Yang, 2007). However, little research has used this framework to explore international students' reasons for studying in developing countries, such as China (Jiani, 2017). Figure 2 illustrates the bidirectional factors which influence international students' decision of study destination, according to the extant literature.

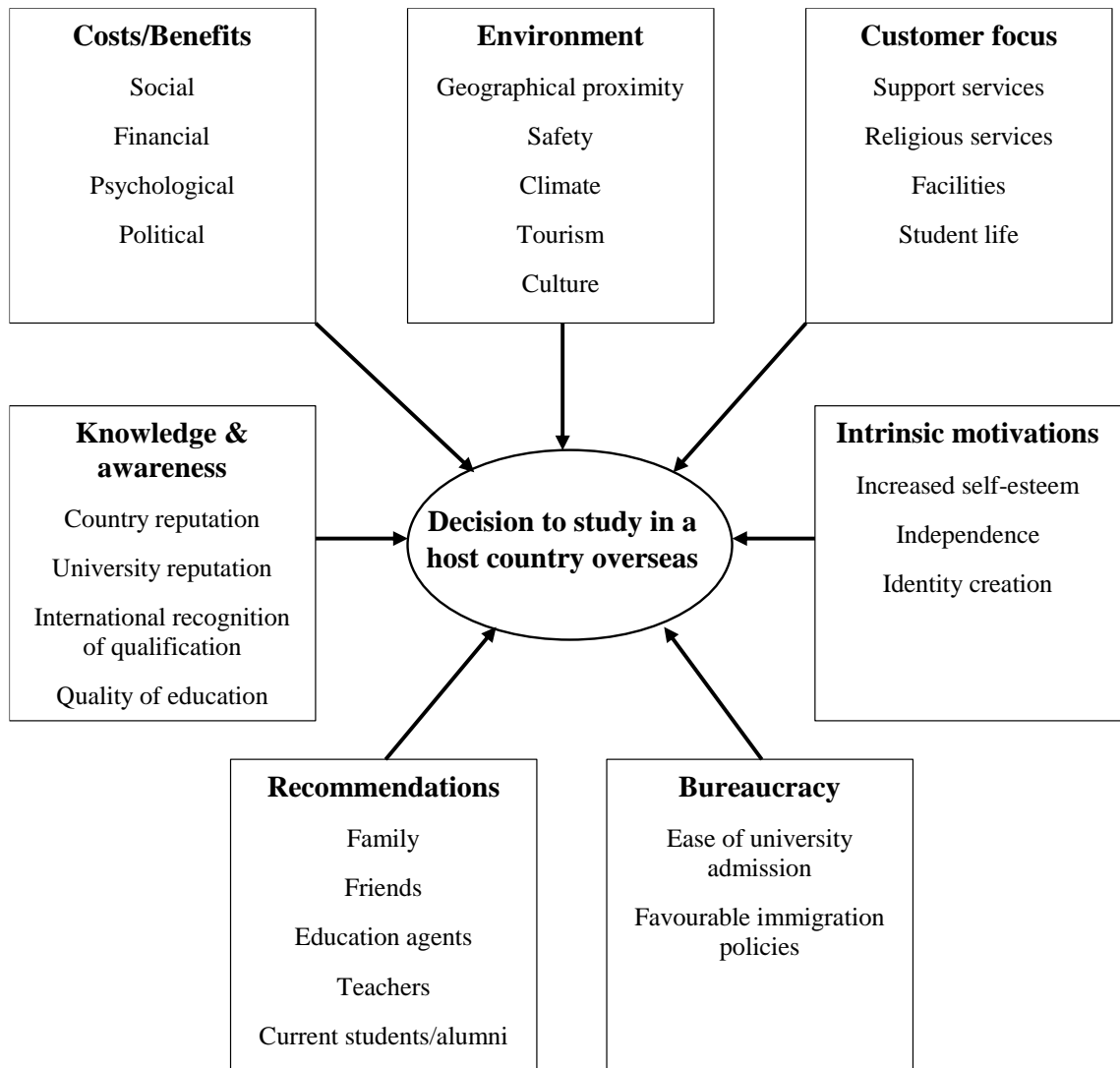


Figure 2. Model of bidirectional factors which influence international students to choose an overseas study destination

2.8 Factors which influence international students' decision-making

Students are influenced by varying push and pull factors at different stages of the decision-making process. Research which explored Indian students' motivations for studying in developed countries discovered that when students are deliberating about whether to study overseas, the aspiration to settle overseas is the most influential push factor in their decision, followed by their inability to gain entry to a local desired institution (Wadhwa, 2016). Gaining admission to the best universities in India is extremely difficult due to limited high-quality institutions and overwhelming demand. Support from parents was also found to be an influential push factor. The pull factor which influences Indian international education consumers' decision to study overseas is the perception that education overseas is better quality, in terms of teaching, infrastructure and research facilities. When choosing a host country, students' main motivation was a

convenient student visa process (Wadhwa, 2016). This finding supports additional research which proposed that international students' decision of host destination is influenced by U.S. immigration policy changes (Bendix, 2017; Bislev, 2017; THE, 2017).

Tuition fee was the most influential pull factor in Indian students' choice of institution, followed by reputation of the institution (Wadhwa, 2016). As many students are choosing to study in China, it could be argued that they are influenced by the lower tuition fees (Crace, 2018; ICEF, 2015). Another extremely influential factor was reputation of the institution. It is proposed that the reputation of the institution is mostly determined by the world rankings, and rankings are considered to be correlated to employment prospects (Wadhwa, 2016). These findings are supported by Kaur and Singh (2016) who found that low tuition fees and reputation and ranking of institutions were extremely influential factors in international students' choice of a Malaysian university.

Previous research has shown that pull factors such as reputation of a country, the perceived standard of the country's education system, safety, geographic proximity, cost of living, social influences and overseas programmes being considered as superior to the programmes available in their home country are core determinant factors for students from less developed countries deciding to study in developed countries (Abubakar et al., 2010; Bourke, 2000; Bodycott, 2009; Chen, 2008; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Lee, 2014; Mazzarol et al., 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Yang, 2007). However, research on the main influential pull factors for students choosing to study in developing countries is contradictory. Some research has found that the quality of education was not of paramount importance to international students studying in China (Bislev, 2017; Hong, 2014; Jiani, 2017). For example, European students chose to study in China because they were motivated to learn about the culture and the language (Ding, 2016; Hong, 2014).

In addition, quality of education was not an influential factor for Asian students choosing to study in the developing country of Malaysia, however, it was of significant importance to African and Middle Eastern students' decisions. It was discovered that customer focus was the main influential factor for all nationalities of international students who chose to study in Malaysia. Customer focus included services such as careers advisors, international student advisors, English language support, religious services and facilities and a good, welcoming campus life (Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010). Quality of education tends to be an influential factor for international students studying in developed

countries, however, these studies suggest that this is not an important factor for students selecting developing countries (Ding, 2016).

On the other hand, further research has shown that the reputation of an institution is extremely influential for international students studying in Malaysia. Quality of the programme, low tuition fees and length of study were also influential factors. Length of study is related to cost as programmes with longer durations result in increased tuition fees. In addition, the most influential environmental factor was similar religion, followed by political stability, a safe and multicultural society and an easy visa process (Kaur & Singh, 2016).

When students are deciding between studying in China and other countries with perceived high-quality education systems, China's teaching and research environment were found to be the main reasons which deter students from studying in China. This suggests that quality of education is important for international students considering China as a study destination (Yang, 2016). This is supported by research which discovered that the most important factor for international students when choosing a Chinese university is the quality of the programme and teaching, followed by the university ranking and reputation (An et al., 2008). Similarly, Wen and Hu (2018) showed that education quality was important to international students choosing to study in China, as the perceived high-quality reputation of China's tertiary education system was the main pull factor which motivated students to choose this host destination (Wen & Hu, 2018). It is proposed that these conflicting findings indicate that quality of education could be a determining factor for international students to study in China. However, there is currently a mixed reputation of the country's education quality.

Conversely, recent research found that the most influential factor for the majority of international students choosing to study in China was the country's rapid economic development, the anticipated future prospects of the country and increased career opportunities (Jiani, 2017). This finding was consistent with additional research which discovered that China's continually growing economy was attractive to international students (Ding, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2018). Students from Europe intended to stay and work in China after they graduate. They believe that there will be more job opportunities in China due to the country's economic development, in comparison to their home country where students with postgraduate degrees are struggling to find employment (Hu et al., 2016; Jiani, 2017). Students believe that studying in China will enhance their career

development and they believe that learning the Chinese language will make them more attractive in the job market (Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017; Lu et al., 2015). For example, as Chinese is the second most prevalent language in Vietnam, Vietnamese students chose to study in China to improve their Mandarin and command high salaries upon graduation. An additional motivation for studying in China was the availability of scholarships (Jiani, 2017). The Chinese government spent an estimated USD\$300million in scholarships for international students and approximately 12% of international students studying in China received government scholarships in 2017 (Skinner, 2019).

Other research has discovered that the most influential factor for Black American students studying in China was social influence (Lu et al., 2015). Students were encouraged to study in China by a Black American faculty leader. As they had a shared identity, students' self-efficacy was enhanced through the vicarious experiences of their faculty leader. Although many students' families discouraged studying abroad, the influence of their faculty leader was strong enough to mitigate familial influence (Lu et al., 2015). Additional research which investigated motivations for American students undertaking study abroad programmes in China found that faculty staff did not influence their decision to study overseas and academic constraints were often considered as a barrier. Parents were considered to be the most significant influence, as their financial and emotional support was required. The main push factor was the opportunity to have an international experience and learn about another culture, followed by the desire for the expected positive impacts on their self-identity, such as independence, pride, enhanced self-esteem, impressing their peers and increased competitiveness in the job market (Cai et al., 2015).

The other push motivation for students was the desire to escape their current situations. Furthermore, the students were motivated to choose China for their study abroad experience because of the unique culture, tourism attractions and the desire to find out whether the country matched the media's portrayal (Cai et al., 2015). The most common concerns about studying in China were related to safety, language, medical issues and emergency responses. Upon completion of their programmes in China, the American students experienced enhanced self-esteem and confidence that they could adapt to other environments easily. They also stated that they would boast about their experience to enhance their self-identity, and they would be selective about who they encouraged to study in China. They would only target students whom they believed were capable of overcoming the challenges (Cai et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Jiani (2017) found that cultural and political factors also influenced students' decision to study in China. Chinese descendants were motivated to study in China to learn about their own culture and enhance their self-identity, while other students from North America were motivated by the opportunity to experience a new culture and a different way of life (Jiani, 2017). Some students chose to study in China because of positive bilateral relationships with their home country (Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017). For example, a Zimbabwean student chose to study in China because of the growing relationship between Zimbabwe and China, and the fact that the Chinese Yuan is legal tender in Zimbabwe (Jiani, 2017). This research suggests that students from different countries have different motivations, and international students should not be treated as one homogenous group (Lee, 2017; Padlee et al., 2010). Therefore, it is suggested that institutions utilise market segmentation to attract students from different nationalities (Wilkins et al., 2012).

Developing countries as host destinations are distinct and the pull factors for each destination are heterogeneous. As discussed earlier, previous research has shown that one of the most common motivations for international students choosing to study in China is to have an international experience and learn about a new culture. These students use the opportunity of studying in a foreign country to challenge themselves, create a self-identity and impress their peers (Cai et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015). However, research has revealed that one of the main motivations for international students choosing to study in Malaysia was because it is similar to their home country. These students expressed that they wished to study in a country with a similar culture, religion and food, and they liked that their study destination was geographically near to their home country (Kaur & Singh, 2016; Kaur et al., 2014). As the majority of international students currently studying in China are from Asia, it is important to understand whether their reasons for choosing their study destination are similar to students who chose to study in Malaysia.

As African students are a rapidly growing market for international education in China, it is important to consider their motivations to study overseas. In contrast to other nationalities, it is suggested that they are more influenced by push factors than pull factors (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Push factors such as lack of quality education opportunities in their home countries are believed to be the main reasons why Africans chose to study overseas. As little research has investigated motivations for African students studying in China, more research is required to determine the pull factors which influence their choice of host country (Wilkins et al., 2012).

In addition, research which investigated international students' decision to study in Taiwan revealed that non-Asian students are typically more influenced by tourism factors such as tourist attractions and tourism supporting infrastructure, therefore they are considered to be "tourism-first" educational service consumers (Lee, 2017). On the other hand, Asian students' decisions were generally more influenced by education pull factors than other nationalities and Chinese students were regarded as "in-betweeners" as they were influenced by the desire for international travel and experience but were also more concerned about the quality of higher education than Asian and non-Asian students. Moreover, Asian and Chinese students were significantly more likely to be influenced by recommendations from others than non-Asian students.

The level of study also impacted students' decision-making. Short-term study abroad students and postgraduate students were most influenced by the opportunity for international travel and experience, however undergraduate students' decision to study in Taiwan was mostly influenced by cost issues (Lee, 2017). Quality of higher education was more important for postgraduate students than other levels of study, and short-term study abroad students were more likely to be influenced by recommendations from others (Lee, 2017). This is supported by the study which revealed that Black American students chose to participate in a study abroad programme in China because they were influenced by their faculty leader (Lu et al., 2015).

In contrast to previous studies which show that international students have different motivations dependent on their nationality, King and Sondhi (2018) discovered that British and Indian students shared similar motivations for studying overseas. The most influential factors for both nationalities were to study at a world-class university, to obtain an international career, experience a unique adventure and support from family. However, there may be differences in the reasons why they have these motivations. For example, Indian students often use studying overseas as a means to enhance their personal and familial social mobility. In addition, as the world's fastest growing economy with the world's youngest population, many Indian students have aspirations to study at the country's top universities, which has made the pursuit of university entrance in their home country extremely competitive and universities are struggling to keep up with the demand. Therefore, studying overseas still gives students the opportunity to study at a world-class university. U.K. students often apply to study overseas because it mitigates the risk of being declined entry to Oxbridge if they have alternative options to study at world-class universities abroad (Brooks & Waters, 2009; King & Sondhi, 2018). Thus,

China's aim to increase its number of top ranked universities could result in more Indian and British students studying there.

International students are more likely to recommend a study destination if they have had a positive experience (ICEF, 2018; Kaur & Singh, 2016). As research has shown that recommendations from others are influential in many students' decisions, it is important for universities to ensure that students are satisfied with their study experience. However, prior studies have found that many international students are dissatisfied with their study experience in China (Ding, 2016; Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Wen et al., 2017). Only 32% of international students were satisfied with the teaching experience in China (Ding, 2010). Furthermore, students stated that they were dissatisfied with programmes that were taught in English (Wen et al., 2017). Ding (2016) found that despite the majority of international students choosing to study in China to learn the language, only 54% reported being satisfied with their progress.

Nevertheless, students were more satisfied with the quality of language teaching than academic content teaching. Students revealed that the content and software is outdated, the vocabulary they are being taught is obsolete and they are unsatisfied with the teaching methods, which focus on rote learning (Ding, 2016). International students prefer group discussions and activities to apply their learning. Less than half of the international students interviewed believed that their education in Chinese institutions was worth the tuition fees they had paid and only 41% of students were satisfied with their progress in academic classes (Ding, 2016). Furthermore, facilities and support services are important factors in students' decision-making and satisfaction (Padlee et al., 2010; Wadhwa, 2016). In addition, although international students would like to interact with domestic students, in China they study in separate classes, stay in separate accommodation complexes, and some even study in separate campuses, therefore, international students believe they do not have the opportunity to make friends with Chinese students. Moreover, less than half of the international students reported that Chinese students were welcoming (Ding, 2016).

Overall, international students in China have significantly lower levels of satisfaction, in comparison to other host nations. For example, 86% of international students studying in Australia are satisfied with their study experience (Australian Government, 2015). It could be argued that China has neglected to consider the student experience (Ding, 2016). China appears to have focused on its universities providing world-class research and

increasing their reputation in the global rankings in their pursuit of attracting 500,000 students by 2020 (17th Communist Party of China National Congress, 2010). As previous research suggests that quality of teaching is important, it is recommended that Chinese institutions focus on teaching and support services as well as research. It is imperative that international students are satisfied with their study experiences in order to become ambassadors for the country and encourage their peers to study there.

Furthermore, for universities to improve student satisfaction, it is imperative that they are aware of the factors which are most important to students. Previous research identified that quality of teaching and the programme were the most influential factors in students' choice of university, followed by reputation and ranking, and then facilities. However, university staff believe that the most influential factor in students' decision-making is the facilities, followed by marketing promotion and then university reputation. This disparity is problematic as university staff will focus on improving facilities, which are not essential to international student decision-making (An et al., 2008). As previous research has found conflicting results about international students' motivations to study in China, it is recommended that more research is undertaken to understand their motivations. Furthermore, it is crucial that the research is communicated to university staff so they are aware of students' needs.

It is argued that China is becoming an increasingly popular study destination due to its competitively priced programmes, and the significant investment from the Chinese government into improving Chinese universities. As China aims to create world-class universities, Chinese universities are increasing their international rankings and research outputs and therefore potentially becoming more attractive to international students (Crace, 2018; Reddy, Xie & Tang, 2016). In addition, the number of programmes taught in English at Chinese universities has increased significantly in recent years. It is proposed that this resulted in the number of American students studying in China doubling and the number of British students tripling between 2005 and 2015 (Parr, 2018). However, as previously discussed, research has shown that international students taught in English are significantly less satisfied with their learning experience. In comparison, students taught in Mandarin were more satisfied and this was irrespective of their Chinese ability. Students' dissatisfaction with being taught in English is arguably caused by Chinese academics' limited capability to teach in English. It is proposed that acquiring qualifications from prestigious Western universities does not equate to the ability to teach

in English. Furthermore, it is argued that Chinese universities are more focused on publishing research than teaching (Wen et al., 2017).

Key motivations to study in China could change in the future if China achieves its goal of providing world-class education in top ranked universities and continues increasing the number of joint degrees with Western universities (Bislev, 2017). It is proposed that a qualification from the highest ranked university in China, Tsinghua University, or another top Chinese university will be as sought after as a qualification from overseas (Reisberg, 2015). As research on international students' decision to study in China is extremely rare, it is argued that further research must be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of students' motivations to choose China as a host destination.

Moreover, whilst China is receiving increasing numbers of applications from international students, the U.S. is experiencing a significant decline in applications from international students (Pemberton, 2016). It is suggested that more students are choosing to study in China as it is an economic superpower focused on internationalisation (Huang, 2015). Conversely, it is proposed that American changes in immigration policy which restricts students from certain nations obtaining visas to study in the U.S., has resulted in international students feeling unwelcome. Furthermore, it is argued that this has also influenced students who are not directly affected by the policy change as they are concerned about a negative shift in Americans' attitudes towards immigrants (Bendix, 2017; Bislev, 2017; THE, 2017).

International students perceive that they will have difficulty obtaining visas to study in the U.S. Therefore, many students are deciding it is not worth investing time and money into the application and visa process to subsequently have to deal with the embarrassment of being declined (Reisberg, 2015). Moreover, the U.S. government's recent policy change in June 2018 which will reduce the length of some Chinese students' visas is anticipated to result in more Chinese students choosing to study at home or in other countries (Chu, 2018). In addition, the growth of transnational education has resulted in many world-class universities setting up campuses in developing countries (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2012). For example, New York University has opened a campus in Shanghai (Langfitt, 2013). China is currently the largest destination for international branch campuses (Mok & Han, 2016). Therefore, students no longer need to travel overseas to obtain a qualification from a Western university (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; Wilkins et al., 2012). More research is required to investigate why

increasing numbers of international students are choosing to study in China and whether the United States' change in government policies impacts their decisions.

2.9 Information sources

In addition to understanding students' motivations for choosing a host destination, it is also important to be aware of the sources of information which influence their decision. Decisions are based on a combination of information available, word of mouth, perceptions and reputation. Students begin their information search internally to retrieve existing information in their memory. When this information is considered insufficient for decision-making about a purchase, students will search externally (Galan et al., 2015; Simões & Soares, 2010).

External searches include direct, internal sources which are university-controlled, such as the official university website, brochures, university open days and interpersonal sources, which include word of mouth recommendations from family, friends, teachers and alumni (Galan et al., 2015; Simões & Soares, 2010). Information searches also include external sources from third parties which are not university-owned, such as blogs. External sources are considered to be the least useful information sources. The extent of information searching is dependent on the perceived risk of the decision. It is argued that if students consider the decision to be high-risk, they undertake extensive research to mitigate the risk (Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Simões & Soares, 2010).

It is proposed that there is a positive correlation between the perceived risk of a purchase and the importance of social influences. Therefore, it is unsurprising that previous research has found that social influences play an important role in students' choice of university (Simões & Soares, 2010). There are a range of interpersonal sources which have been found to influence students' decision-making including family, friends, teachers, agents, and current or former students. However, extant research has produced conflicting results regarding the importance of different interpersonal sources (Cubillo et al., 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Simões & Soares, 2010; Tan, 2015).

For example, several studies have reported that agents are extremely influential in some students' decision-making (ICEF, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). It is proposed that students seek advice from agents as they are overwhelmed with the abundance of information and magnitude of the choices they have to make. Agents assist students with

course counselling, information about host destinations and institutions, completing their university and visa applications, arranging accommodation and insurance, and many book flights too (Bohman, 2009). In contrast, other research has found that despite many students using agents to apply to study overseas, agents are not influential in their decision-making process (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Yang, 2007). Students tend to rely on agents more for their information search and to assist them with the visa application process. It is argued that the decision of where to study is more likely to be influenced by recommendations from family and friends, rather than agents. International education consumers can believe that agents have a vested interest to recommend certain study destinations which pay them higher commission rates, thus their recommendations can be perceived as less trustworthy (Ding, 2016; Pimpa, 2003). In support of these findings, students typically do not use agents if they know someone living in their intended study destination. They are more willing to trust the local contact, even if they have extremely limited knowledge of the institution or programme. For example, a Vietnamese student chose her institution based on her relative driving past the campus every day and positive hearsay about the institution (Bohman, 2009). Similarly, friends and family living in the host country are the most frequently used source of information for Indian students when choosing their host destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wadhwa, 2016).

Correspondingly, the majority of research has identified that family and friends are important influences on students' decision to study in traditional host countries (Abubakar et al., 2010; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pham, 2019; Pimpa, 2003). Family and friends' recommendations were the most influential factor in international students' decision to study in the U.S. (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Tan, 2015). However, Maringe and Carter (2007) found that African students were influenced more by their friends' recommendations than other interpersonal sources. Additional research has discovered that older students are influenced more by their peers, whereas younger students' decisions are guided more by their parents (Pimpa, 2003). Similarly, parents are more influential in undergraduate students' decisions than postgraduate students (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Generally Asian students appear to be more susceptible to social influences than other ethnicities (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Hu et al., 2016). In particular, Indonesian students are heavily influenced by their relatives' recommendations (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Additional research has discovered that current or former students are the most influential interpersonal source in students' decision-making, followed by teachers. In particular,

students who excel academically place more significance on their teachers' recommendations (Simões & Soares, 2010).

Despite the wealth of research which has investigated the impact of social influences on students' decision to study in developed countries, there is a lack of research which has explored the importance of interpersonal sources on students' decision to study in China. The existing research has found that friends and family exert little influence on students' decisions. Instead it was reported that safety, cost, employment opportunities, culture and ranking were more influential in students' decision to study in China (Hu et al., 2016). In contrast, another study which discussed factors which influence Black American students to complete short study abroad programmes in China discovered that their faculty leader was extremely influential due to a shared identity (Lu et al., 2015). It is clear that additional research is required to determine the impact of interpersonal sources in international students' decision to study in China. If social influences are prominent in the decision-making process, it is imperative that the Chinese government and university tailor their marketing to target these audiences.

Although social influences are generally considered as influential in student decision-making, traditional sources of information such as the university website appear to be the leading source of information for many students. Students also find university brochures and campus visits influential in their decision-making process. It is argued that students typically rely on university-owned information sources to provide accurate, trustworthy information (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Simões & Soares, 2010).

Students can also use social media as a source of information when deciding to study overseas. Facebook, YouTube and blogs tend to be used during the information search stage to provide students with an insight into student life, university facilities and testimonials from alumni (Galan et al., 2015). Recent research shows that international students also want to engage with university-owned Instagram pages (IDP Connect, 2019). However, despite the prevalence of social media use amongst the student demographic, there is a relatively low uptake of students utilising these sources to influence their decision-making process. As there is a lack of student engagement with university-owned social media channels post-purchase, it is argued that relevant content showing student life and experiences is limited (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Galan et al., 2015).

In addition to understanding the sources of information which are most useful to international students, it is also important for the Chinese government and universities to know students' information needs. Research has shown that students' information requirements differ dependent on their nationality. African students are most interested in receiving information about costs and financial assistance, whereas Middle Eastern students want information about support services and safety (Choudaha et al., 2012). Conversely, the main concern for Asian students is receiving information from prospective universities about employment prospects post-graduation. However, a commonality which all students shared is an interest in receiving programme information (Choudaha et al., 2012). Thus, it is important to determine the information needs of international students choosing to study in China and whether segmentation is required to meet each target market's needs.

2.10 Implications of changes in China

China is the largest source country of international students globally. However, it is proposed that overseas study destinations are starting to become less attractive to Chinese students with more students considering studying in their home country (Bodycott, 2009; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Tan, 2015). Although the number of Chinese students studying overseas has continued to increase in recent years, the growth rate has slowed significantly. Due to the millions of Chinese students who have already studied overseas, some believe that overseas qualifications no longer provide a significant competitive advantage. Additionally, with Chinese universities featuring in top global rankings for the past few years, students may feel that they do not need to study overseas to obtain a qualification from a prestigious university (Parr, 2018; THE, n.d.). Furthermore, the number of higher education Chinese students studying in the U.S. also declined in 2017. This could be attributed to the prevalence of gun violence which has resulted in international students increased concerns about safety in the U.S., as safety is one of the most influential factors in Chinese students' decision to study overseas (Bislev, 2017; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Mackie, 2019; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Parr, 2018; Yang, 2007). Conversely, others argue that China will continue to be the world's main source of international students for the foreseeable future. China's rapid economic growth and rising middle-class means that more people can afford to study overseas and there is a cultural expectation that students should study overseas because it is considered to provide better career outcomes and increased social mobility (Kennedy, 2018; Pimpa, 2003; Yang, 2007).

There could be significant implications for traditional Western host countries if Chinese students choose to study in their home country, as these countries rely on the Chinese market for over one-third of their international student population (Rafi & Lewis, 2013).

2.11 Self-identity

Students are not homogenous. Even if they are from the same country and culture and studying the same programme, there are still many other factors such as self-identity, socioeconomic status, academic ability and aspirations which influence their choice of study destination (Chen, 2007; Shanka et al., 2005). Self-identity is an important determinant of behaviour as people tend to make decisions and behave in ways that are congruent with their current self-identity and/or their aspirational self-identity (Smith, Terry, Manstead, Louis, Kotterman & Wolfs, 2008). Previous research shows that a motivation for some students to decide to study overseas is to enhance their self-identity by impressing their peers. Some students also experience increased self-esteem as they gain their independence and realise that they can effectively manage the challenges of studying in a foreign country (Cai et al., 2015). In addition, students aim to study in highly ranked universities to enhance their identity (Marginson, 2006). It is suggested that enhanced self-identity and self-esteem is more likely to occur when students study in destinations that are uncommon to their peers (Cai et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015). Previous research has not fully investigated the impact of self-identity on international students' decision-making process, therefore, it is proposed that more research is required to better understand the role of self-identity in students' decisions to study in China.

As the majority of prior research has revealed that international students have different factors that influence their decision-making process, it is recommended that the Chinese government and universities adopt segmented marketing strategies to meet the requirements of their target students. Marketing strategies should include segmentation by nationality, level of study, motivations for studying overseas and future aspirations (Wadhwa, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2012). This is supported by studies using the Consumer Style Inventory (CSI) which shows that consumers from different countries have distinct decision-making styles (Mehta & Dixit, 2016).

2.12 Summary

Despite China's significant investment and growth in international education, little is known about the determinants which influence international students to choose China as their study destination. To date, international education scholarship has focused on the

unilateral, vertical flow of students migrating from developing countries to developed countries, typically East to West (Bista et al., 2018). As China is the main source country for international students globally, most research has concentrated on exploring the factors which influence Chinese students to study in Western countries, such as the U.S., U.K., Australia or Canada (Chen, 2007; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Tan, 2015; Yang, 2007). However, as China is currently the third largest host country of international students (IIE, 2018), research is required to understand the factors which influence international students to choose China as a study destination. The main source countries for China consist of both developing and developed countries, including South Korea, the U.S., Kazakhstan and Thailand (MOE, 2019). This shows that international education is multidirectional (Bista et al., 2018).

Studying overseas is widely regarded as a high-risk decision that is influenced by push factors, which operate in students' native countries encouraging them to study overseas, and pull factors, which attract students to host destinations (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Simões & Soares, 2010). Social influences and information sources also impact international students' decision-making process (Galan et al., 2015; Simões & Soares, 2010). In addition, recent research has shown that intrinsic factors such as a desire to impress peers influences students' decisions too (Cai et al., 2015; King & Sondhi, 2018).

Extant minimal research which has investigated students' motivations for studying in China has produced conflicting results (An et al., 2008; Ding, 2016; Wen & Hu, 2018). For example, it is unclear whether quality of education is important to international students' considering China as a study destination or whether their perception of China's education quality acts as a deterrent (Yang, 2016). Therefore, further research is required to explore the reasons why international students from various countries are attracted to study in China.

Furthermore, little is known about how students make the decision to study in China. The decision-making process of students choosing a Western study destination is believed to be a three-stage process. However, there is disagreement about whether the stages are sequential or intertwined (Chen, 2008; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In addition, previous research has found that students from developing countries undertake extensive research when choosing a developed country as their study destination and multiple information sources and interpersonal sources are consulted to inform their decision (Galan et al.,

2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pimpa, 2003; Pham, 2019; Tan, 2015; Wadhwa, 2016). Given the lack of research which has investigated how international students choose China, what information is required from which sources and who influences their decision-making, additional research is required to better understand the decision-making process of students studying in China.

For international student numbers in China to continue increasing, students must have favourable study experiences. Students are more likely to recommend a destination if they have a positive experience, therefore, it is important to learn about their experiences of studying in China (ICEF, 2018; Kaur & Singh, 2016). Previous research, which is limited, has found that international students are dissatisfied with their study experiences in China (Ding, 2010; Ding, 2016; Wen et al., 2017). Further research is necessary to understand international students' expectations of their study destination and their experiences of studying in China.

This thesis aims to address these research gaps and provide a rich understanding of students from developing and developed countries decisions to study in China. The following chapter details how this research is conducted.

Chapter 3 Research Design

This chapter describes and justifies the research design that was used to achieve the aims and objectives of this thesis. It commences with a discussion of the research paradigm and the qualitative approach that was adopted to answer the research questions. Qualitative methods have been used modestly in previous research which has investigated international students' motivations for studying overseas. The majority of research has adopted a quantitative, survey-based approach to understand the factors which influence international students to study in a particular developed country (Abubakar et al., 2010; Lee, 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rafi & Lewis, 2013; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010). Therefore, qualitative research was employed in this research to provide a detailed understanding of the factors which impact students' decision, their decision-making process and their experience of studying in China. This chapter also provides a description of the research process, including the sampling technique, criteria and sample size. Following this, the process of data collection and data analysis are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the reliability and validity measures undertaken to assure credibility of the data. Figure 3 illustrates the research design adopted in this study.

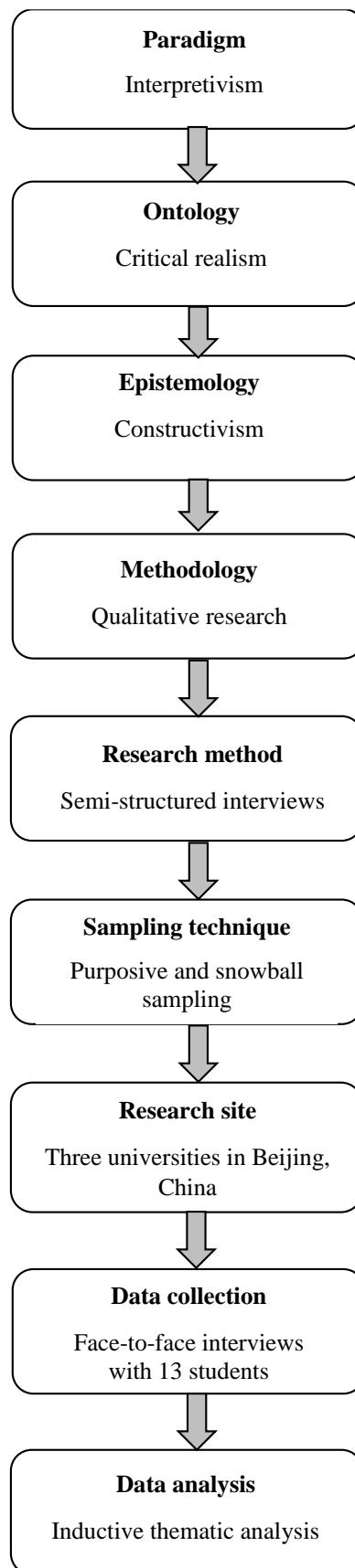


Figure 3. Research design

(Sources: Cresswell, 2013; Grant & Giddings, 2002; Gray, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.1 Research paradigm

It is considered important for researchers to disclose their research paradigm to enable readers to understand the lens of the researcher as this influences the way knowledge is researched and interpreted (Bhattacharya, 2016; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). A research paradigm is a philosophical and theoretical framework which encompasses three core fundamentals; ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Ontology refers to the researchers view of the nature of reality. Specifically, it is concerned with whether reality exists independent of human consciousness or whether reality is constructed and interpreted by humans' views and perceptions. This provides the foundation for developing an epistemology. Epistemologies define the relationship between the researcher and knowledge (Grant & Giddings, 2002). They are concerned with how the researcher researches the social world and can be categorised as either objectivism/positivism or constructivism/interpretivism. Objectivists believe that researchers can objectively distance themselves from their research without influencing the outcomes. Their research is underpinned by positivism, which asserts that reality is fixed and objective, and therefore, independent of human's knowledge, views and perceptions. Objectivists tend to adopt quantitative research and scientific inquiry to test their hypotheses (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Gray, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

On the other hand, constructivism asserts that truth and meaning do not exist independent of humans' knowledge, rather it is constructed by humans' interactions with the world (Cresswell, 2013; Gray, 2014). Therefore, objective truth does not exist. Meaning is constructed, rather than discovered (Crotty, 1998). Constructivism is underpinned by interpretative epistemologies which argues that humans construct their own subjective meanings through experiences, interactions with others and cultural and historical norms (Cresswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014). As qualitative research allows researchers to interact with participants to gain a rich understanding of their reality and experiences, an interpretative paradigm and qualitative methodology were employed in this thesis (Patton, 2002).

Furthermore, interpretivism recognises that reality is not fixed; it is changeable. As individuals each make their own sense of the world, multiple, different realities can exist (Gray, 2014). Interpretivism believes that the role of the researcher is to be a "passionate participant." Thus, the researcher aims to reduce the distance between themselves and

participants to understand and share their perspective (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As this research aims to understand students' perspectives about their experiences of studying in China, the factors which influence their decision to study in China and how they make their decision, adopting an interpretative, qualitative approach was considered the best fit to answer the research questions. Although researchers may possess worldviews about how reality is formed, different studies require distinct methodologies, therefore, it is important that the chosen research methodology achieves the objectives (Grant & Giddings, 2002).

3.2 Qualitative approach

Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and is therefore beneficial for studying topics which little is known about (Creswell, 2013). As international students choosing China as a study destination has received limited attention in academic research, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain an understanding of the factors which influence students' decisions to study in China and their perceptions of their experiences of studying in China.

Moreover, as the decision to study overseas is regarded as a complex decision with multiple mediating factors, a detailed description is required to understand the decision-making process, the context in which certain actions were taken and the thoughts and behaviours that presided the actions. Qualitative research allows for detailed descriptions because researchers can obtain perspectives directly from participants (Bryman, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology is less restrictive than quantitative research and allows participants to discuss new insights which have not emerged in previous research. Furthermore, researchers can explore new insights in detail to ensure they obtain a deep understanding of participants' views and experiences (Creswell, 2013).

In particular, individual interviews were employed to afford students time to share their perspective in detail and explain their views and experiences in their own words (Bryman, 2001; Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, conducting interviews face-to-face helps to build rapport through social cues and body language. As participants were discussing personal experiences which involved their family members and revealing information about exams they had failed and universities which rejected their application, it was considered essential to build rapport with participants to ensure they felt comfortable to openly share their stories with the researcher (Weller, 2017). Conducting interviews in participant's natural setting should also have assisted participants with feeling comfortable in the environment (Creswell, 2013). Face-to-face interviews were considered preferable to

Skype interviews as they mitigate the risk of technological difficulties and allow for conversation to flow uninterrupted. Previous research has found that participants are more willing to discuss topics in-depth face-to-face (Weller, 2017).

Researchers must maintain an open mind and a willingness to listen when conducting interviews. It is important that the researcher is flexible to allow the conversation to flow and new insights to emerge, without imparting their perspective or influencing the direction of the conversation to match a pre-conceived notion (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Semi-structured interviews entail open-ended questions designed to produce detailed responses. This style of interviewing is flexible and allows for variation of conversation, whilst the interview guide aids the researcher to ensure that the research objectives are met. Researchers can ask probing questions to clarify answers and understand participants' meaning (Malhorta, 2010). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were considered to be the best method to produce the rich, in-depth data required to explain the complex phenomena of choosing a host destination (Seidman, 2006).

3.3 Sampling

Purposeful sampling methods are employed in qualitative research to ensure that participants can contribute to the understanding of the phenomena which is being studied. In this thesis, purposive sampling and snowball recruitment were used to recruit participants due to difficulty identifying and contacting participants who could provide rich data to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

This sampling technique involved the researcher contacting Chinese universities to ask them to promote the study to their cohort of international students. The researcher provided an advertisement for universities to use (Appendix A). The researcher also posted the advertisement on a Beijing-based blog (www.thebeijinger.com). Additional participants were also selected by asking interviewees about other international students who might be interested in participating in the research. The potential bias of this non-random sampling technique was mitigated by ensuring participants were from a wide range of nationalities and studying different programmes at three separate universities (Bryman, 2001).

Interviewees were required to meet the following purposive criteria to be selected to participate in the research; they must have commenced enrolment with a Chinese

university to study a full bachelor's or master's degree within the past 12 months, be at least 18 years of age, fluent in English and residing in Beijing. Budget and resource restrictions prevented the research from including international students who could not speak English. Students were required to be fluent English speakers to enable rich, detailed responses (Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, it was a requirement for students to have commenced their programme within the past 12 months as they were expected to recall a detailed description of their decision to study in China. The alternative of interviewing students during the decision-making process, prior to arrival in China, would have caused uncertainty with the data as students could still be considering alternative host destinations and additional factors which influenced their decision could emerge after the interviews were conducted. Finally, Beijing was chosen as the site for data collection as the majority of international students' in China study in the capital city (MOE, 2019). Budget and time restrictions prohibited this study from conducting research in other Chinese cities.

As qualitative research does not aim to provide results which are statistically generalisable to the population, the researcher focused on including "information-rich" participants (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Malhorta, 2010; Patton, 2002). A challenge with qualitative research is that there are no definitive answers regarding sample size. The general consensus is that sufficient sampling is achieved when saturation occurs. Saturation means that no new information is obtained from additional interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Seidman, 2006). Considering the limited time at the research site and data saturation, it was deemed that sufficient sampling in the present study was achieved after interviewing a total of 13 international students from the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia. Table 3 provides more information about the participants, including the breakdown of nationalities, gender, level of study and university.

Table 3. Profile of participants

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Level of study	University	Ethnicity
1	Canadian	Male	Undergraduate	University A	North American
2	South Korean	Male	Undergraduate	University A	2 nd generation Chinese
3	American	Male	Undergraduate	University A	2 nd generation Vietnamese
3	Kazakh	Female	Undergraduate	University B	European
4	Nigerian	Female	Undergraduate	University B	African
5	American	Female	Undergraduate	University A	2 nd generation Chinese
6	Japanese	Female	Undergraduate	University A	2 nd generation Chinese
7	American	Female	Undergraduate	University A	2 nd generation Chinese
8	Mongolian	Female	Postgraduate	University C	Asian
9	Belarusian	Female	Postgraduate	University B	European
10	Mongolian	Female	Postgraduate	University B	Asian
11	Irish	Male	Postgraduate	University B	European
12	Thai	Male	Postgraduate	University C	4 th generation Chinese
13	Zambian	Male	Postgraduate	University C	African

In total, 5 participants were of Chinese heritage. Four students were second-generation Chinese, and another student was fourth-generation Chinese.

“University A” is a top ranked, comprehensive research university, with a history of being a polytechnic university focused on engineering. It was established as a preparatory school for students to study in the U.S.

“University B” is a low ranked, comprehensive university which traditionally focused on science and technology.

“University C” is a top ranked, comprehensive research university, which was the first modern national university in the country.

3.4 Ethical Approval

Ethics approval was sought from Auckland University of Technology’s Ethics Committee (Appendix B). Upon indicating an interest to participate in the study, participants were sent an information sheet to provide more context and protocols about the research and

to inform that their participation was voluntary (Appendix C). Participants were asked to read this before signing a consent form, which assured confidentiality and anonymity and confirmed their informed consent to participate (Appendix D).

Prior to interviews commencing, participants were reminded of their rights and authority to withdraw their participation at any time during the research. Participants were also reminded that interviews would be audio-recorded. No participants raised concerns or requested to withdraw their participation.

The interview findings are presented in the form of quotes, with pseudonyms replacing identifying information to ensure participants privacy is maintained.

3.5 Data collection

Prior to conducting data collection, an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was prepared to ensure each interview contributed towards the research aims, and to ensure consistency in the questions asked of participants (Kemper, 2017). The interview guide (Appendix E) allows for flexibility and improvisation in conversation to uncover new emerging ideas (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, with each interview taking between 40-60 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded to ensure that the conversation was captured in its entirety as it is important to note what participants say and how they say it (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This ensures that participants responses are relayed in their own words. An additional benefit to recording interviews is it enhances the validity of the research by having the data available for public scrutiny to confirm that researchers have not influenced the data. The researcher also took notes throughout the interview to add context to the recording, and to note body language which could not be audibly recorded (Bryman, 2001; Richards, 2005).

The interviews were conducted in participants' study destination, Beijing, China. Due to the researchers' unfamiliarity with the location and to ensure that participants felt comfortable in the environment, participants selected the public place where interviews took place. Interviews occurred in cafes nearby the university campus, or in student designated spaces on-campus.

The interview process was refined throughout the data collection stage. From the first interview, the researcher learned that sensitive topics such as academic failure and

contentious relationships within families emerged, as these contributed towards students' decision-making and experiences of studying in China. Therefore, it was necessary for the researcher to adapt the interview guide to build rapport with participants from the outset and ensure they were given time to feel at ease before asking specific questions related to the research aims (Goia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012; Weller, 2017). This enabled the researcher to ask probing questions later in the interview to gain a deeper understanding of students' feelings and perceptions (Bryman, 2001). Another learning was that participants often imparted some of the most valuable data in short conversations after the interview ended. This indicated that by the end of the interview, participants felt more relaxed and spoke freely when they were not asked to answer specific questions. Consequently, the researcher adapted the interview style to include questions about political influence near the end of the interview and to allow participants to speak spontaneously after the final question. Permission was obtained from participants to include this data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Flexibility was crucial during the interview process. Participants often requested to reschedule interviews at short notice due to demanding university timetables and coursework requirements. Students typically attended classes from 9am-7pm each day so most interviews occurred in the evening or weekend.

3.6 Data analysis

Once data saturation was achieved, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and included linguistic features such as pauses, sighs and laughter. The context of the interviews was also noted as well as the researcher's inference of behaviour, for example, participants hesitation or perceived reluctance to answer certain questions. Participants names were changed to provide anonymity. A sample interview transcript can be viewed in Appendix F. The transcribed data was stored and analysed using a qualitative research data management software, NVivo. The large volume of data generated from interviews and field notes were managed and organised in NVivo prior to analysis (Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

Given the exploratory nature of the present study, thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. Thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and enables the researcher to understand and describe the complexities of meaning that individuals give to their social realities, therefore it is useful to explore more than individuals' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014). This analytic method allows

researchers to identify, analyse and report themes generated from an entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using an inductive approach which is data-driven, rather than research-driven, entails searching for patterns in the data without a pre-existing frame of reference. Consequently, new themes which have not been identified in previous research can be generated to provide a more accurate understanding and lead the direction for future research (Richards & Hemphill, 2018).

The process of thematic analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide. The first stage of analysis involved the researcher becoming immersed in the data. Immersion was achieved by listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, checking the accuracy of the transcription and by reading the transcripts multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process, the researcher took memos of the emerging patterns and ideas for codes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Inductive thematic analysis comprises of codes being generated from the data rather than having a pre-determined framework of codes based on existing research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the next stage, initial codes were generated by identifying interesting sections of the data and categorising these into meaningful groups. The researcher systematically worked through the transcript line by line coding each section of the data using the NVivo software programme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding entails collecting the data into small categories which contain similar ideas and attaching a label and description to each category. Although some researchers support lean coding (Cresswell & Poth, 2018), others recommend constructing many codes to ensure that all relevant data is captured. If codes are considered superfluous, they can be discarded at a later stage (Bryman, 2001). An example of open coding and the descriptions used can be seen in Table 4. Both descriptive and analytical codes were generated. To avoid losing context, it was important to include surrounding data when coding. Furthermore, sections of data were not exclusive to one code. The same extracts were often relevant to multiple codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2001).

Table 4. Example of coding in data analysis

Open code	Description
Perception of China	Perceptions of China, Chinese people, the Chinese education system and lifestyle in China pre-decision and post-decision. Social influences perceptions of China. Perception of China in the media.

Following the coding of the data, the researcher analysed the different codes and combined them into overarching themes. A list of the codes and themes that were generated can be found in Table 5 in the following chapter. As visual aids can assist with the process of generating themes, the codes were printed from NVivo and placed in piles to represent themes. Codes can become main themes, sub-themes or considered redundant. Afterwards, the researcher refined the themes to ensure they were supported by sufficient data, the data extracts within themes were meaningful and the themes were representative of the coded data extracts. Some themes were merged with other themes or split into multiple themes. The researcher then checked that the identified themes were representative of the entire data set. This involved reading the transcripts again and coding any relevant additional data that was overlooked in the earlier coding process. Coding is an ongoing practice which requires continuous evaluation until refinements no longer make significant contributions to the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Connections between themes were also considered to identify the overarching concepts (Bryman, 2001). The next stage entailed further defining the identified themes to capture the crux of each theme and ensuring each theme fit into the overall analysis of the data and contributed towards the research aims (Goia et al., 2012). The researcher analysed the data extracts within themes to explain what was interesting about these points and how they impact the overall understanding of international students' decision to study in China and their experiences of studying there.

A detailed analysis of each theme is provided in Chapter 4. Existing literature was consulted and compared with the findings of the present study to discover the theoretical contributions revealed in this thesis. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in detail and provides a comparison with extant research.

3.7 Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are often considered as one of the challenges of qualitative research (Bryman, 2001; Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Validity refers to the accuracy with which the findings reflect participants' realities of the phenomena being researched (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Multiple accounts of international students' decision-making processes and experiences of studying in China were obtained to maximise reliability (Gray, 2014). Credibility of the research is also attained by the rich, detailed descriptions of how the study was conducted in this chapter and the generated themes in Chapters 4 & 5 (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

Following the emergence of preliminary themes, the process of disconfirming evidence was adopted, whereby the researcher reviewed the data looking for evidence which disconfirmed these initial themes. This is regarded as a difficult process due to confirmation bias, however, it is feasible as the interpretivist approach states that multiple realities exist. As the majority of the data confirmed the existence of the preliminary themes, rather than disconfirmed, credibility of the data and analysis can be assured (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

Furthermore, an audit trail was maintained to log research activity, interview schedules and transcripts, research notes, data analysis procedures and decisions made throughout the study. This process reinforces research dependability as external sources can use audit trails to understand why decisions were made and how the findings were constructed (Bryman, 2001; Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Richards, 2005).

Another method to ensure reliability of interview data is for the researcher to build rapport and trust with participants. Interviewees who feel at ease are more likely to provide accurate, detailed responses. Thus, it was important for the researcher to minimise social dissonance, and to be open-minded and non-judgemental, as social desirability responses can occur if participants feel uncomfortable providing honest answers (Bryman, 2001; Seidman, 2006).

A final validity procedure is to disclose the researchers' biases, views and beliefs, which are discussed in the following section of this chapter (Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Gray, 2014).

3.8 Researcher reflexivity

Qualitative research is constructed by both the researcher and the participant (Cresswell, 2013). Reflexivity throughout the research process enhances the validity, therefore, I ensured continual reflection during the study by maintaining an audit trail and making a conscious effort to avoid personal bias, views and beliefs from influencing the data (Cresswell & Miller, 2000).

Maintaining an audit trail assisted with reflexivity as it enabled the researcher to document each step of the research process and to reflect on how and why decisions were made. A log trail of emerging codes and themes and associated descriptions which were stored in NVivo strengthened the credibility of the data (Richards, 2005).

Furthermore, in addition to the research gap which was identified earlier, I was interested in conducting this study because of my background and personal interests. Having worked in the international education industry for almost 7 years, I was surprised to learn about China's rapid rise as a host destination for full undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The largest traditional host countries, the U.S. and the U.K. boast a long-standing reputation of excellent education quality and their Ivy league and Oxbridge universities are recognised for producing world-leading research (HM Government, 2019; Tan, 2015). In contrast, China has not, to date, been recognised as a world leader in education, thus, I believe it is fascinating for China to be competing with the U.K. as the second most popular study destination (Pemberton, 2016).

As the international education industry is competitive with many players, governments and universities frequently conduct competitor analyses of other Western countries. However, in my experience, China is not considered as a competitor (Bista et al., 2018). Western governments and institutions are focused on each other, whilst China is becoming a dominant host destination.

Furthermore, I am aware of the significant investment that governments and universities devote to international student recruitment, therefore, I believe this research can assist with real world contributions. Similarly, I have experience of supporting students with their extensive decision-making to ensure they choose the "best" university and I am also aware of the large investment of time and money that international students invest in their overseas education and their decision-making process. For these reasons, I was interested to explore why international students choose to study in China, how they make their decision, and what is their experience of studying in China.

Chapter 4 Findings

The findings outlined and discussed in this chapter explore the reasons why international students choose to study in China, the factors that influence their decisions, their decision-making processes and their experiences of studying in China. Fourteen themes emerged from the interviews. These are China as an emerging superpower, language, culture, ranking/reputation, scholarships, entry requirements, differentiation between international students, location, opportunities, social influences, decision-making research, challenges, experiences of studying in China and perceptions of China. A table of themes and codes from the data analysis can be found in Table 5.

Table 5. Themes and codes generated from data analysis of semi-structured interviews

Themes	Codes
China as an emerging superpower	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China as an emerging superpower • Future plans • Goal of studying in China • Job opportunities
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese language • Perceptions of China
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal development • Cultural heritage
Ranking/reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputation of the university • Social influences
Scholarships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarship • Low cost (monetary) of studying in China
Entry requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application process
Differentiation between international students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception of other international students • Classmates, friends in China
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of city in decision-making • Social influences
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job opportunities • Education quality
Social influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social influences • Perception of China

Themes	Codes
Decision-making research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative study destinations considered • Social influences • Choice of programme, alternative programmes considered • Importance of time • Pre-decision making research • Decision-making order
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges • Costs – Potential negatives of studying in China • Education quality • Personal development
Experiences of studying in China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodation • Classmates, friends in China • Perceptions of China • Expectations met
Perceptions of China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political relationship between China and home country • Censorship • China's investment in international students • Chinese influence in home country • Comparisons between China & home country • Expectations met • Feelings about home • Social influences

4.1 China as an emerging superpower

The first theme that arose during interviews with students was the rise of China and the country's emerging status as a global superpower. When asked why they chose to study in China, many students mentioned China's rapidly growing economy and influence on a global scale.

I think that with its growing influence on the global stage, that it should be a good idea to learn more about China. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

I think by now everyone can see that the world has turned its eyes on China. China, I think at the moment is doing fine economically and there are quite a good number of advantages they have. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

Students were also attracted to study in China because of the country's global influence and rapid development.

I think that when people remember this period in history, I think they're going to remember not the iPhones. They're going to remember the progress that China has made...I think that slowly the world is kind of swinging towards China a little bit without even realising it yet. You can see China's influence in a lot of things, even in the U.S. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

It was considered important to experience living in a politically and economically powerful country, such as China or the U.S., in order to have an influential role in students' home countries.

It's [China] one of the candidates to be a superpower in the world...If you want to play like an important position in your country, you should come to China or U.S. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Students from developing countries are also keen to study in China to learn about their policies, how they have implemented them effectively and how they have transformed the country into an emerging superpower, so they can apply similar practices in their home country.

Whatever they have done to reach this spot, I don't know. I'm yet to learn and preferably copy from them and really go and use that in our countries. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

Students from developing and developed countries mentioned the vast amount of opportunities in China and the global opportunities they would have as a result of studying there.

China is a very fast developing country. I believe, well, in my opinion, it's the 21st century's country of opportunities, but it's fast developing, workplaces, communications with other countries, so I think this is where the future is. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

Some students were attracted to China because of the country's investment in innovation and high-tech prowess globally.

Main reason. Well, it's either the biggest or subjectively the biggest market in the world...So the main point, which really, really heavily influenced it was just the level of innovation in China. It's very suitable for my kind of work because I'm in technology....Everything is made in China, pretty much. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

It was also suggested that China's rise on the global stage would attract more international students to study there, as students have historically chosen to study in economically and politically powerful countries.

When my father was a young man there were more students studying in the U.K., there were more students studying in the States...I expect more students coming here because China has joined the powers. That's just logical. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

In summary, a majority of students believed studying in a destination with global influence would increase their future opportunities. As China has experienced rapid growth in the past few decades, student participants in this study indicated they are motivated to study there to learn about the country as they believe its global influence will be enhanced in the future. Students from developing countries also want to learn about the country's success so they can implement similar policies in their native countries.

4.2 Language

All of the students mentioned the opportunity to learn Mandarin while studying in China and they believed that being able to speak the language would increase their job prospects in the future.

I'd like to improve it [Mandarin] because in the future my mum and everyone else tells me it will be really useful and I'll be valued more if I work in international companies, if I know at least some Chinese like conversational Chinese. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

Everyone knows that if you can speak Chinese, there's more salaries, there's more job opportunities and maybe like good positions even in the government institutions. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

The majority of students had some command of the Chinese language before studying in China. Many students' parents encouraged them to learn Chinese.

It was my dad that introduced it to me because he is a lawyer and had so many Chinese clients. He was like "China is the next big thing and there are a lot of opportunities and all". China right now is taking a big place on the world stage right now so he said, "Why don't you learn Chinese as a skill?". (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

A few of the participants had Chinese parents so it is understandable that their parents encouraged them to learn the language.

Conversely, some students decided to study in China despite having any Chinese language ability. Undergraduate students in this situation studied Mandarin in China for approximately one year in order to meet the entry requirements before enrolling at a Chinese university. However, postgraduate students are not required to have any Chinese language ability as all of their classes are taught in English. If postgraduate classes were taught in Mandarin, this would deter some international students.

It would have been difficult if they said we have to learn Chinese first because I would be here for three years for a master's... People get PhD's in three years so I wouldn't have settled for that. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

Although it is not a requirement, all of the postgraduate students still indicated that they aimed to learn Chinese.

One of my goals is to be able to speak Chinese fluently. I mean it's quite sad if you come to study in China and you go back and people expect you to speak Chinese and you just, "Oh sorry, I just can say 'Ni hao'". That's quite embarrassing. It's just one year. I don't know how much can I improve, but yeah, I'll do my best of course. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

The undergraduate students were taught in Chinese. Typically their first year consisted of classes with international students only and they joined the Chinese students in their second year. All of the students in this cohort stated that they were "scared" and it was "so intimidating" in the beginning.

When we started studying with Chinese classmates with actual Chinese professors that was very, very, very challenging. I have to say, I have to admit it. I couldn't understand anything at the beginning because each professor, each person has its own language, its own accent and you need a couple of weeks to just get used to people talking loud, or talking fast, or pronouncing words differently. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

However, it appears that the opportunity to study in class alongside Chinese students was advantageous to undergraduate international students.

...everybody feels Chinese people are so smart, so what they are getting I also get it too. I feel like the standard is very high. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

A few students discussed how their passion for the Chinese language commenced when they started studying Mandarin in their home country, and their enthusiasm for the language motivated them to study in China.

I really love characters. I really like to read Chinese characters and write Chinese characters. I think as I remember, the second year of my college I was dreaming

about Chinese characters, in my dream. Since that time I memorised 100 characters a day. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

To summarise, Chinese language was an important factor for all students in their decision to study in China. Although postgraduate students were not required to learn Mandarin for their studies, all of the participants intended to learn Mandarin while they were studying in China as they believed it would enhance their career prospects.

4.3 Rankings/Reputation of university

Rankings and reputation of universities in China also emerged as a principle theme in this research. All of the students discussed rankings and/or reputation and it was one of the most prominent determinants of choice of university for a vast majority of students. Students typically conducted online searches to obtain information on university rankings, whereas the reputation of universities tended to be formed by social influences.

Almost all of the participants discussed university rankings, and specifically, the top ranked university in China when discussing their decision to study in China. University rankings were considered to be an important factor for most international students. For one student, a high global ranking was the only determinant in his choice of university.

I thought picking the ranking obviously, I'd be pushed to do very good research and when going for my PhD it would be very easy for me to be picked elsewhere. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

A few students believed studying at a prestigious university in China would act as a stepping stone to pursue further study at an even more prestigious university in another country.

Right now because I've joined with this really high level university in the world. So I'm in here right now. I probably just need to jump more higher because right now my goal is to go to probably Columbia University, Princeton University in the future. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

Some students also considered the subject rankings in addition to the overall university rankings.

I wouldn't just go a university with a name, right? I have to consider their majors. Like, if you go to Tsinghua, computer science would be an ideal major because it's so good here. I think this year, they probably ranked the first in the world. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Interestingly, all of the students who were studying at the university which is currently ranked second in the country also mentioned how they had compared it to the top ranked university. Students studying at a university which was not ranked amongst the nation's highest universities referred to their social influences' perceived reputation of their university, rather than the ranking.

The director of the Confucius Institute in Nigeria was a lecturer here, so she told us that this is a school. When I got the scholarship, my dad told his Chinese friends and they were like "Wow, BIT. That is a very big school in China. Your daughter is lucky" so I had rest of mind that I was coming to a good place. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

Students also mentioned the increased opportunities they received as a result of studying at a prestigious university.

It's just like "Oh, you're at Tsinghua, the best university in China, of course come over and we will show you. And if you like it you might come to have an internship". And it's like all the opportunities. So Tsinghua was definitely a plus. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

The American students only considered studying at the highest ranked university in China. If they were not accepted, they intended to study at another university in their home country.

Although Tsinghua University is the highest ranked university in China, one student who is studying there perceived the second highest ranked university, Peking University, as more prestigious. This suggests that ranking is not the only determinant of reputation and prestige, and that age and tradition are also important.

Peking is known probably to every single Chinese person on the planet. Tsinghua, it should be known to most people but it's more like a new phenomenon like when you think of Tsinghua, it's like engineers or maybe you think of the president who is a Tsinghua graduate but Peking University carries much more prestige. It's probably the nicest campus in the whole world. It's got tons of history about it and people just love to be able to say "Oh, I went to Peking University", whereas in Tsinghua, I learned a lot but I don't really care which school I went to. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

For a few students the teaching quality was considered to be more important than ranking, however they were still aware of the ranking.

If I go to a school where I believe the teachers are really good which Tsinghua does have, I'm completely happy. It's just a bonus that Tsinghua is ranked top 20 in the world and top 10 for my programme, so it's just an added bonus but I would

say for most international students, I would assume it's not [important]. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

It is suggested that reputation was more influential than ranking in most students' decision-making. Almost all students were heavily influenced by their community's perception of university reputations. This often led to them having a sense of the "best" universities without having to check rankings online. However, it could be argued that students' social influences' perceptions of universities were influenced by their ranking.

Actually to me the most important thing actually wasn't rankings. On the global level it was actually more about Chinese people's opinions of the university. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

I know Tsinghua University because in my whole life like Chinese people, they want to go to this university. I know this is a really good university and they want to go... (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

In summary, rankings/reputation of university were one of the most influential criteria that students used in their decision-making. All of the students mentioned ranking or reputation when they discussed the reasons for choosing to study at a university in China. Although there are many different global university rankings, with the three most recognised rankings consisting of Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and QS World University Rankings, all of the participants only mentioned the rankings by QS. These included the overall global ranking, subject ranking and employer reputation ranking.

4.4 Scholarships

All of the participants discussed scholarships. A few students reported that scholarships were their main motivation for choosing to study in China. Scholarships or low cost of tuition factored into the majority of students' decision to study in China, although it was not their primary motivation. Almost all of the participants were recipients of the Chinese government scholarships. Students' scholarships ranged from one year of study to the entire duration of their programme. Students with scholarships for one year of study were entitled to apply each year for another scholarship, which was granted dependent on their grades. Furthermore, students' scholarships also ranged from covering only tuition fees to including tuition, accommodation, flights and monthly stipends. When discussing scholarships, many of the students also considered it to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, therefore they decided to study earlier than originally planned or change their programme of study.

For students who were significantly influenced to study in China because of the scholarship, they were concerned about their future after graduation. They mentioned that it was advantageous because they would not have to worry about paying student loans or being indebted to their parents, which would be necessary if they studied in alternative destinations.

But at the end of the day, it's all about the money, you know, life is all about money. You know, university tuition over there, over at the States, it's just too expensive. And there are lots of opportunities in Tsinghua saying, you know, I mean if you come here and I applied and I got an offer in the same, you know, you also get a, what is it called, scholarship, you know? So just come here you're going to be free. You just have to pay for your life expenses. So it feels like what an opportunity! Four years without worrying about the tuition. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

When I was applying for university, I think the main thing was just being able to go to a school that was either free or low cost. I think that probably would have been number one...in Canada it would be significantly harder like to go to university, you have to find funding to go to university and then you spend 10-20 years paying off your debts and stuff. But here, the ability to not only go to school but to a great school and to get a great education but to do it for free, I mean it's like once I graduate I can really do whatever I want instead of going to look for a job. So I would say my life is going to be a lot easier due to that. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Another student whose main motivation for studying in China was the scholarship, considered receiving a scholarship as being a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, which resulted in him altering his intended study plans.

This scholarship, right? Sure, they would not offer the same scholarship to the same person twice, right?... If it is rejected once, then they just find another guy. So yes, I think this opportunity won't come again...So, I have to grab it now. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

In addition, it was discovered that timely responses regarding scholarship applications are important as another student decided to study in China because the Chinese embassy were the quickest embassy to respond to his scholarship application with a positive outcome. Students who were successful in obtaining a government scholarship received a list of applicable universities that they could study at. This influenced their decision of which university to choose.

They [the Chinese Embassy] have a list of universities the government works with so they'll tell you a list of universities to apply to...Of course I was looking at the best universities. I was looking at the university ranking but then they said that the course that you're looking for-- they responded through email that the course

you are looking for is best taught at maybe Peking university so you can try Peking University. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

Many students considered the scholarship to be an additional factor which increased the attractiveness of studying in China.

I would be lying if I didn't say the financial aspect wasn't there because university in the U.S. is definitely pretty expensive. If I bring to my reasons and then adding financial aspects to it, it would probably be fourth. Yeah. It's definitely like a bonus, I think. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

The scholarship also was a decent kind of helping factor. Because it's either I pay like €13,000 in Ireland and do it, or I get it for free, and I also learn a language. So it was a really good opportunity. A really, really good opportunity. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Conversely, some students did not consider scholarships to be important determinants of their decision to study in China. When a few scholarship recipients were asked if they would still have decided to study in China without receiving a scholarship, they responded:

I believe so, yes, because I was quite interested, and I was dedicated to finish my studies in China. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

Yeah, for sure, because no matter what, the tuition here is much cheaper than in the States. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

There were a few other students who were not scholarship recipients because they did not apply or they failed to achieve the required grades to receive a scholarship. As all of these students were from developed countries, it could be suggested that scholarships are less important to this demographic, in comparison to students from developing countries, who were all scholarship recipients.

I don't have a scholarship right now. I forgot to apply. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Students discussed the large availability of scholarships for international students studying in China.

For my scholarship in general.... As long as you're actually willing to study, I don't think that there's any competition at all just because the foreigners that are there, they don't really study that hard and like I said if you get to HSK 4 [Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, Chinese language proficiency test] which as I said for a normal person is like one month of learning, you're guaranteed to get the scholarship, so it's quite easy....Any international probably should apply for a scholarship. Just

because if you're not Chinese ethnicity, it's almost guaranteed to get it. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

I think there's actually more scholarships given to international students studying in China than there are scholarships given to Chinese students studying in China, which is kind of sad. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Scholarship recipients who received free tuition, accommodation and monthly stipends mentioned that the generous scholarship was difficult to spend.

I do have the government scholarship, there's not really much of a need to work and if you live on campus, it's hard to spend that much money, like 3200 Yuan. It's hard to spend that much in one month. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

It honestly feels like being paid to study. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

To summarise, although the majority of students were scholarship recipients, obtaining a scholarship was not their main motivation for studying in China. Most scholarship recipients considered it as an additional advantageous factor in their decision.

4.5 Entry requirements

Another theme which was revealed in the student interviews was entry requirements. Previous research has identified that a pull factor for students when choosing their study destination is the relaxed entry requirements for international students studying in China (Wen & Hu, 2018). This also appears to be the case for entry to the top ranked, elite universities.

The programme was pretty easy to apply to compared to applying to the U.K. or U.S. Because the materials I needed to provide was really already the materials I already had on hand. I just had to get two recommendation letters and write my study plan which was only just two pages or three pages and others were just fine. It was not really competitive, so, I thought maybe I will have a chance and now I'm here today, so, I'm really lucky of course to study in this big university. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

In particular, students spoke about the recent change in entry requirements to the highest ranked university in China, Tsinghua University. It seems that following the implementation of a more rigorous admissions policy in 2017, the University relaxed their entry criteria for international students in 2018 (Wen & Hu, 2018).

So normally you have to take like a literal test to pass and if you pass then they pick you based on the ranking. But just on my year they changed, they changed the whole system. Instead of taking the literal test and stuff, you just have to go and interview. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

I remember one of my friends telling me they were studying for the test and then because, in past years, you always had to test in. And then when he found out, Tsinghua didn't have the test anymore, well, he just studied and then now he doesn't have to. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Students' parents who were of Chinese ethnicity informed their children about the less restrictive admissions criteria and encouraged them to apply. One student reported that her mother completed her application on her behalf and claimed that her daughter was fluent in Mandarin. It seems that some students gained admission to elite universities without submitting their language test certification.

A friend of mine, he never took the HSK and his Chinese is much worse than mine. I think he just got a written something from someone saying, "Oh, yeah, he's fluent." And that's all he needed. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Many students applied to high ranked universities in China without expecting to gain entry. Prior to the change in entry criteria, a few students had only applied to universities in their home country and had not considered studying in China. Therefore, these students only applied to the most elite university in China and did little research prior to submitting their application.

So during college applications, I actually hadn't considered coming to Tsinghua at all. I just was planning to go to a state college in California and I learned about applications after the fact that I applied to all universities in America. And then I was like I might as well apply and see where it goes and then I was accepted and did an interview and I was like 'What the hell, I'll try it and if I don't like it, I can come back but I will regret it for the rest of my life if I don't try it'. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

So last year, they opened up admissions for international students for applications instead of the usual testing in. And so when I found out about it, I just thought, "Well, I might as well just give it a shot." And so I gave it a shot, and I ended up getting in. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

The requirement of having to pass a test to gain entry to a university deterred some students from applying. When a student was asked if she would still have applied if she had to pass a test, she responded:

Maybe not, just because if there was a test, I'm not sure I would get in. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

The entry requirements seem to differ between universities and study levels.

Their application system was different, so for Tsinghua, for international students, they didn't have standardised testing, so the application process was much like

applying to a U.S. college, whereas for Peking there was a whole other test you have to take to enter into the university. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Undergraduate students studying at one university were required to complete interviews in person.

Instead of taking the literal test and stuff, you just have to go and interview. So what you do, first round, they have to go through your material. So your grades, how you did before university, you know, how's life, who are you, what kind of people you are, that's the first round. Second round would be like interview. They just ask you five questions and it's not even anything about subjects or it's not anything about studying. It's more about life...It's just like when you go to the job interview, they kind of give you these weird kind of questions. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Students spending time and money to travel overseas to be interviewed to gain entry to a university did not seem to deter them from applying.

They are all in person. You can't do it through Skype. So I paid 7000RMB just to come from Vancouver to Beijing, stay for three days and went back. But I think I was the unlucky one. There were lucky ones who had the interview in New York. They have one in Beijing, one in New York. I didn't know there was one in New York. They just told me to go to Beijing. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Another student completed his admission interview when university staff visited his school.

They [University staff] were just going around the boarding schools to see if they could find students. My entrance to the university was a little bit unorthodox. I mean, I didn't really kind of apply like most international students, I actually didn't really know much about the university. Of course I'd heard of it, like Peking University, but I'd never seriously considered going to China until they had contacted me. At that point I was already receiving my early admissions notices back from American colleges. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

In summary, relaxed entry requirements were extremely influential in all of the American students' decisions to apply to study in China, and students studying at the highest ranked university in the country. Students considered an entrance exam as a significant deterrent that would prevent them from applying to universities. Entry requirements appeared to be more important to undergraduate students than postgraduate students.

4.6 Differentiation between international students

A further theme which emerged was differentiation between international students, domestic students and "proper international students". Whilst undergraduate international

students are not required to pass a test to gain university entrance, Chinese students are required to pass a national test, Gaokao. Gaokao is considered to be one of the most competitive exams in the world and has a low pass rate in comparison to equivalent university entrance exams in Western countries. This is widely regarded as an extremely stressful time for Chinese students (Lu, Shi & Zhong, 2018).

As some countries including China do not permit dual citizenship, students who have spent the vast majority of their education in China have the option to choose between Chinese citizenship or another nation's citizenship when they reach 18 years old. Students who wanted to study at a university in China tend to choose the other nation's citizenship, which enables them to study at top Chinese universities with less restrictive entry requirements than their Chinese counterparts.

I think like my Chinese friends...because I was staying in Chinese school before. I think they kind of were like shocked because they can't believe that I'm getting to Tsinghua University. It is the top one university in China, but I think in the other way, they're kind of, I cannot say jealous. But because I'm using a green card or something to get into this university. If you're a Chinese student, you have to get a higher grade, you have to study to get into it. But I'm an international student. It's more easier for me to go to this university. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

Because to be honest, for foreign students, it's easier to get into Tsinghua than it is for Chinese students. It is sort of unfair but also it is an opportunity, you know, for both the university and for us. It's beneficial to each other. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

This phenomenon has led to a differentiation between international students and “proper international students.” “Proper international students” are considered to be students who do not have Chinese ethnicity and did not complete their high school education in China.

It doesn't really matter so much outside of the country but inside of the country a lot of people are getting quite mad at the fact that Chinese people will like... it mainly happens with Americans, like if a Chinese mum gives birth in the United States or in Canada, that kid will have a foreign citizenship but since they'll spend their whole life, they'll go to Chinese high school, they'll take Chinese exams and then they'll apply through China... Since international students that are there now, like the student quality is quite low, significantly lower than the Chinese students, it's easier for a Chinese student that has an American citizenship to apply and get in. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

On the contrary, another international student who studied at school in China believed that domestic students are not upset about international students having less restrictive entry requirements to study at Chinese universities. When speaking about his Chinese friends from school, he said:

They would love to come to Tsinghua too, right, because we all studied together, you know, we are in the same environment...But now, like with the same everything but I got into the better university, it's a way better university than theirs...they are actually excellent. They are better than me in studies compared to—like it's unfair to them. But they see something that we do that they cannot so they don't really complain. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

He argued that the difference in domestic and international students' language competencies lead to domestic students understanding the different entry criteria.

So think about me, I am a Korean, but I speak English fluently, right, which they can't. Most of them can't and also trilingual, and also, you know, it's a very different style of living compared to them so if we have a lot of similar factors I think they might realise what's the difference between me and them and they might start to judge. But for now, or just maybe just in their mindset they just think, we're just different and the criteria is different. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

It was suggested that universities have a preference towards international students, but they continue to admit domestic students to maintain academic excellence.

The school prioritises actually having actual records of like non-Chinese people but because they want to keep up the academic performances, they will still take Chinese people. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Furthermore, one student proposed that a university had continued to rise in the rankings due to the proportion of international student enrolments.

It might be because a lot of foreigners are coming in and there's a criteria that say the ratio between foreigner and the domestics. If it's high, I think the ranking is high. It has some factor with that. So that might be it but who knows? (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Although students who have Chinese parents and were educated in China may consider themselves as international students because they have a foreign passport, other international students who are not ethnically Chinese and did not attend school in China consider there to be a differentiation between these cohorts.

But a lot of them are Chinese as well with foreign passports. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

In contrast, international students who were born in China but possessed foreign passports do not consider themselves Chinese. For example, an international student with Japanese citizenship who was born in China to a Chinese father and a Japanese mother, educated in China and lived her entire life in China with the exception of a two-year exchange to

Canada, considered herself to be an international student.

I feel more comfortable staying with international students. Actually as I mentioned before that my mum and dad, they educate me I think in a Western way. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

This suggests that for some students their national identity is determined by cultural norms, rather than country of birth.

International students also tended to differentiate between other international students' ethnicity.

There are a lot of like American-born Chinese who are not sufficient in Chinese. They came here because their mother tongue is Chinese. So there is an option when you apply for Tsinghua University, either you have to pass a test called HSK, so level six would be ideal, level five is acceptable. Although if you get a level four, you come in and then in a year, you have to get a level five to stay, otherwise you get kicked out. Those are the options. Or the easiest one would be your mother tongue is Chinese which you just have to say, my parents were Chinese. They don't have to do the test. So there are Chinese who are just not good at Chinese at all like, American-born Chinese are not good at Chinese at all but they came here and they are really struggling. They are very different from Chinese students. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

American-born Chinese students were considered to have poor Chinese language skills, however, students from other nationalities with Chinese parents were perceived to be competent in Mandarin.

Most Europeans Chinese, like European Chinese when they come here, their Chinese is very good. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Students were unable to pinpoint why this difference occurs, however, it was insinuated that American-born Chinese students either have no interest or are ignorant about learning Chinese.

Don't know why, I mean, like "I'm American, I don't care", you know? (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Undergraduate students studying at the highest ranked university in China appeared to be extremely interested in their peers' backgrounds and heritage. Arguably, as they are studying in a competitive environment, they could be interested in their peers' backgrounds as it helps them to assess the competition. Interestingly, this was not evident in undergraduate students studying at other Chinese universities or in the postgraduate cohort.

I'm the only... I guess there's a Swedish girl but even though she was raised in Sweden her whole life, her family is still Chinese. Although I guess her Chinese levels is about the same as mine and she's also in my programme and so other than us two, everyone else is like Chinese native and they just have American citizenship or stuff like that. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

It could be suggested that non-Asian students are considered superior to other international students studying undergraduate programmes in China, as students were impressed by Caucasian students' command of the Chinese language, particularly if they have not been educated in China previously.

There are some things that are surprises because I really didn't thought, it's nothing racist, white people, they can speak Chinese very fluently, like, "Dude, how?". "What opportunity made you like this?". Because their families are obviously not Chinese and, "How are you so good at Chinese?". (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

In contrast to undergraduate international students studying at the highest ranked university, other undergraduate and postgraduate students did not appear to differentiate between the international student cohort.

They're all different nationalities. I have a Nigerian friend, I have an American friend, I have Kazakh friends, Russian friends, Ukrainians, some Arab guys. They're all from different nationalities. We have people speaking Spanish, people speaking English, people speaking French, they're all from different nationalities and I can call them friends. That is the best experience that I had studying in China, is the diversity, because we live in the International Student Centre and we get to meet people from all over the world and you get to know the countries, their countries as well. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

To summarise, international students tend to differentiate themselves from domestic students and other international students. International students who are not Chinese descendants consider themselves "proper international students". This appeared to be an important distinction to them. Similarly, students who are Chinese descendants, have lived in China their entire lives and studied at school with Chinese students still relate to international students and consider themselves distinct from their Chinese counterparts.

4.7 Location

Another theme which emerged in the research was location. Consistent with existing research, the majority of undergraduate students expressed that it was important to study in the capital city, Beijing (Abubakar et al., 2010; Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017).

I wanted to stay near the capital because it's a new place and probably I know the capital will have a lot of people...it was my first time travelling overseas so I wanted to stay--and also because I know the capital has the main things like the Great Wall and most of the fun will happen in the capital so I want to stay here. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

Fun, convenience and the excitement of experiencing a new capital city were undergraduate students most common reasons for choosing to study in Beijing.

It's very convenient but also Beijing is just the capital city of China...So I feel like, you know the capital city, I've never been there, I should go with a lot of expectations and excitement... (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Social influences such as teachers and parents also proved to play an important role in some students' perception of location.

My Chinese teacher is also from Beijing and he said that if you want to study Chinese language, you should go to Beijing because the dialect is not so strong, so it's better than going to another cities. And in his opinion, Beijing, it's also the best city of China. (Female, Postgraduate, Belarusian)

I actually wanted to study in a place called Harbin, but I don't think my parents would ever visit me. So I had to kind of scratch that one. I told my mother I was going to Harbin and it's like minus degrees all year long. She's like, "No." A professor in my university told me I should go there. He told me it was kind of one that he had visited multiple times, he had connections with and that I should apply for it. But the location was a little bit inconvenient. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Postgraduate students' choice of university was more influenced by educational factors such as university ranking rather than the location of the city. When a student who considered studying at two universities in Beijing was asked about the importance of the city in his decision-making, he said:

I was influenced by the ranking only. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

A few students mentioned that it was important to choose a location which was safe and near their family.

China is a relatively safe country and people here are friendly towards foreigners, and it's quite close to my home country so it would be easier for me to travel back and forth. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

Postgraduate students' choice of study destination was typically less influenced by the location of the city than undergraduate students. It was important for undergraduate students to have fun and experience a new city whereas, postgraduate students were

willing to consider other universities in different cities, as ranking and reputation were generally more important.

4.8 Opportunities

Opportunities emerged as one of the core themes in international students' decisions to study in China. All of the participants discussed numerous opportunities that they were currently experiencing and anticipated to encounter post-graduation.

Perceived opportunities of studying in China factored into the majority of students' decision. Some students stated that their main reason for choosing to study in China was the perceived job opportunities upon graduating.

Probably the job opportunities and salary. I really don't care much about that root, even in Thailand I don't follow that old traditions in my family so, yes, maybe I'm the exception, but job opportunities is more important. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Students believed there were more opportunities in China than their home country.

.... it's [China] probably one of the best places to go if you want to find opportunities that you couldn't find in your own country. People from many European countries, maybe don't have such opportunities, especially coming from a smaller country of 3 million people. Everything is made in China, pretty much. So it's probably one of the best places to be, especially if you have a computer science background or even business. There is a huge market in one country... So it's a lot better, I think, than Ireland, which is a small country island which doesn't really produce anything electronic. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Within a week of commencing postgraduate study in China, a student discussed how he met a Mongolian classmate and they were planning to start trading between their home countries, Mongolia and Ireland.

You know when you come to China, you get all these random opportunities, you would never have even thought. Would I ever have thought that I'd be like talking about opening a company with a Mongolian guy in China for trade? (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Although this opportunity to trade was unexpected, another student reluctantly divulged that her primary motivation for studying in China was to trade and make money.

The biggest, main reason I'm in China is also one reason I have that's I can do trade from here with China to my country because my country borrowed with China. This is my chance to get money. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

Another participant foresaw an opportunity to teach English in China after graduating to earn a lot of money.

My parents wish that I do go to America and have some experience with college there and go to graduate school there. As for me, I just don't want to go to school. I do see a possibility of working here for a couple of years just to make some bank, especially as a native English speaker, I have a lot more opportunities for higher paying jobs. Like tutoring alone pays quite a bit. Everyone wants the perfect English which is the American accent. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

A few students who planned to study law changed their intended programme of study to international politics or economics, as studying in China was more important than their course. As Chinese law is different from the law of their home country, they chose programmes with greater global relevance.

I consider that China also has a lot of opportunity. This course, international trade and economics, it has really fantastic jobs, especially as a Nigerian. I know there are so many Chinese back in my country. Even if I want to look for a job or anything, there will be so many opportunities for me. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

Many students mentioned that they were considering doing an internship or working at an international company upon graduation. They believed that their experience of studying in China, their knowledge of the country and the language, the available resources, and contacts they met while studying in China would assist them to obtain employment.

It [the University] has a lot of resources and a lot of great people coming to speak and stuff, so I think it's a really good launching point to access those opportunities...there's lots of job fairs. Like there's people like Mark Zuckerberg. They regularly come to campus and like big companies come to recruit, so I think being at Tsinghua and having access to those resources is a great advantage, so I'm very excited. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

It's a great university with a lot of excellent people. And when you talk to them, you just know, 'Wow, you're talking to the right guy,' you know. They are very... they are brilliant minds. Professors, students and also I happened to meet a lot of alumni and they are great too. Like, they graduated and they start doing start-ups which I really want to do as well. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Although the majority of students believed studying in China would increase their job opportunities, one student suggested that it could be difficult to obtain employment in China.

Finding jobs especially in China is really hard. The government has strongly

recommended that all graduates from the scholarship programmes go home to their home country for at least two years and then they can decide if they want to come back. That way they can contribute to their home country. I think it's mainly for African students. That way they go back to lower development countries, and they can either work in government or in business to help their country. Apparently, I can have that waived because I'm a Canadian and I go to Tsinghua but finding jobs without actual job experience might be quite hard. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Employment outcomes proved to be an important satisfaction indicator for many students' study experiences.

We will see when I get a job. If I have a hard time getting a job, my expectations - I will be disappointed. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

In summary, students believed studying in China would increase their opportunities. Students mentioned a wide range of opportunities including teaching English in China and trading with their native countries. They believed that having experience of the Chinese culture and knowing the Chinese language would be advantageous in their search for internships and jobs upon graduation.

4.9 Social influence

An additional principle theme that emerged was social influence. Social influence and word of mouth were extremely important determinants in almost all of the students' decisions to study in China. The vast majority of international students were made aware of the scholarship opportunities available via word of mouth. Students tended to learn about these opportunities from teachers in the Confucius Institute of their home countries while they were studying Chinese language, from other students who were studying in China or from their parents.

Before I applied for the scholarship through the Confucius Institute, I had like zero knowledge of any sort of scholarship, anything to do with China. I knew nothing, pretty much. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

The majority of students' families were supportive of their decision to study in China. Several students' parents were actively involved in researching universities, often doing more research than their children. One student's mother completed the university application on her behalf. Some students asked their parents to assist them with their decision of which university to choose.

I was 17 and I felt like I needed some help and advice, making such a big decision of my life. I had to ask my parents for any advice and their only concern was a

safe environment for me to study and we found out that China would be the best...they were very happy that China is quite close so that they can come visit and then I can go back home for the holidays. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

Conversely, other students were planning to study in other countries, but their parents decided they should study in China.

Tsinghua University is not in my plan at all actually... I was applying to all the universities not in China, but by myself, but for this university, Tsinghua University, it was my dad and my mum who did all the research for me. So actually, they want me studying here more than I want to study here. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

Another student whose mother completed her application discussed the parental pressure that she felt to study in China.

I felt as though I didn't have much of a choice. Because at least in my mum's perspective, this was the only good school I got into. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

However, although she was influenced to study in China by parental pressure, she also considered it to be a good opportunity and is enjoying studying there.

...part of it was to please her and part of it was truly like, I did kind of want to go, but when I got here I think my mindset changed... when I came here, I was kind of scared of everything. And then the more I thought that it was all to please my mum. But in hindsight, I realised even though she was definitely a big influence, the reality was that part of me still wanted to come here even with the parental pressure. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Conversely, a minority of students discussed that their family were not supportive of their decision to study in China.

They weren't really happy about it. They still think it's kind of a bad idea. They're under the impression that it's impossible to get a free education, so like even I mentioned I have a full scholarship and I get paid for it, that concept is not really in North American culture. So for example my parents think I go to a very poor school and I'm going to have to pay them money back as a loan or something, so I'm not sure if it's like a cultural thing where they just don't understand it. Yeah they just don't really care. They continue to insist that it's better for me to go back in Canada and take like a community college kind of thing. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Another student reported that although his parents supported his decision, his Vietnamese grandmother was unsupportive.

So my grandmother was the least supportive person ever. Going to China to her might as well have been the worst decision I could make in my life. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

These students were from developed countries, enrolled in undergraduate programmes and did not have Chinese heritage. It could be suggested that their families were unhappy because they are young students, their relatives are unfamiliar with China and believe that they would have a better education in a developed country. Other undergraduate students from developing countries and postgraduate students typically received their families support.

Teachers also appeared to be an important influence on postgraduate student's decision to study in China.

He was a very good teacher. He was a great influence on my decision. He always told me "You can go to China. You need to study there. I know you can do it". I was working but every year he would call me. Every spring he would call and ask "How is your decision? Did you make it yet?". Yeah, my teacher forced me (laughs). (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

My Chinese teachers told me a lot. They told me about the universities, which is good, which is not so good. Like I should go to which city, something like this, so actually no, I didn't research something like that for myself. (Female, Postgraduate, Belarusian)

One student mentioned that the opinions of his Chinese peers and Americans who had worked in China was one of the most influential factors in his decision.

Actually to me the most important thing actually wasn't rankings. On the global level it was actually more about Chinese people's opinions of the university, especially those whose voices I'd heard, you know those working in the U.S. because back then, I was kind of really torn between staying in the U.S. and coming here and I didn't really know how to make a very effective decision of what should be going into that and I think what ended up happening was that I took the opinions of others and I weighed that a lot more highly than anything else. I mean in my opinion, those of my classmates and people that the university introduced me to, who worked in industry, specifically in finance and also Americans who had done work in China. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Most students received a positive reaction from their friends about studying in China, although some were also surprised by their decision. Friends did not tend to influence students' decision, unless they were also planning to study in China.

Our dads were good friends here, and then they went to America together. And then coincidentally, we were born on the same year, same month, same day. We have the same birthday. So we grew up together, like 20-30 minute drive...And so

that's when we heard about Tsinghua, and we applied together...So we asked, "Can we be in the same room?" and then they were like, "Oh, yeah, of course," because we were scholarship students. And so now we're roommates. And we're continuing our dads' legacy, I guess...I actually, like I remember during senior year I'd be like "I don't really want to go, if Mary doesn't go". (Female, Undergraduate, American)

However, African students influenced their friends and relatives from their home country to study in China. This finding is consistent with previous research which discovered that African students were strongly influenced by their friends' recommendations when deciding to study in the U.K. (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

I have two siblings in China right now. They got the idea from me staying here in China... I had some friends who used to stay in my area at home who even came to China last year to study Chinese language. I also have friends who still text me to ask "How do I get to come to China? Are there opportunities here and everything?". (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

I'm the first born so I think the offer they've given me is something that has trickled down to my family. They are looking at me as a role model. I have even encouraged my brothers and my sisters and nieces to wish to study overseas. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

In summary, with the exception of one student, social influences proved to play an extremely important role in all of the students' decision-making. They influenced students' choice of host country and university. Parents had the most influence on undergraduate students' decision and postgraduate students were more influenced by their teachers. While parents of postgraduate students supported their sons or daughter's decision, they were not actively involved in the decision-making process. In comparison, parents of undergraduate students were actively researching universities, submitting applications on behalf of their children and often leading the decision-making process.

4.10 Decision-making

Decision-making was a common theme that emerged from the data as all of the students discussed their decision-making process and the order of key determinants which resulted in their selection of their host destination, university and programme of study.

Many students mentioned time as a factor in their decision-making process. The duration of the programme was considered important to postgraduate students.

Although students were keen to learn Mandarin whilst studying in China, it was important for most postgraduate students to have classes in English to reduce the duration of the

programme. Programmes of a shorter duration in comparison to longer programmes in alternative study destinations were preferable for most students. A contributing factor in one student's decision to study in China instead of the U.K. was the reduced time required to obtain a master's qualification.

First of all, there was this programme for international students which would only take one year to complete. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

However, despite some master's programmes in China requiring a longer duration of study, some students considered the additional time spent worthwhile.

... maybe it's a year longer, but it's also an option to kind of improve my Chinese, get better kind of contacts and see what sort of work is out there. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

The majority of students from developed countries made the decision to study overseas and to study in China simultaneously (Jiani, 2017). They tended to only apply to universities in their home country or China.

I mean, for me, I only really thought of the U.S., and then China became an opportunity. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Students from developed countries only decided to apply to Tsinghua University in China once they learned that an entrance exam was not required for entry. Most students studying at Tsinghua University did not apply to any other universities in China. If their application to study at Tsinghua University was unsuccessful, they typically planned to study at a university in their home country.

For me, it was totally not expected [to study in China]. I grew up as many Americans would... And so in my senior year when I did my applications, I did the normal thing which is apply to colleges in America. And then for this year, Tsinghua, my year, so last year, they opened up admissions for international students for applications instead of the usual testing in. And so when I found out about it, I just thought, "Well, I might as well just give it a shot." (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Conversely, students from developing countries tended to consider a variety of study destinations, including China, the U.S., U.K., Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Russia and Mauritius.

One of them I was considering is Scotland, then there's U.K. Then there's Sweden and Germany. I think those are the countries I was considering, and Japan. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

The vast majority of students from developing countries were not considering studying in their home country. Push factors such as political instability, cost, higher quality education and increased opportunities overseas motivated students from developing countries to study overseas.

The education system in Nigeria is, if you go to public schools, they are really good public schools but the uncertainty of when you are going to graduate because of strikes and things like that... If I decide to go to a private school, I think it's even more expensive than China. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

Moreover, African students referred to a shift in student's preferred host country from the world's most popular study destination, the U.S., to China.

Before the dream was always to go to the U.S. or the U.K. to study but right now it is China. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

It was proposed that students have changed their preference towards China because of employment opportunities in both China and their home country.

When you read the news it's all China, China, China. Also because of job opportunities. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

The opportunity to study in China was considered so important that two students changed their intended programme of study.

Actually, I was going to like take another degree in laws, but then the scholarship came, and China is more important than that degree, to be honest... Because if you stay there, I might get another degree and I get to be a lawyer faster, but then I lost the opportunity to be here. China is a very, what should I say? It's growing all the time. It's one of the candidates to be a superpower in the world. So, you should be here. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

The vast majority of students studying in China applied to the highest ranked university in the country, Tsinghua University.

I didn't expect to get into Tsinghua. I didn't expect to which is why I put it at number one, just in case. Because if you apply and you don't try, you never know.... but of course, I didn't get [in] because it's extremely difficult to get into. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

In addition, the three-stage decision-making model proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) which states that students choose to study overseas, followed by the host country and then the university, accounted for less than half of the students' decision-making order. The decision-making process for some students was not a clear three-stage process

and some elements were intertwined. A few students decided that the host country and institution were equally important, or the university and programme were equally important.

So I think that I wouldn't come to Tsinghua if it weren't in China, I wouldn't come to China if it weren't at Tsinghua. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Furthermore, a few students chose their host institution prior to choosing the country (Jiani, 2017). For these students, the ranking of their chosen university was extremely important, as well as the less restrictive entry criteria.

When I decided which university I'm going to stay, I'm thinking about the ranking of the university, of course. So it looks like Tsinghua University, the international ranking is higher than Sydney [University]. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

Another student was originally planning to study at a U.K. or U.S. university in a few years, but she changed her plans when she discovered the opportunity to study at a high ranked university in China with a fully funded scholarship.

It was a really sudden choice. I was not really planning to do my master's right away. I graduated more than a year ago and I was thinking of doing-- I was thinking of working for a few years and see which subjects or which sector I would really like to concentrate on, and then I just came across this opportunity and suddenly I just decided to apply and see if I would pass or not, and then I passed and I came here. It all happened in just four months or so. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

The majority of students undertook very little research prior to deciding to study in China.

I wasn't really an active person in high school. So for that reason I didn't really like to do much research. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

The students who conducted little research stated that they did not expect to be accepted by the universities.

At first, I didn't expect to be accepted. I thought it would be very difficult, you know at Peking University, one of the best universities, and so I didn't really do much research and the response was like only two weeks before the flight. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Some students tended to make their decision based on the university's reputation rather than undertaking research.

I knew that like its common knowledge, at least in my household, that Tsinghua University is like the best university, at least for engineering and stuff. So, I thought it would be really amazing to be able to say I've been to a world-class

university and Tsinghua in China because it just has such a big reputation.
(Female, Undergraduate, American)

A student who did not conduct research prior to studying in China deferred an offer for a university in her home country while she studied in China for the first year of her programme.

I was like "What the hell. I'll try it and if I don't like it, I can come back but I will regret it for the rest of my life if I don't try it". (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Another student did not research studying in China beforehand because she had received advice from her teachers.

Not so much because my Chinese teachers told me a lot. They told me about the universities, which one is good, which is not so good. Like I should go to which city, something like this, so actually no, I didn't research something like that for myself.

When asked if she trusted her teacher's opinion, she responded:

Yes, exactly. Why not? Maybe I check something like some pictures of Beijing, how is it? Like about weather maybe, nothing special. (Female, Postgraduate, Belarusian)

Some students mentioned that they struggled to find information about studying in China online.

Of course I searched for the surrounding areas and many stuff, but it led to the university website and you can see it in English, but when you enter many stuff it will, in the end it will be Chinese and there will be no translation. So, it was pretty hard to navigate through the website. So, I couldn't research much and see pictures of the campus and stuff. So, I just gave up and "Okay, I'll just go and see for myself". (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

I went onto YouTube to see if there's any student life clips or something about Tsinghua. There was close to nothing. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Although some students discussed the lack of available information about studying in China and compared it to the abundance of information available about their home country, it did not deter them from choosing China as a study destination.

I did my due diligence but I didn't learn that much... I think for the U.S., it's kind of simple. There's college board and then you talk to people who went to the universities who did better or that graduated above you. I mean you can get kind of a fairly comprehensive understanding of the universities before you go. But

China, not so much. The bridge is too far. The information asymmetry is too intense. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

The majority of students who conducted research were interested to know about student life in China.

I watched one or two videos on being vegan in Beijing. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

I didn't check the ranking but student life I checked. I most of all, I really wanted to experience for myself, but I did a little research on student life here. (Female, Undergraduate, Nigerian)

Some students did not conduct research prior to applying to universities but conducted a little research once they had received their offer.

I did search, but after I applied...I just wanted to see if Tsinghua is better or not. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

Students who did not search for university rankings were typically satisfied that the university had a good reputation because of the influence of word of mouth from parents, teachers, classmates, and society in general.

On the other hand, a minority of students completed a thorough research check before deciding to study in China. Students who conducted research all searched the QS rankings, and most students completed searches on Google.

Of course I did some research. I wouldn't just go a university with a name, right? I have to consider their majors. Like, if you go to Tsinghua, computer science would be an ideal major because it's so good here. I think this year, they probably ranked the first in the world...I also did QS ranking. And I searched a lot on their official website. I just want to see how they portray themselves to the public, right, because it's not crafted by the others but themselves. So you better be good or you are just... you're not doing your job. So I checked it and, you know, it's pretty nice. Compared to other Chinese universities, they have the pretty nice ones. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

Some students also used third party websites, such as CUCAS, who offer application services to research information about universities. However, no students enlisted their services.

I definitely stick to try to look at paid services, because they're very often updated and usually very accurate. It's a paid service so they have to. It's their job to be accurate. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Students seemed to have mixed reviews of blogs. Some students found content on blogs helpful but others did not search for them or find them helpful.

I think I read it on one of the blogs... it's a funny story because I looked at BIT and it rhymes with MIT and people say that BIT is the MIT of China so that actually helped me make a decision to come study here...It made me feel very important actually. I felt like I will be a great specialist after I graduate. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

I know that all bloggers will write the same information. (Female, Postgraduate, Belarusian)

One student's research investigation was so thorough that it included her own research and her parents and friends research.

They mostly helped me with making my research so they would suggest some blogs, they would suggest YouTube channels, they would suggest universities, majors. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

Social media, with the exception of YouTube, was generally not a platform that students used to research studying in China.

I think the social media or something is not really is make the decision for me. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

I think I used the internet. Let's stick to internet because for social media it depends on the people you interact with and so on and so forth. They are the ones who would talk about maybe such, but if you have few friends that are advancing well, you would not pick it. But I searched for it on net and then I saw how it has been performing here. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

To summarise, the research revealed a distinct difference between the decision-making processes of students from developed and developing countries. Students from developing countries chose China from a wide selection of alternative countries and tended to discount their native country from their consideration set. In contrast, students from developed countries typically chose between studying in their home country or studying in China, specifically the highest ranked university in China. A common trait shared between students from developed and developing countries was the lack of research conducted by the majority of students. The minority of students who did conduct research were interested in learning about student life and university rankings.

4.11 Challenges

This theme relates to both positive and negative challenges associated with studying in China. Some students mentioned that they were motivated to study in China because they wanted to challenge themselves to try something new, have an adventure and enhance their personal development.

I just kind of wanted to challenge myself in the adventure aspect...Learn something new and really go out of my comfort zone. And push myself to grow, to be a better person and learn about other perspectives, experience something I've not done before I grow old and have too many people depending on me like children or something. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

For one student, this was the most influential factor in their decision to study in China.

I think the biggest thing for me was kind of just doing something new. I mean I think this is-- I'm the first class of undergraduate international students that are in the same group as the mainland student cohort, so that was kind of a big thing for me...Stepping out of my boundaries, I guess. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

However, although he wanted to do “things that other people aren't willing to do”, he did not enjoy the attention he attracted as a foreigner.

I miss kind of being like a regular person a little bit. Like I don't like standing out...And it's really easy to stand out here because I mean other Asian countries don't really do this but Chinese people find foreigners like a very mysterious race and it brings up a lot of conversations and some of them I don't want to have... It feels a bit like a novelty, yeah. I don't like being a novelty. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Although students discussed the difficulties of studying in China, particularly undergraduate students who have to take classes in Chinese, it was important to students to feel challenged. It was also considered essential for students to view their classmates as intelligent.

Only one year, it has to be tough. It has to be difficult. It's not a trip. It's not a tour and I should learn something. I want here to be very competitive. I want teachers to expect a lot from me, to pressure me a lot, but right now I'm not sure if he will do that cause the classmates are very important for your education. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Some students also discussed the opportunity and social costs of studying in China.

I mean there's a high cost coming to a place like this...Turning down schools in the U.S., probably something easier. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

I sacrificed a lot. So, I want here to be very competitive... My girlfriend, of course I have to leave her but that's--The job is the most important for me because it's not very easy for a non-lawyer to get some position in a law firm in Thailand, so I'm not sure if they will take me back when I go back, and the law degree. One year can be very, one year can be nothing, but can be, what should I say? I know it's one year, it's only one year. I can go back to pursue again, but one year might be a very long time also. It may be a lost opportunity. So mostly my job and the law degree. It slows me. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

International students discussed a variety of challenges which they had to overcome when they started studying in China. Challenges included the language barrier, food, accommodation, weather and the difficulty of classes.

Sometimes you don't understand people, sometimes people do not understand you. I'd say loneliness would be the hardest challenge. Outside of it, maybe disappointment in my own self in the study field because maybe I was expecting myself to do better and sometimes I did not. (Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

I think what shocked me the most was the difficulty of the classes, which I don't think it should have because it's Tsinghua. I guess I've been a straight 'A' student in high school and coming to Tsinghua and failing my first course is a kind of a hit on my pride but I think a lot of people experience that, you know. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Another challenge that was mentioned was reverse culture shock which occurred when students returned to their home country.

It's kind of surprises, like a huge strip mall, driving distances and like seeing a lot of different ethnicities. In China, it's all Chinese people. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Overall, students considered studying in China as a challenge and they wanted to feel challenged in order for their expectations to be met.

4.12 Culture

The next theme which emerged was culture. In addition to being interested in Chinese language, a few students expressed that their interest in Chinese culture and the opportunity to experience a new country and culture which was different from their own influenced their decision to study in China.

There are quite a few factors that really influenced my decision to go study in China. The first one would be that I was really interested in the culture. Chinese, it's very different from any other countries that I've ever been to and I wanted to try something new, go somewhere that I've never been to before and I feel like immersing yourself in a different culture where people think differently, act differently, even eat differently is quite an experience. It's an adventure and if

you're open minded enough then it could be the greatest adventure of your life.
(Female, Undergraduate, Kazakh)

The majority of American students interviewed were second generation Chinese and referred to themselves as American-born Chinese. They chose to study in China to learn more about their culture.

I think what was favourable about China was because I'm ABC, so American-born Chinese and I guess, I do kind of want to learn more about my culture. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

For international students, like having roots in China or having parents that are Chinese is a huge influencer that make people come here to study. Like including me, if I wasn't Chinese, then I don't think I would come here to study for undergraduate study at least. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Students with Chinese descendants from earlier generations were also motivated to study in China to learn about their cultural roots.

I'm a Thai Chinese, so like my descendants, the Chinese they sail from China. That has been normal in Southeast Asian countries, but I cannot speak Chinese at all. It's like being in China gives me two feelings. Firstly, it's completely new to me. It's very modernised here. Very civilised to be honest. Maybe not very traditional now, but very civilised. The other feeling is like it's a feeling of being back home. It's like because it's going to my root and stuff, so it's like some reminiscent. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Studying in China resulted in Chinese descendants feeling connected to, and proud of their cultural heritage.

...the place I grew up, in Collins, Colorado, it's very much predominately white, there's not very much diversification, so I kind of grew up feeling like I should blend in, and be as little Chinese as possible, like not let my culture show. So coming here has made me confident and proud of being Chinese and who I am.
(Female, Undergraduate, American)

Almost half of the students stated that culture influenced their decision to study in China. The majority of these students were Chinese descendants who had no previous experience of living in China and wanted to learn about their cultural heritage. This finding is supported by previous research which found that Chinese descendants are motivated to study in China to learn about their cultural roots (Jiani, 2017).

4.13 Experiences of studying in China

Another common theme which emerged in students' interviews was experiences of studying in China. Despite the challenges and costs, all of the students were positive about their experiences of studying in China, with many students stating that their expectations had been surpassed. This finding contradicts previous research which depicted that international students are dissatisfied with their experiences of studying in China (Ding, 2016; Wen et al., 2017).

So now it's like certainly 100% I'm very happy... I wouldn't trade my teachers for anything, I view them with the highest level of respect. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Students also spoke favourably about the support services, resources and facilities, which are considered important factors in students' satisfaction rating of universities (Padlee et al., 2010; Wadhwa, 2016).

It is a little slightly better than expected. I expected a lot and it's slightly better... The institutions here and the officers, the university officers, they're really helpful. Okay, maybe they don't speak English, but they're really helpful. I mean everything is pretty organised, and the accommodation and schools and the course syllabus and everything is very detailed and the professors, they are very wow. They are very wise and very intelligent. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

...the expectations about university. They exceeded. I really liked the university. It's really big and there's so many students... So, I feel very close to the university because they're always like worried about you. They always tell you. They always remind you stuff, the teachers and others, the faculty members are really close to you, and maybe because they have WeChat and they just chat to you. (Female, Postgraduate, Mongolian)

Another indicator of international students' satisfaction is the friendships they develop (Ding, 2016). All of the students spoke about having friends from various countries. Although all of the students mentioned that they would like to be friends with Chinese students, only half of the students had been successful in forming these friendships. International students expressed that they wanted to integrate with Chinese students and develop friendships with them to learn from each other.

One thing is they're [Chinese students] really good at studying but I'm not that kind of person. They are more focused on how to study, how to get higher grades, they stay at the library a lot. I go to the library often but not that much like them. But I really want to make friends with them because they are really smart. We can learn from each other, right? But I think the school is getting better for mixing Chinese students and international students together. (Female, Undergraduate, Japanese)

The students who had not built friendships with Chinese students stated that it was difficult because they have separate orientation programmes and live in separate accommodation.

...we go through our own orientation, so when you just enter the school as a freshman and you're just meeting new people, it kind of naturally separates the two groups. Like I just feel more comfortable around the international students too because they've been through much of the same experiences as me. Most of them speak English, it's just more comfortable to communicate. And we live in different dormitories, like the international students' apartments are completely separate from the Chinese students' apartments. The time that we are together; the Chinese and the international students is during classes and during classes, we don't really have much time to converse or socialise, it's usually just listening to lectures. But over WeChat or something, or homework, we sometimes communicate. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Furthermore, the majority of students stated that Chinese students were welcoming.

They are just trying to be friends with us and we're trying to be friends with them too. Of course there's a lot of culture difference, not between me and them but for other foreign students. (Male, Undergraduate, South Korean)

As most of the students with Chinese friends exhibited advanced abilities in Mandarin, it could be argued that the language barrier and cultural differences hinder international and domestic students from forming friendships with each other.

To summarise, all of the students revealed that their overall experiences of studying in China were positive. Key indicators of student satisfaction appear to be teaching quality, student support and friendship with other students.

4.14 Perceptions of China

The final theme which emerged was perceptions of China. Many students discussed their own or their relative's perceptions of China and how their perceptions compared to the reality. Some students also discussed their perceptions of the relationship between China and their home country. Furthermore, a few students of Chinese descent revealed their feelings of identity conflict and difficulties attempting to justify their relatives and friends' perceptions of their home country and host country.

Prior to visiting China, students and their social influences had a range of perceptions about China.

I wouldn't say I had much of an opinion on it because the only thing I ever heard was like my grandma saying "Oh you know... you should eat your food because

if not, you'll be like one of the Chinese people starving, eating rice and we air drop rice to them". But she's like 80 years old, so they're going back to like in the 50's when China was poor but I mean I knew that was not true. I knew that was just my grandma being an old person. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

I think a lot of my friends had an idea of China that it's still a farming country or really undeveloped. So when I go back and visit, and I tell them about WeChat Pay, the great public transportation, they can't believe it. But I think it's something that the whole rest of the world should know about China. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

The most popular misconception that students and their peers held prior to visiting China was that the country was less developed than it is.

I found it more developed than I expected and more easy going. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Before I went, I thought Beijing will be kind of an older city, not so modern. But when I got there, I noticed that it was actually a huge amount of innovation more than even Ireland, to an extent, which was really, really surprising. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

It was also mentioned that students' perception of China was influenced by the media in their home country.

It was a lot different than my kind of image which I had was very different while I was in Ireland than when I came to China. So it kind of changed very quickly because when you have media in like, say, Ireland, it wouldn't maybe be accurate, maybe it is slightly construed in certain ways. So you only know how it is until you get there. So everyone knows wrong information about everything. (Male, Postgraduate, Irish)

Similarly, students discussed how their knowledge of international political affairs is influenced by the media of the country they are living in.

It's hard to keep up on unbiased news. Yeah, so I actually don't know too much about what's happening, because I know each is biased in its own way. It's just hard to get the facts. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

American students had little knowledge of the trade war between their home country and China.

I'm not really into politics....And so I never actually knew much....It doesn't really affect me first-hand. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

It started after I got here, right. The trade war or these political differences isn't something that limits education because the people buying education, their demand is too high...I don't work for a company, since I don't have a company it

doesn't affect me very much...I think that people expect me to have a very, very concrete opinion and sometimes I'm not as informed as they are and so it feels a little bad—I feel a little bit bad. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

Another student admitted that she also did not have a lot of knowledge about the situation, however, she believed that there was a lack of cultural understanding from both countries.

I feel if the U.S. leaders took a course on Chinese culture and if the Chinese leaders took a course on American culture, there wouldn't be this kind of conflict. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

American-born Chinese students also discussed an internal conflict between their American and Chinese identities.

You know how I said I feel like defending my Chinese identity in America and sometimes it is the other way around when I'm here and you know it's kind of weird, it's an internal conflict as well. You know sometimes my Chinese relatives will ask me about gun control laws or ask for my views on certain things and I feel the need to defend America sometimes. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

This resulted in students feeling pressured that their views and behaviour were considered representative of an entire population. As American-born Chinese students are minorities in both the U.S. and China, they experienced these feelings in both countries.

And then I need to explain that what I say doesn't represent the entire U.S. and then when I'm in the United States, what I say doesn't represent the whole population of China, I found that when you're a minority in both countries, I feel like I'm a minority here because I have a U.S. citizenship and I've lived there most of my life and then when I'm in America, I'm like Chinese so that is a minority. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Some students discussed a disconnect with their friends from their home country after they started studying in China. This seemed to be particularly evident for American-born Chinese students, as they felt compelled to defend China from their friends' negative perceptions.

I'm finding more and more that sometimes the things they [my friends] say that I would not have minded before kind of like, like their perspective might not be as wide or they may say something kind of ignorant and it's because they haven't experienced it for themselves. Like they will say something about Chinese people or they will see something on the news about China, since I've been in China, they start asking a ton of questions and they will be really curious. And I'm usually really patient to answer their questions but sometimes I feel frustration too. It's definitely unintentional but sometimes it feels like offensive. But I would not have minded that before. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Some Chinese descendants tended to feel more connected to their heritage and “aware of both my identities” after studying in China.

I feel like I need to defend sometimes, whereas back then I would have laughed along with them. It's kind of grown a part of myself. And yeah, so it definitely has more to do with me as before I would be like 'Oh it's over there on the other side of the sea. That's not me, I'm American'. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Students from African countries also discussed the political situation in the U.S. and how this may deter students from studying there.

There is this political will sometimes with the coming of this U.S. president, you know what is happening. The foreigners are not being entertained that much, especially those from the African side. I don't expect for example, a lot of Africans, I don't expect a lot of Zambians to go to the States. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

On the other hand, students discussed the positive relationship their country has with China and how China has invested in their home country, welcomed their students and provided scholarships to fund their studies.

I think China is trying to support most of the, can I say industries, running's of the country. I think what I like the most is the speech that was given by his excellency, the President of China, Jinping. He said something like “We will support Africa the best we can with the five laws, not through political influence, not through making demands on the African countries”, and then they will give more to the African countries and take less from the African countries because of the way they've gained. Zambia is one of the African countries so there is that influence and at this point, because for a long time African countries have not managed to survive on their own, China is welcome to have that influence if they promise that they'll still settle with the five laws, as the president actually said. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

For these reasons, it was suggested that in the future more students would choose to study in China.

Students also discussed the benefits to China of providing international students with scholarships.

I think Chinese government tried to offer these scholarships to different [political] parties in different countries, so they can be studying here and go back and be supportive towards China. I think that's the idea. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Furthermore, students discussed additional political strategies which could encourage more international students to study in China.

...I would assume that the new One Belt, One Road thing, that they're trying to get more students to come. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

I think the current leader of our country cut all the ties really except China. Yes, he's a military guy, right? He's a dictator right now. So, I think he's trying to develop two ties between Thai and China. Actually, I'm not sure if it is good for us or not because he doesn't have many choices because he's a dictator so, not so many countries, like accept him as a leader of Thailand. So if a country like China accepts him, maybe China can like negotiate a lot, they can gain advantage for that. (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

Students from developing countries planned to learn about Chinese policies and business and technological advancements while studying in China to implement these in their home country.

We have to bring our country to like a fore point, Thailand and stuff...in China, technology is actually everywhere. I mean everyone can use it and reach it... It's a very fundamental thing that should be changed right now. We have the apps and stuff because Thai people use the apps a lot, but how can they not make the use of it like the Chinese people are doing? (Male, Postgraduate, Thai)

On the other hand, researchers have argued the Chinese government's policy on online censorship hinders academic research (Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Sharma, 2017). However, the majority of students stated that the censorship had little or no effect on them, therefore, they did not consider online censorship to be problematic.

I think lots of the stuff that may have originally been censored when I came to China is now not. Who knows? Most of the stuff I do doesn't get censored. (Male, Undergraduate, American)

For students of Tsinghua University which has its own internet service providers that permits access to blocked research sites, it could be argued that online censorship has no impact on students who study and live on campus (Sharma, 2017). The challenge that students at Tsinghua University faced, regarding online censorship, was inviting large groups of students to student society events.

It's hard to gather in big groups like Facebook where you can post public events and then have anyone come. On WeChat, like even for a group chat, there's a limit of 500 people and then when 100 people enter the group, you can't scan in by QR code, you have to privately pull in each individual member, so these little things make it kind of hard for big groups of people to gather. (Female, Undergraduate, American)

Alternatively, one student believed that online censorship was positive.

When I came here, I actually learnt the art of let's say learning to protect your own. I'm actually learning that China is where it is today because it protects its own. I don't see why someone would choose to settle for less when they've seen the best. China is supporting its companies, it's what, it's a good thing. I'm learning that from them, it's also important that maybe we learn and follow that. I don't have a problem with that, I think it's a good thing, of course it becomes a bad thing if it starts maybe sitting on the freedoms of the students especially us international students who enjoy certain privileges. (Male, Postgraduate, Zambian)

Another student believed that some universities in China have more freedom over the curriculum and teachers are able to discuss controversial topics more openly with students, in comparison to universities in his home country.

It's like they teach you different aspects of how to actually build an economy, whereas I feel like courses in North America would be much more censored in that way. So there's more educational freedom I think here, especially in Tsinghua and Peking where they also don't have Chinese censorship to deal with either. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

It is perceived that other Chinese universities do not have the same freedom from government influence. As a student studying international politics, it was considered important for teachers to be able to speak freely about political matters in class, as students believed they learned more this way.

Whereas I know in other schools the curriculum is directly controlled by the government. If you're taking most subjects, there shouldn't be a problem, like if you're taking international business it will not affect you but for someone taking international relations or politics, being able to talk to about anything is quite effective. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

Although the university he was enrolled in was considered to be free from government influence, he believed that there had recently been repercussions for teachers expressing their political views.

I think it's mainly just been Peking and Tsinghua, they're exempt from any government interference. Theoretically Tsinghua should be as well but as of last year they kind of run into some government problems. They told some of the government to resign and some teacher's kind of were fired for that. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

However, the repercussions were not necessarily considered to be negative.

...you can get some really radicalized people like people who are just like "Oh, I don't like what the government does no matter what. Don't care. Just hate

it”...They just don’t want anyone with really radical views teaching. I guess it’s not a bad thing. (Male, Undergraduate, Canadian)

To sum up, students and their peers often had misconceptions about China before they studied there. Upon arrival, all of the students held positive perceptions of the country and they discussed the impact of the media on their perceptions of countries and international political affairs. None of the American students expressed strong views on the trade war between their home and host countries, as they believed it had little impact on them. Furthermore, students discussed China’s political strategies and their perception of the impact these could have on international students choosing to study in China. Most participants thought more students would seek to study in China in coming years.

4.15 Summary

The findings demonstrate that there are a wide range of factors which influence international students’ decision to study in China. Rankings and the reputation of a university play a crucial role in students’ decision-making. It could be argued that reputation of a university is more important than rankings for most students.

Students were also motivated to study in China because of the country’s rise on a global scale. It was believed that studying in China would significantly enhance student’s employment outcomes globally. Additionally, students were motivated to learn Chinese because they believed it would further increase their employment prospects.

Another factor which motivated students to study in China was the availability of scholarships. This was a contributing factor for students from both developing and developed countries, however, it was arguably more influential for students from developing countries. Students considered the ability to study at a high ranked university for free a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity”.

Social influences, in particular parents and teachers, were found to be extremely influential in students’ decision of study destination. However, friends, siblings and extended family did not typically influence student’s decision. With the exception of seeking information from social influences, students conducted little research prior to studying in China.

It was imperative for students to feel challenged while undertaking their studies, and the majority of the undergraduate students discussed the difficulty of trying to understand classes in Mandarin and how they had failed some classes. However, all of the students

were satisfied with their experiences of studying in China, with some students expressing that their expectations had been surpassed. Their reviews of their university, teachers, resources, and social life were all positive.

The political relationship between a student's home country and China appeared to be positively correlated to students from developing countries and the decision to study in China. On the other hand, American students did not consider the political relationship with their home country to have any bearing on their decision of study destination. Furthermore, although researchers have argued that online censorship negatively impacts academic research (Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Sharma, 2017), censorship was not considered to be an issue for international students.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This study has investigated the reasons why international students study in China, the factors which influence their decisions, their processes of decision-making and their experiences of studying in China.

There is a wealth of research on international students' decision to study in various developed countries, predominantly the U.S., U.K. and Australia (Abubakar et al., 2010; Gong & Huyber, 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Tan, 2015; Wadhwa, 2016; Yang, 2007). However, there is a distinct lack of research on international students' motivations to study in developing countries, such as China. Considering China's recent success in attracting large numbers of international students (IIE, 2018; Jiani, 2017), it is imperative that this gap is addressed. This research aims to contribute towards the understanding of international students' motivations and behaviour when selecting China as a study destination. In this chapter, the research findings will be discussed in more detail and compared with the results of prior research. Implications for practice and research, limitations and future research directions will also be discussed.

5.1 Summary of the research findings

The major findings from this thesis show that educational factors were the main motivation for the international students interviewed in selecting China as a study destination. University reputation was of utmost importance to all international students. Another key motivation was economic factors. The majority of students discussed the enhanced career prospects and future opportunities they anticipated as a result of studying in China. In addition, China's rise as an emerging global superpower encouraged students to choose the country. The low cost of tuition and attractive scholarships acted as an additional advantage in students' decision-making. Furthermore, social influences proved to be extremely influential in students' decision-making and cultural factors contributed to Chinese descendants' choice of the host destination. The final factor, political motivations, played a relatively minor role in students' decisions. Students from developing countries were more influenced by political factors than students from developed countries. Figure 4 depicts the themes and subthemes which influence students' decision to study in China. Figure 5 is a theoretical model, adapted from the work of Cubillo et al. (2006) to show the main factors which motivate international students to study in China.

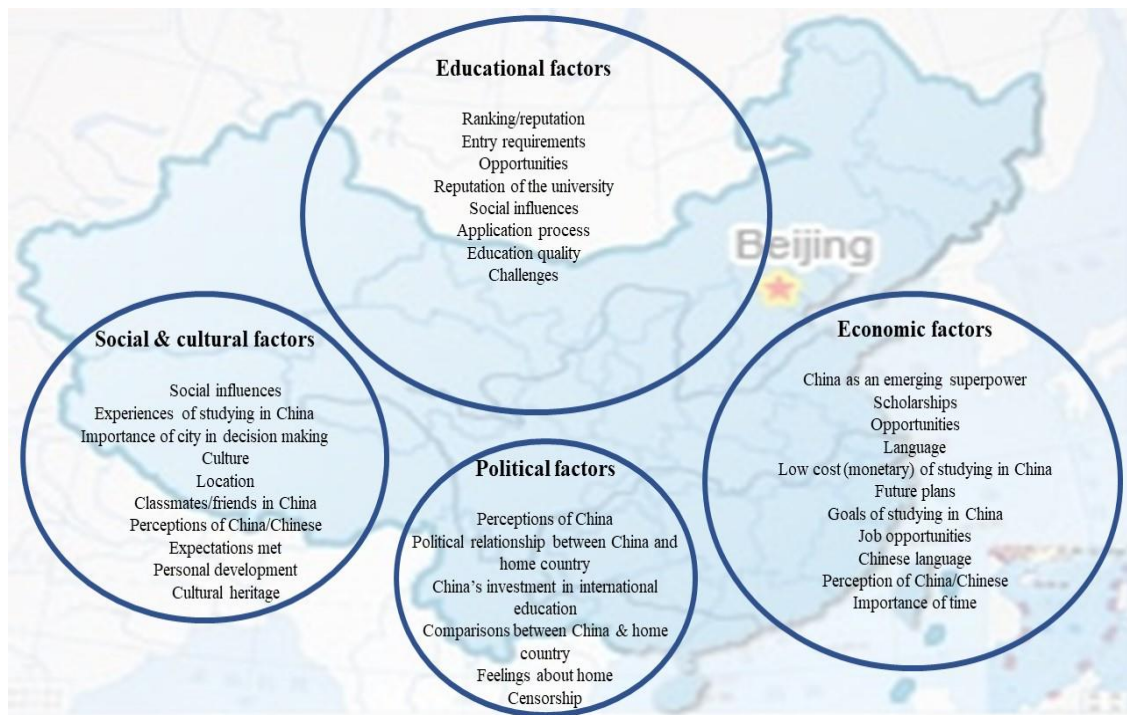


Figure 4. Factors influencing international students' decision to study in China

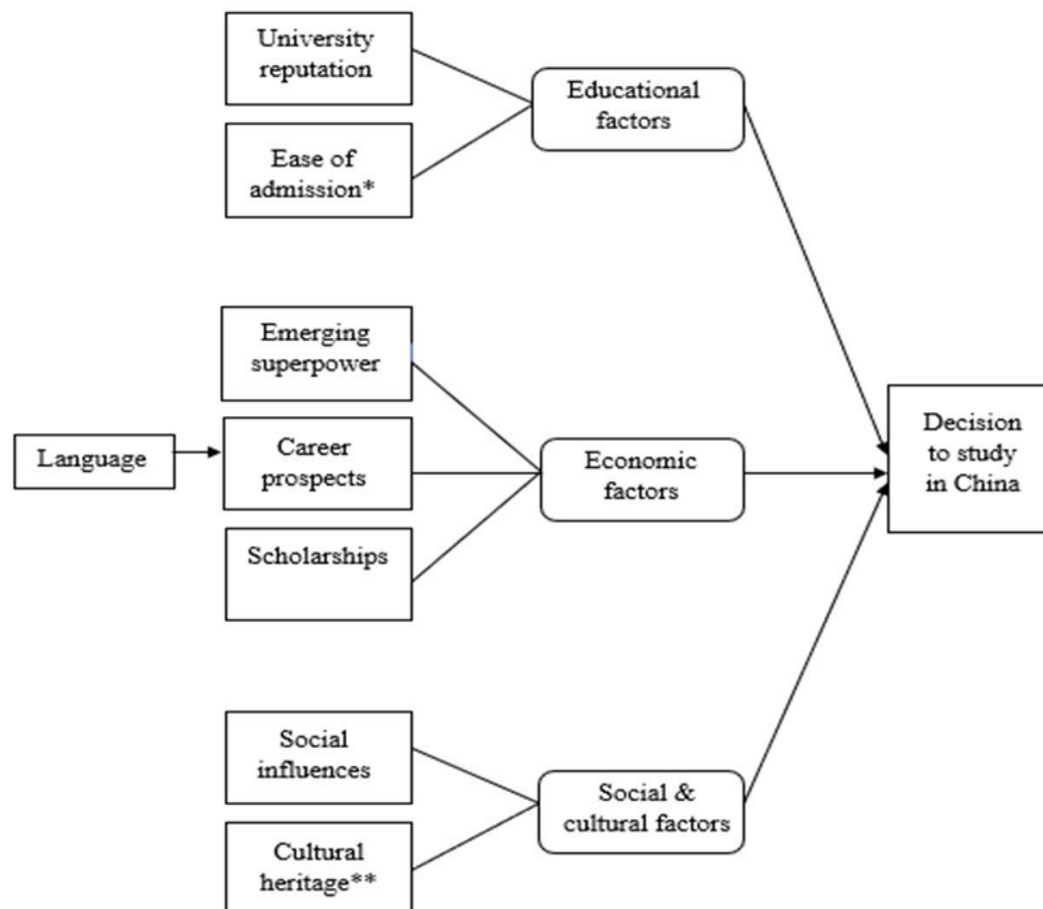


Figure 5. Theoretical model of the main factors which influence international students' decision

* Pertinent to students studying at the highest ranked university in the country

** Pertinent to descendants of Chinese migrants only

5.1.1 Educational factors

Figure 4 shows that educational factors were the most influential consideration in students' decision to study in China. In particular, the thesis shows that the most influential factor for the international students interviewed, when choosing to study in China, was to study at a university with an excellent reputation. This is highlighted in Figure 5. University reputation was a motivation for all international students, regardless of their demographic. This finding supports existing research that has revealed university reputation is a significant factor in international students' decision to study in multiple study destinations including developing and developed countries (Eder et al., 2010; Kaur & Singh, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Simões & Soares, 2010; Wen & Hu, 2018). However, several studies have demonstrated that the importance of university reputation is dependent on a students' ethnicity. For example, students from North America and Europe were less motivated by university reputation than Asian students. Asian students were found to be more concerned about university reputation than other nationalities (Wen & Hu, 2018). Conversely, this finding was not supported in the present study.

Students in this thesis sample assessed the reputation of universities primarily based on global university rankings, which they accessed online, and the perceptions of their social influences. Although there are numerous global university rankings to choose from, all of the students who were interested in rankings searched for the overall QS university global rankings to inform their decision. A few students also searched subject specific rankings and employer rankings. On the other hand, students studying at a lower ranked university in China stated that they did not search their university's ranking. Their choice of university was mainly influenced by their teachers' recommendation. Thus, university reputations appear to be formed by numerous factors including, global ranking indicators, teaching quality, and word of mouth. A wide range of social influences can impact students' perceptions of universities' reputations.

Extant research has provided conflicting findings regarding the importance of education quality for international students choosing to study in China (An et al., 2008; Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2018). However, as students used QS Global University Rankings as a measure of education quality, it is argued that quality of education is influential in international students' decision to study in China.

Consistent with previous research, another educational aspect which proved to be an important pull factor for all of the students studying at the top ranked university in China

was relaxed admissions requirements, as shown in Figure 5 (Wen & Hu, 2018). Students stated that the previous entrance exam would have acted as a barrier and precluded them from applying. Several students also mentioned that they were surprised to be accepted to study at one of the world's highest ranked universities.

5.1.2 Economic factors

Figure 4 illustrates that economic factors overall were the second most influential aspect in international students' decision to study in China. The availability of scholarships or low cost of tuition fees was a contributing factor for the majority of students. This finding supports extant research which shows that cost is influential in students' decision-making. However, cost is typically a barrier to studying overseas, whereas cost acts as a facilitator in the present study (Choudaha et al., 2012; Hassett, 2018; Padlee et al., 2010). Most students were scholarship recipients and considered the prospect of studying at a globally recognised university for free as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It is suggested that scholarships may be more important for students from developing countries. The few students who were not scholarship recipients were from developed countries and decided not to apply or forgot to apply for a scholarship.

As shown in Figure 5, students perceived that an education in China would result in increased employment opportunities globally. The majority of students were global citizens, who were willing to stay in China, return to their home country or move to any other country which offered the best employment opportunities. The opportunity to learn the Chinese language was also attractive to students as they believed the ability to speak Mandarin would further enhance their career prospects (Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2017).

Furthermore, in accordance with extant research, China's strong economic growth and position as an emerging global superpower motivated students to choose to study in China. However, the strength of this pull factor was not as apparent as existing research has stated. Jiani (2017) found that this was students' main motivation to study in China, whereas the present study discovered that university reputation and future career prospects were more influential in students' decisions to study in China.

5.1.3 Social and cultural factors

Consistent with prior research, social influences were one of the main influential factors in students' decision-making (Beech, 2015, Cubillo et al., 2006; Tan, 2015). Almost all students' decisions were heavily influenced by their parents or teachers. In accordance

with extant research, undergraduate students were heavily influenced by their parents and most of the postgraduate students were influenced to study in China by their teachers (Chen, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Many postgraduate students' choice of university was determined by their teacher's recommendation without conducting much individual research. With the exception of African students, siblings and friends did not typically influence students' decision-making. This finding contradicts prior research which found that friends are influential in students' decision of host destination (Abubakar et al., 2010; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007). As China is an emerging destination about which little is known in comparison to traditional host countries, it is proposed that students would not consider their friends to have a wealth of knowledge about this destination. Furthermore, as some students chose to study in China to create a unique identity, it is argued that they did not seek their friends' prior approval because this could influence their friends to also study in China and consequently, reduce their uniqueness.

It was important for the vast majority of students to have their parents' emotional support. As nearly all of the students were scholarship recipients, their parents' financial support was not required. The majority of undergraduate students also received informational support from their parents. This support ranged from students asking their parents to assist them with research to several students' parents leading the research, choosing the university, and even submitting the application on their child's behalf. Of note, the parents who were more actively involved in the research by selecting universities and submitting applications were all Chinese natives and their children were studying at the highest ranked university in the country.

Prior research found that agents are influential in international students' decision to study overseas and many students enlist their services for application and visa assistance (ICEF, 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003; Wadhwa, 2016). Conversely, it was discovered that a minority of student participants in this thesis who chose to study in China used agents' websites during their information search, but no students enlisted their services. The majority of students navigated the application and visa process on their own. This presents an interesting challenge to the power of agents in international student recruitment.

Location was also an important factor for several students. Despite prior research citing that location is a main concern for students because of safety (Cai et al., 2015; Eder et al., 2010; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Wilkins et al., 2012), geographical proximity to their home

country (Oliveira & Soares, 2016; Shanka et al., 2005; Simões & Soares, 2010), or cultural familiarity (Jiani, 2017; Kaur et al., 2014), most students chose to study in Beijing for the social aspects. They perceived that many foreigners would live in the capital city, and it would be a fun location with lots of activities and sightseeing. Postgraduate students though were typically less motivated by the location and more concerned about where the highest ranked universities are located.

Consistent with existing research, Chinese descendants were motivated to study in China to learn about their cultural heritage (Jiani, 2017). However, learning about the Chinese culture was not a motivator for other ethnicities. This finding which is illustrated in Figure 5 contradicts previous research which proposed that European students chose to study in China because they were motivated to learn about the culture (Ding, 2016; Hong, 2014).

In accordance with prior research, some students with Chinese parents revealed that they experienced parental pressure to study in China. Students from Confucian heritage tend to respect and obey their parents' wishes. Disagreeing with their parents and choosing to study at an unapproved university may be interpreted as a sign of disrespect (Bodycott, 2009; Pham, 2019). Although students may have experienced doubts previously, all of the students reported that their experience of studying in China was positive.

Although American-born Chinese students enjoyed learning about their cultural roots and reported that they felt more connected to their Chinese heritage, they revealed that they face an internal conflict with their identity as they feel they belong to a minority in both the United States and China. Despite feeling like a minority, they also feel representative of each country and feel compelled to justify the actions of China to their American peers and defend the behaviour of America to their Chinese friends and relatives. Students also experience a reverse culture shock when they return to the United States.

5.1.4 Political factors

As depicted in Figure 4, political factors played a relatively minor role in international students' decision to study in China. Students from developing countries were more influenced by political factors when choosing to study in China than students from developed countries. They discussed the bilateral political relationships between China and their home country. This was particularly prevalent in interviews with African students as they discussed China's investment in their native country and China's welcoming approach to international students. Postgraduate students from developing countries were also motivated to study in China to learn about the country's policies and

technological advancements with the intention to implement these when they return to their home country. Furthermore, consistent with existing literature, students from African countries also discussed how they expected the stricter U.S. immigration policy change and the negative discourse about immigrants to result in more African students choosing to study in China instead of the U.S. (Bendix, 2017; Bislev, 2017; Bista et al., 2018; THE, 2017). In comparison, students from developed countries stated that they had limited knowledge of the political relationship between China and their home country and it had no influence on their decision.

In addition, prior research shows that ease of obtaining visas is a motivation for students to choose study destinations (Ahmad & Buchanan, 2016; Chen, 2008; Rafi & Lewis, 2013). However, no students studying in China mentioned visas. Thus, the perceived ease of obtaining a visa did not feature in students' decision-making process.

5.1.5 Decision-making process

The results of this study demonstrate that the attractive pull factors of China are more significant in students' decision-making than the perceived negatives, also known as push factors, of their home country. Only African students mentioned push factors such as political instability and university strikes in their home country, which influenced their decision to study overseas. In addition, Maringe and Carter (2007) indicated that push factors have greater strength than pull factors in African students' decision to study in the U.K. It is therefore implied that push factors are more pertinent to African students than other ethnicities.

Furthermore, in accordance with the findings of Li and Bray (2007), it was revealed that a change in push-pull factors for one host country can lead to a change in push-pull factors for another study destination. The present study discovered that the reverse-push factor of visa restrictions in the U.S. increased the pull factor of career prospects in China (Federis, 2019). African students believed this shift has contributed to many other African students deciding to study in China instead of the U.S.

In addition, as mentioned earlier in the literature review, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed a three-stage decision-making model to explain international students' decision-making process. They stated that students first decide whether to study locally or overseas, then they choose the country, followed by the university. This indicates that the host country is more important to students than the host university. However, this research demonstrates that the model does not effectively represent the decision-making process

for all international students selecting China as a host destination. For example, all of the American students in this study chose their host country and university simultaneously. They were unwilling to study at another Chinese university, or another location overseas. This was exemplified by one student's comment: "I wouldn't come to Tsinghua if it weren't in China, I wouldn't come to China if it weren't at Tsinghua." Similar results were reported in another recent study of international students' decision to study in China (Jiani, 2017).

Moreover, the findings of the present study contradict the three-stage decision-making model proposed by Chen (2007), which states that students first choose whether to study in their home country or overseas, then they select their programme, and finally they consider the host country, university and city concurrently. Several students changed their programme to study in China, and other students chose their programme after selecting their university.

In addition, contrary to existing literature (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pham 2019; Tan, 2015), it was discovered that many students did not undertake thorough research prior to studying in China. They adopted a "just give it a shot" attitude towards their application. Similarly, various other students adopted the same approach to accepting their offer as it was considered a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity. Therefore, they did not have enough time to conduct a thorough research investigation before applying or even accepting. For example, a Thai student received his offer two weeks prior to the programme commencing.

This is significantly different from extant literature which proposes that the decision to study overseas is a high-risk decision. Therefore, it is assumed that international students' study decision-making process involves extensive research, significant time deliberating potential study destinations, saving money and sourcing of information from multiple sources to inform decisions, as well as many influencers including parents, extended family, agents, university staff met at education exhibitions, and the local community (Galan et al., 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pham, 2019; Tan, 2015). It could be argued that the reasons for this difference is related to cost factors and ease of admission.

The majority of existing research has focused on international students from developing countries studying in Western, English speaking countries where international students are required to pay high tuition fees. In developing countries, one-third of a family's income is typically spent funding overseas study, therefore, the decision to study overseas

is often a familial decision which requires extensive research and complex problem-solving (Bodycott, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pham, 2019). However, as the majority of participants studying in China were scholarship recipients, financial support was not required. It is suggested that the availability of scholarships reduces the risk and therefore, less information and research effort is required. In fact, it is proposed that the cost factor resulted in students making their decision to study in China faster. They believed they must accept this offer immediately as they would not get another opportunity to study at a high ranked university with a fully-funded scholarship.

Another factor which may explain the limited research conducted into choosing China as a study destination is the language of instruction. International students studying overseas are often required to invest significant time and money learning the native language prior to studying in typical, English-speaking host destinations. However, postgraduate students are not required to have Mandarin language ability, therefore, the cost associated with learning the local language is not a barrier to postgraduate students studying in China.

Furthermore, undergraduate students from developed countries studying at the highest ranked university in China discussed the relaxed entry requirements which had recently been implemented prior to their intake. These students had not considered studying in China previously as they did not expect to pass the entrance exam, therefore, they had not searched for information about this potential study destination. Many students submitted their application without the expectation of being accepted, therefore they did not invest significant time into research.

Prior research has revealed that it is imperative for host destinations to provide a wealth of rich information to be considered by prospective international students (Bourke, 2000; Mpinganjira, 2009). However, this study showed that a lack of information about students' host destination did not negatively impact their likelihood to study in China. Several students discussed encountering difficulties accessing information as the information online was in Chinese without English translations. As students are aware that China is an emerging host destination for international students, it is proposed that they do not expect to be able to access a wealth of information comparable to traditional study destinations. Some students discussed that a contributing factor of their decision to study in China was "to do something new." This suggests that students consciously chose to study in China to differentiate themselves from their peers (Cai et

al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015). There is also an adventurous element to their decision-making which is summed up perfectly by an American student: “What the hell, I’ll try it and if I don’t like it, I can come back but I will regret it for the rest of my life if I don’t try it.”

Unsurprisingly, as university reputation was the most influential factor in students’ decision, the QS Global University Rankings were the most frequently cited source of information. Despite the availability of numerous other global university ranking systems, such as Times Higher Education (THE) and Shanghai Ranking’s Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), they did not feature in student’s decision-making. Although previous research has discussed university reputation as a determinant for students’ choice of host destination, university ranking websites have not been identified as useful information sources (Eder et al., 2010; Kaur & Singh, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wadhwa, 2016). The other most frequently used information sources to influence student decisions were university’s official websites and searches using Google. This finding is consistent with previous research which showed that traditional sources of information such as university websites and brochures continue to be the most influential in students’ decision-making (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Simões & Soares, 2010).

Despite the perceived benefits of universities using social media to target prospective international students (Galan et al., 2015), it was discovered that students do not generally consider social media platforms as a valuable information source during their decision-making. The video sharing website, YouTube, was an exception as several students revealed they searched for videos about student life on YouTube prior to studying in China. These results are supported by prior research which explored the influence of social media in European students’ decision-making (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Galan et al., 2015). Although word of mouth is extremely influential in students’ decision-making, it is suggested that this information source is valuable when students respect and trust the source, rather than being influenced by strangers’ recommendations.

5.1.6 International students’ experience of studying in China

All students relayed their experience of studying in China positively, with some students stating that their expectations had been surpassed. This is in contrast to prior research which found that students studying in China are dissatisfied (Ding, 2016; Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Wen et al., 2017). Students reported similar levels of satisfaction regardless of whether their language of instruction was English or Chinese. This outcome is contrary to that of Wen et al. (2017) who found that students who were taught in Chinese,

regardless of their language ability, experienced significantly higher levels of student satisfaction in comparison with students who were taught in English.

Despite experiencing a language barrier with some university staff, it was revealed that student support services in China exceeded students' expectations. This finding contradicts Ding (2016) who found that international students report low student satisfaction rates due to the absence of student support resources in universities in Shanghai. As these studies were conducted in different cities, it is argued that universities in China have different resources.

The present research has identified that student support, facilities and resources are important factors in student satisfaction (Padlee et al., 2010; Wadhwa, 2016). Although they do not directly influence students' decision of study destination, given the importance of social influences in international students' decision-making, and that satisfied students are more likely to recommend their university, this finding is an important contribution to ensure positive word of mouth (Abubakar et al., 2010; Roy, Lu & Loo, 2016).

As Ding (2016) revealed that the majority of students in his study did not believe their education in China was worth the tuition fees, it could be argued that the expectations of students in this study were reduced as the majority of students received fully-funded scholarships. However, this study found no correlation between tuition fees and student satisfaction.

Existing literature about international students' experiences focuses on the challenges that students encounter, such as cultural assimilation, and provides recommendations to alleviate these difficulties (Wen et al., 2017; Yang, Zhang & Sheldon, 2018). However, the present study revealed that although students may have faced challenges such as a language barrier and difficult classes, several students chose to study in China because they wanted to be challenged and do "things that other people aren't willing to do." In addition, one student stated that he chose to study at a university in China because "everyone goes to Stanford [University]." This indicates that creative choice counter conformity motivates some international students to study in China (Nail, 1986). Thus, they are influenced to behave in a manner which is incongruent with the norm to protect or create their perceived unique identity, whilst ensuring their decision is viewed favourably by their parents and/or teachers (Tian, Bearden & Hunter, 2001). These findings provide support for the argument that some students choose to study in China to

create an identity which impresses their peers and enhances their self-esteem (Cai et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2015). In addition, some students who were not of Chinese descent referred to themselves as “proper international students” to differentiate themselves from other international students. It is proposed that the rationale for this is to highlight the additional challenges they perceive that they encounter, such as language and cultural assimilation, therefore, highlighting their adventurous identity and ability to succeed in challenging environments. Students also mentioned that their friends and family ask them many questions about their experiences of studying in China which implies that students receive more attention as a result of their decision to study there. As pull factors are not static, it is suggested that when China becomes a mainstream host destination, international students who consider themselves adventurous and want to create a unique identity for themselves may decide to study in another emerging market.

5.2 Implications for practice

This study found that QS University Rankings played an important role in students’ decision-making and were often one of the few information sources that students searched for and relied upon as an indicator of quality. Increased rankings provide multiple benefits to universities and prospective students in the decision-making process. Firstly, they serve as a promotional tool as students frequently cite rankings as an information source. Secondly, they provide an indicator of quality and measure of comparison with other universities that students are considering, and finally, students can use rankings as a personal promotional tool when they graduate (Chen, 2008).

In addition, as previous research has shown there is a positive relationship between the number of highly ranked universities and perceptions of the country’s overall education system. This means that, in theory, all of the Chinese universities can benefit from the halo effect (Beech, 2014; Bourke, 2000; Cai & Loo, 2014). Therefore, it is essential that universities in China continue to invest their resources into climbing the QS University Rankings.

As university rankings and reputation, enhanced employment opportunities, and China’s rise as an emerging superpower are extremely influential in international students’ decisions, marketing promotions should focus on advertising these aspects. Advertising increased employment prospects of students who study in China could be achieved by featuring successful alumni in marketing campaigns. While there are a variety of global university ranking systems, students who were interested in ranking typically checked the

QS rankings, therefore, these should be promoted to encourage students to apply to particular universities. Furthermore, the rapid advancement of China to become the world's second largest economy should be advertised to prospective students, and their most important social influences, specifically parents and teachers. This strategy is recommended as students discussed that their own perceptions and the perceptions of their social influences were that China is less developed. In addition, as cost was a contributing factor for many students, attractive scholarship opportunities, such as free tuition, living costs, flights and monthly stipends should be promoted to encourage students to select China as their destination country.

Moreover, as student support and resources contribute towards students' satisfaction rates, and social influence and word of mouth is one of the most influential information sources (Abubakar et al., 2010; Padlee et al., 2010), it is important that universities continue to invest in providing excellent student support. Universities in traditional Western host countries are obligated to comply with their governments' established Code of Conduct for international students, which includes responsibilities such as providing accurate, age-appropriate information and advice on further study and career development options (q.v., New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2016). As career outcomes were found to be extremely important to international students, it is recommended that the Chinese government implement a Code of Conduct to ensure that all Chinese universities provide satisfactory student support.

Although marketers cannot influence push factors in source countries such as Africa, it is recommended that Chinese universities become more aware of market conditions as their existence signifies an availability of prospective students from African countries. An awareness of market conditions enables marketers to focus recruitment effort to maximise enrolment of international students.

Furthermore, as descendants of Chinese migrants revealed learning about their cultural identity was a pull factor in their decision to study in China, it is recommended that universities focus effort on targeting these students. As this study has identified that Chinese parents often lead the information search and application stage and exert pressure on students to choose their preferred university, universities should target parents and students in their marketing campaigns.

To summarise, although the main motivations for international students choosing to study in China are fairly consistent across the international student population, it is important

for marketers to be aware of cultural differences as well as differences amongst levels of study in students' decision-making. Marketers must also consider students' social influences and their impact on students' choice of study destination. In addition, it is recommended that marketers remain aware of macroenvironmental factors, such as push factors, which motivate students to study overseas as this could represent a new target market. Overall, it is crucial that marketers are abreast of the changing dynamics of push and pull factors within the international education sector and the implications this could have on China.

5.3 Implications for research

Despite China becoming one of the leading host countries for international students in the world, existing research has focused on a unidirectional flow of international students from developing countries studying in developed countries, predominantly the U.S., Australia and the U.K. (Abubakar et al., 2010; Bodycott, 2009; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Gong & Huybers, 2015; Shanka et al., 2005; Tan, 2015; Yang, 2007). Therefore, there is a gap in the research which investigates the multidirectional flow of international students from both developing and developed countries studying in a developing country, such as China.

Previous research has investigated influential factors in students' decision-making, information sources, stages of the decision-making process and students' experience in the host country independently. However, this study adopted a holistic approach and explored all of these factors simultaneously. It is proposed that push-pull factors and the use of information sources occur concurrently during the decision-making process and it was considered important to identify how students' experiences of studying in China compared with the perceptions which influenced their decision to study there.

Numerous theoretical models have been presented in previous research to explain the factors which influence international students to study in traditional, Western host countries. However, the present study proposes one of the first models to describe the influential factors in international students' decision to study in an Eastern, developing host country, namely China (Figure 5).

Existing research on international student migration has utilised the push-pull framework as a model to explain the factors which influence students' choice of a host destination. However, push factors were not considered to be influential in this study as the majority

of students focused their decision on the perceived positive attributes of China. Only African students mentioned push factors such as political instability and university strikes as contributing factors in their decision to study in China. This contradicts previous research which found that push factors such as ethnicity, discrimination, lack of jobs and cost issues in home countries encouraged students to study in China (Wen & Hu, 2018).

Extant literature has shown that studying overseas is a high-risk decision which requires extensive research (Galan et al., 2015; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Shu & Scott, 2014). However, the present study discovered that the majority of students conducted little research prior to deciding to study in China. It is suggested that a low financial cost for international students reduces the perceived risk associated with studying overseas and therefore, results in a quicker decision-making process than traditional host countries which typically incur higher financial costs.

Cost is frequently cited as a critical factor in international students' decision to study overseas (Abubakar et al., 2010; Gatfield & Chen, 2008; Padlee et al., 2010; Wen & Hu, 2018). However, the significance of cost and scholarship availability was reduced in this study as the low cost of tuition fees and scholarships were found to be contributing factors in the majority of students' decisions. Furthermore, contrary to prior research which discovered that scholarships were more influential than increased career prospects (Wen & Hu, 2018), the current study found that enhanced career prospects were the second most influential factor in students' decision-making, following university reputation. All of the students mentioned perceived increased opportunities upon graduation in their rationale for studying in China.

In addition, previous research has found that students studying in Western countries use multiple information sources to inform their decision such as university websites, brochures, high school counsellors, blogs, social media and family and friends (Abubakar et al., 2010; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Simões & Soares, 2010; Tan, 2015). In comparison, the present study showed that useful information sources for international students considering China as a study destination are the official university websites, the QS university rankings website, parents and teachers. This finding contradicts extant research which argues that it is imperative for study destinations to provide a wealth of information to be considered by prospective international students (Bourke, 2000; Mpinganjira, 2009). However, as China becomes a more popular destination for international students and the country develops

its international recruitment strategies, education consumers' expectations for a broader range of available information sources may change.

Moreover, findings from the present study do not support the three-stage decision-making models proposed by either Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) or Chen (2007) to explain international students' decision-making order. Both of these models were developed to describe the decision-making process of students from developing countries when deciding to study in a developed country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) argued that students first decide whether to study in their home country or overseas, then they choose a host country, followed by a university. They neglected the choice of programme and city in their model. On the other hand, Chen (2007) argued that students first choose whether to study locally or overseas, then they choose their programme, and the remaining choices of country, university and city are selected simultaneously. Although these models represent some of the students' decision-making processes in the current study, the findings showed that students who decide to study in China make their decisions in alternative orders, with some students choosing the university prior to the host country or choosing the programme prior to the university. A number of different decision-making sequences were revealed, including some stages being intertwined and occurring simultaneously. This highlights that international students are not homogenous in their decision-making processes and should not be treated as such.

Differences in decision-making between students from developing and developed countries and undergraduate and postgraduate students were also observed. For example, political factors did not influence students from developed countries, but they influenced students from developing countries in their decision-making. Despite the negative political relationship between China and the U.S., American students held positive perceptions of China and they considered themselves to be unaffected by any political tension. In comparison, students from developing countries discussed the positive political relationship between China and their home country, China's welcoming approach to international students and their intention to emulate China's policies in their native countries.

Differences between undergraduate and postgraduate students were also identified. Location of the city was more influential for undergraduate students. In contrast to previous research which stated that safety, geographical and cultural proximity to students' home country is important, this study discovered that students were more

motivated to choose their location based on social aspects, such as a perceived fun environment. On the other hand, postgraduate students were less influenced by the city as their choice of host destination was dependent on educational factors, such as university ranking and reputation. It could be argued that as postgraduate students are typically older, they have more travel experience and are more confident in their ability to settle into different environments. Also, postgraduate courses are shorter in duration, therefore, students are more academically goal-oriented than undergraduate students who will spend 3-4 years studying in a location.

Another difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students were the social influences who encouraged their decision to study in China. Undergraduate students were heavily influenced by their parents, whereas postgraduate students were more influenced by their teachers. The importance of teachers' influence on postgraduate students' decision-making is underreported in existing literature. Furthermore, the few studies that have investigated international students' decision to study in China have neglected the importance of all social influences. Jiani (2017) identified that students of Chinese descent are motivated to study in China to learn about their cultural identity, however, the strength of their parents influence in students' decision-making was not considered. The present study discovered that parents of Chinese descent are extremely influential in students' decision-making resulting in students feeling pressured to study in China.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This study focused on students studying research programmes, however many students choose to study professional programmes overseas and there is a gap in the research on international students' motivations to study professional programmes abroad. Previous research has found that international students studying professional programmes in Canada are more influenced by cost than students studying research programmes (Chen, 2008). Therefore, future research should investigate the motivations for international students studying professional programmes in China. If this finding is consistent with international students' motivations for studying in China, this could provide an opportunity for China to attract more international students to their professional programmes.

Participants were students at three universities in Beijing, therefore, this sample is not representative of international students studying across China. For example, determinants such as location may not be an important factor for undergraduate students studying in

rural cities in China. Future research should be conducted across a wider geographical distance to include large, cosmopolitan cities and smaller, rural cities.

As China has recently become the leading destination for international branch campuses, future research should also explore motivations for students choosing to study at branch campuses of western universities in China. It would be interesting and of deep relevance to the field to discover the similarities and differences between students choosing to study at international branch campuses and Chinese universities.

Participants in this study were interviewed after they had commenced their studies in China. As students were required to remember previous events, this could cause potential biases with retrospective recall (Gardial, Clemons, Woodruff, Schumann & Burns, 1994). Future studies should conduct longitudinal research and interview students at multiple stages throughout their decision-making process. It is recommended that students are interviewed at three distinct stages. Firstly, when China is in their consideration set, secondly, when they have received their offer and finally, when they have commenced their studies. This should alleviate any potential issues with memory recall and provide more accurate data as students will be able to identify which factors influence their decision at each stage.

Furthermore, as enhanced career prospects were one of the main reasons why students chose to study in China, future research should investigate international students' graduate outcomes. Existing research discovered that British students who had completed overseas tertiary qualifications in Europe and the United States did not benefit from increased career prospects (Brooks & Waters, 2009). As several students declared that their expectations would be met dependent on their post-graduation opportunities, future research should also explore students' post-purchase satisfaction rates. As extant research has demonstrated that word of mouth is extremely influential in students' decision-making, it is important for the Chinese government and universities to ensure that students evaluate their study experiences positively.

This study revealed the importance of teachers in postgraduate students' decision-making, however, little is known about teachers' involvement in students' decisions to study overseas. Therefore, future research should investigate this further to identify how teachers influence students' decisions and the nature of information they provide to assist students. These findings could prove important for the Chinese government as it aims to increase the number of international students studying postgraduate programmes (Wen et

al., 2017). Moreover, the role of parents of Chinese descendants in students' decision to study in China has not been explored. The present study discovered that parents were extremely influential in undergraduate students' decisions, resulting in students feeling pressure to study in China. Previous research has revealed that students' decision to study overseas in other collectivist cultures, such as Vietnam and Thailand, are a familial decision (Pham, 2019; Pimpa, 2003). It is recommended that future researchers explore the role of parents in Chinese descendant's decision-making.

Finally, the present study adopted a qualitative approach to enable a depth of rich data which could explain international students' motivations to study in China (Patton, 2002). Future research could employ survey-based methodology to quantitatively determine the significance of the factors in Figure 5. These findings would enable the Chinese government and universities to prioritise their efforts to achieve maximum recruitment benefit.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings extend our knowledge of international students' decisions to study in China. The present study identified that the core influential pull factors in international students' decision to study in China are educational factors, specifically university reputation. The second most influential factors are economic, focusing on China's rise as a global superpower and increased career prospects. Similarly, students are motivated to study in China to learn Mandarin as they believe this will further enhance their career prospects. Although cost is not a critical factor in students' decision to study in China, scholarships and the low cost of tuition fees play a contributing role in students' decision-making. Social influences, particularly parents and teachers, are also significant in influencing students' decision-making. Another motivation is ease of admission to the highest ranked university in China and students of Chinese descent are motivated to choose China as a study destination to connect with their cultural heritage. A theoretical model is proposed to explain the pull factors which motivate international students to choose China as a host destination (Figure 5).

In contrast to prior literature that found international students undertake extensive research when choosing a study destination (Maringe & Carter, 2007; Pham 2019; Tan, 2015), it was discovered that most of the students interviewed conducted little research before deciding to study in China. It is proposed that the low financial risk of studying in China combined with excellent university reputation alleviates the perceived risk of

studying overseas and therefore, hastens students' decision-making process. Contrary to extant research, international students reported positive experiences about studying in China (Ding, 2016; Schulmann & Ye, 2017; Wen et al., 2017). For some students, it was important to experience and overcome the challenges of studying in China to enhance their self-esteem and create a unique identity which differentiated them from peers who study in traditional host destinations (Nail, 1986; Tian et al., 2001). This research also provides managerial implications and recommendations to improve marketing practices which will assist the Chinese government and universities to meet their ambitious recruitment targets. Despite China's rise to the third largest study destination globally, existing research has focused on international students studying in Western host countries. To better understand the determinants of China as a host destination, opportunities for future studies to address this research gap were discussed.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Advertisement for participants



Student Decision-Making Study

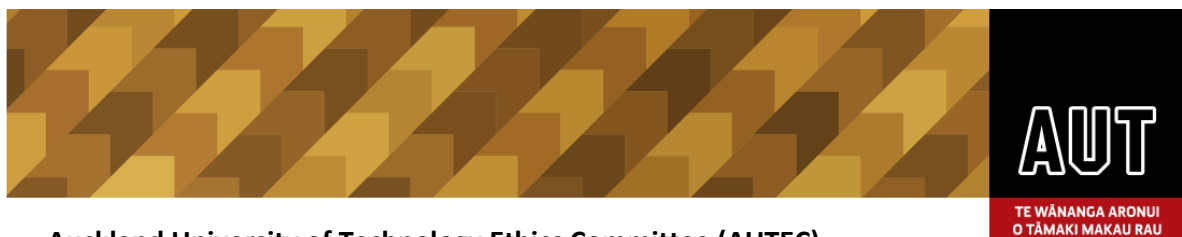
Are you an international student who would like to share your experience about choosing to study in China?

The purpose of this research study is to discover the motivations for international students choosing to study in China, how they make this decision and their experiences of studying in China. Participants will receive a cash incentive for their time.

To participate, you must be at least 18 years old, studying a full Undergraduate or Postgraduate programme in China and be a fluent English speaker.

For more information, please contact the researcher, Joanne Chrystal;
joanne.chrystal@aut.ac.nz

Appendix B. Ethics approval letter

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)**

Auckland University of Technology
 D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
 T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
 E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

23 July 2018

Ken Hyde
 Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Ken

Re Ethics Application: **18/281 When the source country becomes the host country - International students' motivations for studying in China**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 23 July 2021.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. If the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all locality legal and ethical obligations and requirements. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,

Kate O'Connor
 Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: joanne.chrystal@aut.ac.nz; Sommer Kapitan

Participant Information Sheet



Date information sheet produced:

12 July 2018

Project title

When the source country becomes the host country – International students' motivations for studying in China

An invitation

My name is Joanne Chrystal and I am a Masters student in the Department of Marketing at Auckland University of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. I am conducting research on international students' motivations for studying in China. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. The collected data will be used for the stated purpose only. Participation in this research is voluntary and all information collected will be kept confidential. You may withdraw your participation any time before the completion of the research project without any disadvantage.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations for international students choosing to study in China, the factors that influence their decision and the decision making process. I am conducting this study for my Masters requirement, as well as an opportunity to present the findings of this study at conferences and publish articles in academic journals.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You were initially identified as you are an international student studying an undergraduate programme in China and you are an English-speaking adult (18 and above). You received an email from your university/agency as they believed you may be interested in participating in this research or you contacted the researcher after viewing an advertisement online. I would like to ask for your voluntary expression of interest to participate in the study.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You can agree to participate in this research by emailing me: joanne.chrystal@aut.ac.nz or contacting me on +6421763788. Once you send me an email with your interest, I will give you a Consent Form for your review and completion prior to the interview. Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

Following your acceptance to take part in this study, I will verbally confirm your participation on the day (with option to send a confirmation via email if you wish); I will also answer any queries you may have and include a Consent Form for you to sign. An interview would take place in a public place at your time



of convenience. The interviews will take approximately 40 minutes. This will be audio recorded and I will also be writing notes. Questions will relate to your decision to study in China. You will be asked to provide identifying information which will remain confidential, and only pseudonyms will be used in the final reporting.

You will have the choice of receiving a summary of the findings at the end of the research which you can indicate on the consent form.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There is not expected to be any discomfort or risk involved in answering these questions. They are related to the reasons why you chose to study in China, factors which influenced your decision and your experiences. To minimise the possibility of discomfort, I assure you that questions are non-invasive as we are not seeking a level of detail that may identify you or create any discomfort.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Participation is voluntary and if for any reason you feel uncomfortable, you are able to decline answering certain questions or even withdraw from the research project at any time prior to the study's completion without any consequences. You will have the opportunity of choosing a suitable time for participation to take place.

What are the benefits?

This research has several benefits for you as the participant, the wider community, and the researcher. As a token of appreciation for participating in this study, you will also receive a gift card or cash to the value of 65CNY. For the wider community, this study will provide both academics, practitioners and governments with beneficial information about factors which influence international students' choice of study destinations. This research will also allow me as the primary researcher, to fulfil the requirement for the award of a Masters degree from Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand.

How will my privacy be protected?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone. To ensure that privacy and confidentiality are respected, your name will be changed to a pseudonym and contact information will not be disclosed in final reporting. Any data that the researcher extracts from the interview is for academic use only and all reports or published findings will not, under any circumstance, contain names or identifying characteristics. The names of universities will also not be included. Contact details of the researcher and supervisors are provided in case of any concerns.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no costs to you other than your time to participate in the study. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes.



What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

As I will only be in China for a limited time, you have the choice of selecting the most appropriate time from date options sent by the researcher for the interview to take place.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

By completing a Consent Form or by responding to the invitation email, you may tick the box showing your interest in receiving feedback on the research's results. A result synopsis will be emailed to you once the study is complete (which is different from the draft interview transcript you will receive to review and confirm).

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisors – Ken Hyde, ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz and Sommer Kapitan, sommer.kapitan@aut.ac.nz

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Primary Researcher: Joanne Chrystal – joanne.chrystal@aut.ac.nz

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 23 July 2018,
AUTECH Reference number 18/281***

Appendix C. Consent form

Consent Form



Project title: *When the source country becomes the host country – International students' motivations for studying in China*

Project Supervisors: *Dr Ken Hyde and Dr Sommer Kapitan*

Researcher: *Joanne Chrystal*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated (12 July 2018).
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that the researcher will take notes during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 23 July 2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/281

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Interview Guide

1. Why did you decide to study in China?
2. Did you consider studying in any other countries? Which countries?
3. What was preferable about China, in comparison to the other countries you were considering?
4. What influenced your decision?
5. Can you describe your experience of studying in China? Have your expectations been met?
6. How did you make the decision to study in China? For example, did you decide to study abroad, then select China, then the institution?

Probes for discussion:

- *Perceptions of China before studying*
- *Political influences*

Appendix D. Sample interview transcript

Interviewer: Hi Maria.

Maria: Hello.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to study in China?

Maria: A few reasons; One is that my dad is actually an alumni of this university, so I'd heard a lot of things. He also came to China when I was in middle school to start a business and because of that I didn't have enough time with him growing up so I'd like to spend some time with him. So one's family. The other one is just the state of development of China right now. I think that with its growing influence on the global stage, that it should be a good idea to learn more about China. I mean it is like a really big country and especially since I have a Chinese background. And I was fortunate enough to learn a little bit of Chinese growing up, I thought I should seize the opportunity to pursue studies here. I think that would give me a lot of opportunities in the future. And also, just I think the third and final reason is I just kind of wanted to challenge myself in the adventure aspect.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maria: Learn something new and really go out of my comfort zone. And push myself to grow, to be a better person and learn about other perspectives, experience something I've not done before I grow old and have too many people depending on me (laughs), like children or something.

Interviewer: Great. So is your dad Chinese?

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: And you said he moved here when you were in middle school. What age was that?

Maria: I was 12 years old.

Interviewer: And has he stayed here since then?

Maria: Yes, and then I'd maybe see him once every four months for like a week or two at a time and so even though he was there sometimes, he always told us that his family comes first as a priority. He did miss some of the milestones, like high school graduation, prom, he wasn't there, which I don't hold against him, but it would have been nice to have him around especially during like teenage years.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maria: But I love my dad, so I would like to develop a better relationship with him.

Interviewer: And is he in Beijing?

Maria: Yes. Sometimes he is in Beijing, sometimes he is somewhere else but when he is in Beijing, we maybe have lunch together.

Interviewer: And what nationality is your mum?

Maria: She's also Chinese. Full Chinese.

Interviewer: Were you born in America? Do you have an American passport?

Maria: Yes, I was born in California and then grew up there all my life and then came here for college.

Interviewer: Had you been to China before?

Maria: Yes, you know growing up during summer vacations and summer holiday, I'd come back to visit relatives, because I think our extended family, my parents are the only ones who left the country to go study abroad and stay there, so all my other relatives live in China.

Interviewer: And do you see them much now that you're here?

Maria: No, not actually. I'm usually busy studying.

Interviewer: Are they based in Beijing?

Maria: My uncle... one of my uncles. But the rest are like in the northern part, southern part and kind of scattered.

Interviewer: Did you consider any other countries?

Maria: Not really. I think if the opportunity presented itself, maybe I would go on exchange but since I already had some basic knowledge of Chinese language and it was a university that my dad has been to before, I kind of felt more comfortable coming to the country by myself, so that definitely gave me some affirmation. It wasn't something entirely foreign to me.

Interviewer: So you didn't consider staying at home and studying in the U.S.?

Maria: Oh, I did. So during college applications, I actually hadn't considered coming to Tsinghua at all. I just was planning to go to a state college in California and I learned about applications after the fact that I applied to all universities in America. And then I was like I might as well apply and see where it goes and then I was accepted and did an interview and I was like "What the hell, I'll try it and if I don't like it, I can come back but I will regret it for the rest of my life if I don't try it".

Interviewer: So did you apply to any other universities in China?

Maria: No, just Tsinghua.

Interviewer: So what if you didn't get into Tsinghua?

Maria: Then I'd go to Berkeley.

Interviewer: Did you have an offer for there as well?

Maria: Yes, I actually applied for the waiting list because I was wait listed and then I did not wait for a... I'm forgetting my English now I'm in China (laughs)... I did not wait for

an email back before I just went to Tsinghua. So, I would have either went to Berkeley or UC Davis.

Interviewer: We had an intern working with us from UC Davis. We've had quite a few students working with us from UC Davis.

Maria: It was like really close to home, so it was either Berkeley or UC Davis.

Interviewer: Where did your mum study? Did she study in the U.S.?

Maria: She studied in China for her undergraduate and graduate degree at Peking University.

Interviewer: Okay, but you didn't consider Peking?

Maria: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Maria: Their application system was different, so for Tsinghua, for international students, they didn't have standardised testing, so the application process was much like applying to a U.S. college, whereas for Peking there was a whole other test you have to take to enter into the university.

Interviewer: What do your friends think about you coming to China?

Maria: My friends, they're like "Oh China, that's something" (laughs). They know I'm Chinese and compared to some American-born Chinese, I'm more in touch with and I care a little bit more about my roots, so they're like "It's really cool. It's a great opportunity. We will miss you", you know. You know "Come back and visit". I think a lot of my friends had an idea of China that it's still a farming country or really undeveloped. So when I go back and visit, and I tell them about WeChat Pay, the great public transportation, they can't believe it. But I think it's something that the whole rest of the world should know about China.

Interviewer: Yeah. What? They should know that it's developed or about WeChat Pay?

Maria: That it's more developed than I think people perceive.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so did you get a scholarship to study at Tsinghua?

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: Is it a full scholarship?

Maria: It's the Chinese government scholarship, so I actually got like a full scholarship and monthly stipend of RMB2500. And going back to your first question about my reasons for coming, I would be lying if I didn't say the financial aspect wasn't there because university in the U.S. is definitely pretty expensive.

Interviewer: Yeah. How important was this in your decision making?

Maria: If I bring to my reasons and then adding financial aspects to it, it would probably

be fourth. Yeah. It's definitely like a bonus, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. So sorry the first reason was..? Can you go through them?

Maria: The first was I wanted to take advantage of China's development and increase my opportunities. The second would be adventure and developing my own perspective and character development, the third would be for my dad and for my family and the fourth would be the financial, the scholarship.

Interviewer: Was it difficult to get the scholarship?

Maria: I don't know how competitive it was but I did go through an application process. And then I just got an email saying I got the scholarship. I don't know how competitive it is though.

Interviewer: Okay. What are you studying?

Maria: Industrial Engineering.

Interviewer: Bachelors?

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was preferable about studying in China in comparison to the U.S?

Maria: I wouldn't say preferable but more just different. Just for I think all personal reasons. It's cost effective, I get to learn a different language, make connections with people who have an international outlook. I think because the people I interact with are also international students and they come here to study for a lot of the same reasons, like to have some experience internationally.

I think just like something that pushes you out of your comfort zone, just challenges your perspective and that's preferable for me. If I didn't come, I'd still have a pretty narrow mindset, the place I grew up, in Collins, Colorado, it's very much predominately white, there's not very much diversification, so I kind of grew up feeling like I should blend in, and be as little Chinese as possible, like not let my culture show. So coming here has made me confident and proud of being Chinese and who I am.

Interviewer: So do you feel more Chinese now that you're in China?

Maria: Yes. Sometimes when I go back I feel a reverse culture shock. Have you ever heard of that?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Maria: It's kind of surprises, like a huge strip mall, driving distances and like seeing a lot of different ethnicities. In China, it's all Chinese people (laughs).

Interviewer: And how else do you feel when you go home?

Maria: I feel kind of lonely sometimes because our holidays don't match up, at least with my friends who are my age, because when I go back for break, they're going back to

school or when I'm still in school, they're on break. Sometimes it's hard to match up the times.

Interviewer: Yeah. Are you still in contact with your friends?

Maria: Yeah. But like I think increasingly less. I don't know it just kind of happens when you meet new people, experience new things like they kind of draw you away from your old life, yeah. But definitely good friends I still keep in contact with.

Interviewer: Have any of them come here to visit?

Maria: Oh no.

Interviewer: They wouldn't?

Maria: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Your friends here, are they mostly international students?

Maria: Yes. The way the university is set up is like we have a different orientation than the Chinese students. The Chinese students go through a military training thing, then they like get together in their class units and march around.

Interviewer: Really?

Maria: Yeah and then since it's mandated by the government for all Chinese students, it doesn't apply to international students. So, then we go through our own orientation, so when you just enter the school as a freshman and you're just meeting new people, it kind of naturally separates the two groups. Like I just feel more comfortable around the international students too because they've been through much of the same experiences as me. Most of them speak English, it's just more comfortable to communicate. And we live in different dormitories, like the international students' apartments are completely separate from the Chinese students' apartments. The time that we are together; the Chinese and the international students is during classes and during classes, we don't really have much time to converse or socialise, it's usually just listening to lectures. But over WeChat or something, or homework, we sometimes communicate.

Interviewer: So do you do group projects?

Maria: Yes, and sometimes there's classroom meetings so you get to meet classmates then.

Interviewer: How do you find the different teaching style?

Maria: Because I haven't experienced college in the United States, I'm not too sure but I feel mostly that in China, it's more like lecture, homework, lecture, homework whereas in Western universities they do more cooperation and creative thinking and group projects, much more than in a Chinese University. I think a lot of it is like memorisation and like hard knowledge and then maybe in U.S. universities, they do more creative

thinking and discussions.

Interviewer: Okay, and are all of your classes in Chinese?

Maria: Yes, most, because my department is industrial engineering and they use an English curriculum like the McGraw-Hill, like those textbooks. So even though we read our textbooks in English, the class is taught in Chinese, so that's an interesting mix.

Interviewer: Yeah. So everyone in your class must be able to speak both English and Chinese?

Maria: Yes or at least be able to read and then learn in English and Chinese. Even if you were just a Chinese student, learning computer science or something, like English is very crucial. A lot of Chinese students know how to read and write English very well and then the oral English aspect they might be a little weaker just because they don't have the opportunity to practice. But when I came I was very surprised, like their vocabulary knowledge is very extensive and they're very impressive when they study in English.

Interviewer: So when you do your essays and your exams, is it in Chinese?

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: And did you have to take any Chinese language classes before going to the university?

Maria: Not before going but there was a requirement where you had to pass at least level 5 of the HSK. It's like a Chinese standardised test for Chinese language and then submit that with your application. Additionally, the international students are required to take Chinese class, so the required classes for Chinese students, they are required to take up politics and English classes and then for me, I'm required to take Chinese classes and Chinese like situation classes. It's a summary about the current news and like climate of China, so it's like a summary for us to understand what's going on in the country.

Interviewer: So from learning at school or from your parents, you already had HSK 5?

Maria: Yes.

Interviewer: Was it from your parents or was it....?

Maria: It was like I was taught Chinese by my mum. She's a Chinese tutor, so that's good and then I came to Beijing to take the HSK 5 and it was like in a computer lab setting.

Interviewer: Could you not take it in America?

Maria: I think they do have a centre. I'm not too certain though.

Interviewer: OK. That's cool that your mum's a teacher.

Maria: Yeah, it was very fortunate for me (laughs).

Interviewer: Was there anything else that influenced your decision to come to China?

Maria: My parents encouraged it but actually when I was accepted and made the final

decision to go, they were very on the fence I think and then I think my dad was even... he didn't show it of course but I feel like he wanted me to go to UC Davis, because they thought that an education in the U.S. would be better for my learning, because there's no language barrier and a lot of Chinese students go to America to study but I was going to China, so it was like against the current international students. So I guess it was just entirely my choice. Out of high school I just wanted to experience something different and I think the answer to that was going to China.

Interviewer: Did you look up social media or online or the prospectus?

Maria: Not really. And I went on to YouTube to see if there's any student life clips or something about Tsinghua. There was close to nothing. But I mean I knew that like it's common knowledge at least in my household that Tsinghua University is like the best university, at least for engineering and stuff. So I thought it would be really amazing to be able to say I've been to a world class university and Tsinghua in China.... Because it just has such a big reputation. I thought it might be something interesting to add into like... If I put it into terms of having a bank of experience and I think then it's like adding that.

Interviewer: Yeah. Like adding to your C.V?

Maria: Yeah, kind of.

Interviewer: So from your perceptions has anything been different from what you expected it to be?

Maria: Not too, too much because I thought I've had a lot of opportunities to come to China, like almost every summer break, from high school, so it was kind of how I expected it to be. I think what shocked me the most was the difficulty of the classes, which I don't think it should have because it's Tsinghua. I guess I've been a straight 'A' student in high school and coming to Tsinghua and failing my first course is a kind of a hit on my pride... (looks sheepishly) but I think a lot of people experience that, you know. Just going to college, in general, or university, and yeah I think I should have expected it.

Interviewer: So did you have to take the class again?

Maria: Yeah, I had to take it again. It's calculus.

Interviewer: Did you pass the second time?

Maria: I don't know yet. I'm retaking it this year.

Interviewer: I've only met a couple of students so far and you're not the first person that has said that so I hope that makes you feel better.

Maria: Yeah, I mean I would like to say it's mostly the language barrier but I know from my heart that I could have done something different.

Interviewer: Okay.

Maria: Yeah. It's hard to not blame some things on the language barrier and it's kind of like the international student card, like an excuse. Like 'I am an international student, so that's why I haven't done so well. That's why I can't understand this', but it's a learning process and I need to take responsibility for my own self.

Interviewer: What do you think was the reason for not passing?

Maria: Okay. It was partly language but also because I didn't spend as much time learning or seeking help. I was a little afraid to ask for help because I thought I'd be bothering people which is totally not like something to be afraid of but at the time I was. So I just didn't seek help when I should have and I didn't catch up when the time was... like I still could catch up and then I just fell behind. And then it was finals and then I didn't pass.

Interviewer: So have your expectations been met?

Maria: Yeah, yeah, I think so. I think so. One thing I'm working on is just like asking for help when I can and I'm seeing myself getting better at my study which I think is great and I just expect myself to just improve upon each semester, so I think that's what I'm working on right now, like a personal project.

Interviewer: And what do you want to do when you finish at Tsinghua?

Maria: I want to go back to the United States to get an MBA but between then I might enter the workforce for a few years and whether it's in China or in the U.S. or wherever in the world, it doesn't matter, I just think wherever has the best opportunities, I would go and then go to get my MBA.

Interviewer: Do you have any idea of where you want to work?

Maria: I don't know entirely but I do want to work for an organisation or a company that connects cultures or is like international.

Interviewer: And do you think Tsinghua will help you get that?

Maria: Yes. It has a lot of resources and a lot of great people coming to speak and stuff, so I think it's a really good launching point to access those opportunities.

Interviewer: So do you have lots of employers coming to campus?

Maria: Yeah, there's lots of job fairs. Like there's people like Mark Zuckerberg. They regularly come to campus and like big companies come to recruit, so I think being at Tsinghua and having access to those resources is a great advantage, so I'm very excited.

Interviewer: That's great. And is that all for free?

Maria: Yeah, it's all for free.

Interviewer: So have you met Mark Zuckerberg?

Maria: I haven't met him personally but I've seen him talk. He's actually one of the board members for the Department of Business and Management Administration, SEM.

Interviewer: Of your university?

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: That's cool. So when you were deciding to study, did you first of all choose your programme or did you choose the university? How did you make that decision?

Maria: I had always wanted to go into industrial engineering as a major and then I was delighted to know that Tsinghua had that department. If they didn't have industrial engineering, I might have applied to business or economics but...

Interviewer: So the major wasn't as important as the university?

Maria: Oh no, the other way around, the major was more important than the university.

Interviewer: So if Tsinghua didn't have industrial engineering, you may have studied somewhere else?

Maria: Yeah, I might have just stayed in the U.S.

Interviewer: And how do you feel about your experience of studying here in comparison to your friends' experience of studying in the U.S.? Or a comparison to what your experience may have been if you had studied in the U.S.?

Maria: So each semester an average student, at least for engineering students, will have around 28 credits and then my friends in the U.S. they probably don't take that many classes. Like first semester I might have like 8-9 classes and then most of them being required and then most of my friends, they maybe take 4 courses per semester. I think maybe they spend more time on each course in the U.S. and then I don't know, it just feels kind of like high school except you're going to different classes around campus for China. You know like you go to a lecture, you get homework, you turn in your homework, it's just like back to back classes sometimes, it gets a little bit exhausting.

You know like sometimes my friends in the U.S. have a full day where they don't have any classes or a few full days. And then like every day here, I have a class. I took a few classes. On an average day, I have 3 classes. Maybe in all, it's like 6-7 hours.

Interviewer: 6-7 hours a day of class?

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are you still expected to do independent study as well?

Maria: Not for my grade, not for sophomore, but I know senior and junior year, we do hard internships and stuff but then I don't think you take as many courses. You have more free time.

Interviewer: So when do you have to do the internships?

Maria: During the summer or during the semester. I think a lot of seniors take like the minimum amount of required classes or credits and then they intern outside of campus.

But I know during the summer there's like required summer semesters, like this summer for me after school until June 30th, I had three extra weeks of study. It's called internship but it is basically like industrial training, like we went to do metal works and like coding for some type of machine to cut metal like, it was a cool experience but it was three more weeks of my break. So I think for summer, in reality, I had a month of break.

Interviewer: Okay.

Maria: But winter break is a little longer I think than America. For most of the time.

Interviewer: Okay. Do have a job?

Maria: On the side, I tutor oral English. So I go to a classroom that's kind of in the Southwest of Beijing. And then teach a group of 5 or 6 kids oral English. Their age is like from 6-8 years.

Interviewer: Okay.

Maria: Then we like play games and have fun.

Interviewer: So that's not through the university? That is something separate?

Maria: No. That's something separate. I mean I don't have a work visa but a lot of foreigners work here privately and they do tutoring in languages.

Interviewer: Do you have to have a work visa?

Maria: I don't know because like I got the job through connections, so I don't know if it's a very official, corporation or company. If it was then a work visa would be required.

Interviewer: And so when do you find time to do that?

Maria: On the weekends. It usually takes up maybe 3-4 hours of my time. Just like to commute and then teach and then come back.

Interviewer: What do you do in your free time?

Maria: I like to play sports or hang out with friends. Just like the usual stuff. There's a lot of entertainment, like karaoke, going out to eat. Maybe visiting some clubs around the city. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you go to any student associations or societies?

Maria: Yes, oh I'm actually the President of a society. It's an international student association that organises events like language mixers which helps people match up with the people of the language they would like to learn, to communicate or converse. We also do holiday events like Halloween and Christmas for people from Western countries who might not have the chance otherwise to celebrate those holidays. We also teach some Chinese culture to international students.

So a lot of my time actually was spent in that because I'm the President and I kind of planned the semester. So when I said when I go out with my friends, it was like before I

became President but now I almost don't have any free time anymore.

Interviewer: When did you become President?

Maria: In January this year.

Interviewer: And how did that happen? What was the process?

Maria: So I knew the past President of the society and no one was going to take it up. Because most of the members of the club are exchange students, so once they leave for a semester, like the club is empty and then there's not very many permanent students or students who stay long term, so the club was going to be disbanded. So I thought that that would be a shame and I kind of picked up the scraps and started over.

Interviewer: Do you have a committee?

Maria: Yes. The committee is mostly Taiwanese students or like undergraduate students just because they're more long term and so they have more commitment towards the club. And they can organise with Chinese and English which is pretty difficult to do sometimes. The language aspect is big.

Interviewer: Are most international students' parents Chinese?

Maria: For undergraduate students, most of them or a big portion of them are ethnically Chinese or they came from a Chinese speaking country like Malaysia. There's a lot of Korean people. But I think the Korean part is because it's kind of a thing in Korea, like their university is really expensive so then a lot of people choose to go to China for study and that's just a trend. And then for people from the western hemisphere, most of them are like me or they were born in America or a western country and then move to China when they're young. So it's kind of split into these two groups.

Interviewer: What about postgrad?

Maria: For postgrad, you see a lot more western people and so they might not have any background in Asia. For postgrad, sometimes they come just because of Tsinghua's resources, like it just generally has a good education. Some people, there are very few like me, who are Canadian-born Chinese or American-born Chinese. But most of them just want to come for the culture or just want to come for the education.

For international students, like having roots in China or having parents that are Chinese is a huge influencer, that make people come here to study. Like including me, if I wasn't Chinese, then I don't think I would come here to study for undergraduate study at least.

Interviewer: And was it helpful to know that you have other family here? Like as safety-
?

Maria: Yeah. I think so.

Interviewer: What do you think is the largest nationality of international students?

Maria: Korean. And then it's Malaysian, then Japanese I think. So a lot of Asian countries. But I think they mostly go there for the education and then like from Western countries when they go to China, it's for like to experience a different culture, or they have roots in China.

Interviewer: Does the Chinese firewall impact your experience of studying in China?

Maria: It's hard to gather in big groups like Facebook where you can post public events and then have anyone come. On WeChat, like even for a group chat, there's a limit of 500 people and then when 100 people enter the group, you can't scan in by QR code, you have to privately pull in each individual member, so these little things make it kind of hard for big groups of people to gather and then also with experience of Tsinghua association like when we organize events and try to publicise it, it is so hard to get the word out, like we can only post WeChat posts on to our subscription accounts and then, like no one checks those. It goes to a little tiny tab in your WeChat feed. It's a little tiny red dot and then we try to promote the event in our bigger group chats but then it's like a ton of little, big group chats and I don't know, it's super inconvenient.

And then the only other way is through posters and people will usually just walk past those. Promotion is definitely something I've had to learn and I'm still learning how to do. So that's an interesting about the censorship. Oh there's interesting accounts-

Do you know that Winnie the Pooh is blocked in China because there was an internet meme of Obama walking next to the Chairman and then it was compared to Tigger and Winnie the Pooh walking together. And now the search is blocked (laughs) so it's little things like that.

Also my classroom mentor, he's a senior and he helps my class out with anything and he told us after one of the big government conferences that we should be careful about what we say on WeChat. Don't slander the government. Don't talk about the government, you know just to be safe. So it's something that people are aware of, that we shouldn't talk about, we shouldn't arouse trouble but I don't think it's an attitude of like being oppressed. It's just the status quo. It's just normal.

Interviewer: It's just what people are used to.

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: And do you think international students are conscious of that?

Maria: Yeah, definitely. I think almost every international student has a VPN, so we just...

Interviewer: So if you communicate through other forums then it's okay?

Maria: Yeah, but it doesn't get the word out as effectively as WeChat, because it's just

more commonly used and we still do want to spread the word to Chinese students. I don't know. It's just really hard.

Interviewer: To attend your groups?

Maria: Sorry...?

Interviewer: You want to spread the word to Chinese students to come to your event?

Maria: Yeah because we don't want to be an exclusive international club. We still want to bridge the cultures.

Interviewer: Do many Chinese students go?

Maria: Yes, especially to the language ones. A lot of Chinese students want to practice their own English, especially postgraduate students who are seeking to go overseas to study. So that's really nice.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is there anything that you miss from home?

Maria: Surprisingly, salad. I don't know. I just miss a really good salad. Fruit. The fruit isn't very fresh. I think it's mostly just the fresh green and fruit aspects. You know I miss having a really quiet environment and you know like the noise pollution is quite something and sometimes I'll be in my dorm at 2am in the morning, I'll be woken up by a really loud honk. Like my dorm is at an intersection and there's you know 'honk, honk, honk'.

I think at least where I lived in the suburbs we had a good friendly stranger kind of vibe, so if you pass on the side walk, you'll be like "Hi", you would always smile. And whereas in Beijing, you would be like you're a stranger so I won't talk to you, don't make eye contact, mind my own business, on the phone but I think that's everywhere in big cities.

Interviewer: Yeah. When you used to come on summer vacation, did you used to come to Beijing?

Maria: Yes and also to big cities but not as big as Beijing, but they are still big cities but maybe like the size of Denver. There's a whole lot of people here.

Interviewer: So have you found it easy to assimilate?

Maria: I think so. It took me maybe like two months to get comfortable. I don't think it was a super hard adjustment. I just kind of accepted things the way they were and if something happened in the wrong way, I was like 'Well this is how things are going to be for the next four years, so I might as well get used to it'.

Interviewer: Yeah I think that's a good attitude to have. You mentioned when you go home, sometimes you feel a bit lonely because your friends have different holidays from you? Is that the only reason?

Maria: Yeah, it's really quiet and after like 9pm the streets are empty. And then in

Beijing, it's like the night has just started. There are people everywhere. Also it feels kind of dangerous. Having people everywhere, it feels kind of like having eyes everywhere and so for me, it's kind of like people are watching so nothing too terrible will happen. In the States walking alone on the street when it is past 9pm, it feels a little dangerous. I just feel safe around like, I feel if I was at a campus in the United States I'd also feel unsafe. Because in Beijing, I think it's mostly petty crime. You know like stealing and stuff but in the U.S. I think more cases are more severe. There are more cases of assault or something happening on campuses a lot.

Interviewer: Do you still feel similar to your friends back home? Do you still have things in common?

Maria: Yeah but I'm finding more and more that sometimes the things they say that I would not have minded before kind of like, like their perspective might not be as a wide or they may say something kind of ignorant and it's because they haven't experienced it for themselves. Like they will say something about Chinese people or they will see something on the news about China, since I've been in China, they start asking a ton of questions and they will be really curious. And I'm usually really patient to answer their questions but sometimes I feel frustration too. It's definitely unintentional but sometimes it feels like offensive. But I would not have minded that before.

Interviewer: But now you said because you live here and you feel more Chinese, maybe that's why it feels-?

Maria: Yeah. I feel like I need to defend sometimes, whereas back then I would have laughed along with them. It's kind of grown a part of myself. And yeah, so it definitely has more to do with me as before I would be like 'Oh it's over there on the other side of the sea. That's not me, I'm American'.

Interviewer: So you considered yourself more American before you came and now more Chinese?

Maria: Not more Chinese but aware of both of my identities.

Interviewer: Okay. How do you feel about the political situation between America and China?

Maria: The trade war. I think it's a pity. You know.... I'm pretty idealistic, pretty utopian. I'd like for the two countries to get along, like figure something out but it just kind of seems childish to me. I don't know. I feel if the U.S. leaders took a course on Chinese culture and if the Chinese leaders took a course on American culture, there wouldn't be this kind of conflict. I think it's just a lack of understanding.

You know how we talked about the VPN, like the internet block? It's hard to keep up on

unbiased news. Yeah, so I actually don't know too much about what's happening, because I know each is biased in its own way. It's just hard to get just the facts.

Interviewer: Yeah, so do you feel like the information you get at the moment is more Chinese biased?

Maria: Yes. Like comparing the news, it's like who do I listen to? So it's interesting seeing both sides. I actually think it's good to see both sides. But it makes things confusing.

Interviewer: Yeah, so with the VPN you can't access U.S. News?

Maria: I can. Yeah, so sometimes NPR (National Public Radio) is pretty reliable. But you know each news station has political lenience. I'll try to make my own judgment.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel being American-born Chinese?

Maria: I feel like I'm getting insider information.

Interviewer: Because you're in China?

Maria: Yeah. It's very conflicting information but it kind of feels like a puzzle, like it can kind of be exciting. It's kind of interesting to see how information is distributed to different audiences and how that can entirely influence a whole populations understanding of a situation.

You know how I said I feel like defending my Chinese identity in America and sometimes it is the other way around when I'm here and you know it's kind of weird, it's an internal conflict as well. You know sometimes my Chinese relatives will ask me about gun control laws or ask for my views on certain things and I feel the need to defend America sometimes. And then I need to explain that what I say doesn't represent the entire U.S. and then when I'm in the United States, what I say doesn't represent the whole population of China. I found that when you're a minority in both countries, I feel like I'm a minority here because I have a U.S. citizenship and I've lived there most of my life and then when I'm in America, I'm like Chinese so that is a minority.

But people come to you because they are curious and also when they see how you act or what you say, they'll immediately apply it to the whole picture. So for example, if I was like really into drinking and I kind of did that all around Beijing, they'll be like "All Americans are big drinkers. They're crazy" and then if I did the exact same thing in America, they'll be like "All Chinese people are drunkards. They're all crazy". So it's kind of like a little pressure or just an awareness of myself like I feel self-conscious sometimes about how I act around certain people.

Interviewer: Because however you act, you feel like you're going to be considered to be representing a whole population?

Maria: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think in America people more see you as Chinese?

Maria: Yeah. For sure. Definitely.

Interviewer: And how do people see you here?

Maria: If they know me, they see me as more American but I love the Chinese. But people have told me that I don't look Chinese. A lot of Chinese people, when they see someone who has grown up outside of China, who's ethnically Chinese, they say they can tell if they have been there or not. There's a subtle difference in the way people act or carry themselves. So I've gotten like I look like I'm from Taiwan or I look like I'm from a Southeast Asian country or Korean. I've gotten a lot of different things.

Interviewer: Does that bother you?

Maria: No. Not at all. I think it's interesting.

Interviewer: It's interesting the perceptions people have in their mind of how someone from a certain country should look?

Maria: Yeah. Sometimes the air pollution really affects my mood, directly, physically. If I'm outside a lot exercising or something or just breathing in the air, I'll go back to my dorm and feel like I have a hangover maybe the next morning or like lightheaded or I have headache or just like really drowsy.

And then if I just look outside my window and see a smoggy environment, I'd be like 'Damn'. Sometimes I question myself like 'Oh, like what did I get myself into', you know sometimes I doubt myself like why did I come here, because I love being outdoors like I like running. So when I wake up in the morning and then I see the smog, I'm like I don't want to get through this day and it's a dampener on my mood. I think kind of like a rainy day, you know if you wake up to a rainy day, it's the same kind of concept. And stuff like this one can physically affect your head and stuff. That's why people wear masks to kind of protect their lungs health.

Interviewer: Do you wear masks?

Maria: Yeah when it gets up to... like I have a tracker on my phone for air quality and so when it goes upwards of 200, I'll wear a mask. It's like a good idea. Sometimes in the winter it gets really bad and then those days I don't even leave the house or leave my room, I just stay in and then order take out. One because I just want to breathe the air, two because it's probably not a good idea.

Interviewer: It's not a good idea to breathe the air?

Maria: Yeah, it really affects you. At least like how you feel physically. You know people who grow up in Beijing, like a lot more and more children are being born with

asthma and I'm not an expert on it but I know there have been studies before that found it's affecting the population. That's why I wear a mask because I just don't want that to happen to me.

They're trying to capitalise on that so they will design fashionable masks or influencers like celebrities will wear a brand of mask and the style will grow fashionable or trendy. So there's even that urban aesthetic with the mask in Asian countries so even on a clear day, you might see some people with masks.

Interviewer: Yeah, I seen designer masks in the airport.

Maria: That's interesting. I didn't know that would affect countries outside of Asia. Interesting.

Interviewer: Okay. I think that's me. Do you have anything else to add or any questions for me?

Maria: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you.