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What motivates Chinese students to study in the UK? A fresh perspective through a 'small-lens'

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Abstract

Chinese students represent a substantial portion of the UK university student population, with most of them being postgraduates. However, whilst the UK remains a top choice for Chinese students seeking to complete a higher degree programme, competition within the global Higher Education (HE) landscape is intensifying. Consequently, popular HE destinations such as the USA and the UK must now contend with growing academic markets in Australia and New Zealand (Marginson, 2006) as well as some non-English speaking countries which offer appealing university degrees through English-Medium-Instruction (EMI) (Mok, 2007). It is therefore salutary to ensure that Chinese students continue to find the UK appealing. This is vitally important both for the economy and the intellectual diversity and talents these students bring to UK HE institutions. This study thus revisits the core motives which drive Chinese students to UK universities. Significantly, unlike other investigations which have treated the topic of motivation rather marginally and through broad research scopes, this paper uses a 'small-lens approach' (Ushioda, 2016), which here is operationalised through the combination of practitioner research and narrative analysis. The study therefore focuses on a small group ($N=16$) of Chinese students to unpack the nuances of meaning which characterise their initial motivation to study in Britain.

Keywords Chinese students · UK universities · Motivation · Internationalisation

Introduction

It is well-documented that traditionally the UK has been one of the English-speaking countries receiving the largest number of Chinese students for university studies (Liu, 2021; Lomer et al., 2018). However, whilst the UK remains a top choice for Chinese students seeking to obtain a higher degree, competition within the global higher education (HE) landscape is intensifying. Popular HE destinations such as the USA and the UK must now contend with growing academic markets in Australia and New Zealand which, as well as providing university programmes, now offer promising job prospects to incoming international students (Yang et al, 2022). This picture is further exacerbated by non-English

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speaking countries that propose appealing university degrees through English-Medium-Instruction (EMI) (Lomer et al., 2018). Furthermore, in light of the massification of Chinese tertiary education, Chinese students now have a much larger range of options of universities to choose from both in China and abroad (Cebolla-Baoda et al., 2018; Liu & Liu, 2021). To complicate matters further, many UK institutions are suffering due to the down-trending of their rankings as well as the decrease in home students enrolments (Duncan, 2021). Therefore, it becomes imperative to delve into whether Chinese students continue to find the UK appealing (Yu et al., 2023). This is vitally important for both the economy and the intellectual diversity these students bring to UK HE institutions. Therefore, a study that revisits the make-up of international students' motivations to study at British universities is timely and allows us to reassess what may attract them to this specific academic study abroad experience.

Research on international students has usually focused on issues that students confront *during* the HE study-abroad experiences as opposed to the early motivational impetus that drives their decision to pursue HE studies abroad. Studies have typically examined students' experiences of pedagogical marginalisation (Hayes, 2017); linguistic problems (Copland & Garton, 2010), intercultural differences and social integration (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017), social isolation (Arthur, 2017), and students' engagement with UK religious organisations (Yu, 2020; Yun & Moskal, 2019). It should be noted that these investigations have tended to examine international students subsuming into this category a range of cultural heritages and nationalities (e.g., Arkoudis et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2016; Wu & Hammond, 2011). Therefore, this study targets the UK with a specific focus on Chinese students, who represent the largest demographic of international students with 141,870 students from mainland China registered in 2019/2020. Furthermore, given that approximately 60% of these are postgraduates (UUKI 2022), this study focuses on Chinese students at master's level.

This is not to say that previous empirical work has ignored the specific flow of Chinese students to study abroad. However, within the literature that has looked more specifically at Chinese students' rationale to study abroad, the vast majority of these studies have examined the case of the USA, traditionally the top HE destination (Chen, 2019; Khanna et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022). Also, as mentioned above, most studies on international students examine their *experiences* as opposed to their *motivations* to study abroad (Deuchar, 2022) and many of these remain descriptive in their scope due to the large-scale methodologies adopted. In this light, Page and Chahboun (2019) call for more studies which adopt qualitative methodologies to offer alternative empirical perspectives on international students. In particular, a number of HE scholars call for a methodological shift which may foreground students' *actual* voices, motivations, and aspirations; thereby tapping into the complexity and diversity of their viewpoints (Deuchar, 2022; Guo & Guo, 2017; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Qualitative methodologies have therefore been encouraged to address this shift.

This is not to question the quality and contributions of previous large-scale quantitative or mixed-methods research, but to suggest that a more nuanced empirical vision may further enrich the representation of international students in research findings and policy-making in university settings. In the field of international students in HE, this methodological tradition has been initiated by studies such as, Fong (2011), Yang (2018), Page (2019) that adopted an ethnographic research design. The present paper aligns with this trajectory of qualitative studies on Chinese students by looking specifically at their motivations to study in the UK through a novel methodological perspective which follows a '*small-lens*' approach (Ushioda, 2016) — more details on this below.

Motivation is one of the most impactful factors which shape international students' performance and experiences (Woodrow, 2013). Yet, there is a dearth of research which examines Chinese learners in western academia through the construct of motivation (Deuchar, 2022; Page & Chahboun, 2019), and those few studies which have examined motivation have tended to focus on language-related issues, for example, with emphasis on shifting discourses about learning English (e.g., Gao, 2008). Nonetheless, as highlighted by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021), motivation exists in relation to several complex factors inherent to the individuals and their contexts. This, in turn, suggests that motivation research must examine the multiple and complex realities we live in (e.g., political, ideological, sociocultural). In particular, in this study I argue for a view of motivation which incorporates an understanding of the individual student's *life capital*, i.e., the symbolic wealth that stems from the individual's life story with its own idiosyncratic traits and experiences (Consoli, 2021a; 2022a). As such, this study goes beyond issues of language learning, and incorporates a wider web of dimensions. These include, *inter alia*, the willingness to integrate in new academic discursive communities (Paltridge, 2001), the dissatisfaction with the provision of postgraduate education in China (Page 2016, 2019), and the prospect of enhancing one's professional edge in the wider competitive labour market (Kettle, 2017).

Why Chinese students choose the UK

Most research on Chinese students studying abroad has concentrated on their academic life, with particular attention to their participation in class (e.g., Hodkinson & Proropat, 2014), their cultures of learning (e.g., Jin and Cortazzi, 2011), issues of social integration (e.g., Dervin, 2011; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017) or the broader notion of 'service quality of education' (Zhu & Sharp, 2022). This literature has generally offered peripheral discussions about Chinese students' *initial* motivations to study and live in the UK, but here I discuss a few exceptions.

In a project driven by her experience as a Chinese postgraduate student in London, Hong Ding (2009) recounts that studying in Britain was a dream shared by many at her Chinese alma mater. The study involved several interviews with four Chinese Master's students. The core findings revealed admiration for the UK, portrayed as having an abundance of cultural resources, including British people having more options in life than Chinese people who are 'expected to do certain things at certain stages' and feel pressure from society. Ding portrays China as a society where 'traditions have not yet disappeared, and modernity has not completely arrived'. This way she framed two participants' desires as core motivations for 'individualised lifestyles and free life choices' in the UK. Two other participants showed an inclination towards the UK based on the understanding that they would enhance their skills and career prospects. One limitation of this study is that we do not see how *in-depth* or *nuanced* these findings may be due to a lack of methodological discussion of how the interviews were conducted and how the researcher forged and managed the relationships with her participants.

In a mixed-methods study, Bamber (2014) investigated Chinese female students' motivations to study in the UK, demonstrating that the notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motives intertwined. First, these students viewed UK postgraduate education as more prestigious than the Chinese counterpart. Crucially, some of these participants foregrounded the notion of 剩女 (*shèng nǚ*), a term which translates as 'left on the shelf' and refers to women who are unmarried because they may spend too much time in HE (To, 2013). This signals the

need to complete postgraduate education in the least time possible and, in this respect, the UK seemed a better option than China or the USA. Another critical finding relates to the costs involved. The USA, which is often the first-choice destination, was discarded because of concerns about safety and overall costs of living in comparison with the UK. Finally, these students were driven to study in the UK because of the ease to travel around Europe, which for them was essential, as they saw the year abroad as the last opportunity to travel freely outside China. Whilst this study offered insights from several interviews, focus groups, and a survey, there is a lack of focus on the individual participants. This could be due to the relatively large number of participants involved in the qualitative phase of the study or because not every participant joined each focus group or interview meeting, thereby limiting the researcher's ability to build rich and nuanced findings.

In another investigation, Wu (2014) administered a questionnaire to 169 Chinese students who studied in Britain between 2009 and 2010. Thirty of these participants were interviewed, and additional data obtained through two focus group discussions. Findings revealed a strong desire for 'cultural enrichment' driven by the motivation 'to broaden horizons and experience different cultures and lifestyles' (p.431). Career betterment was another core finding sustained by the understanding that within the competitive Chinese labour markets, graduates with international qualifications are in a stronger position than domestically educated peers. The study also reported a motivational orientation towards personal growth. Another important insight concerned the prestige attached to British universities as opposed to Chinese universities which were seen as 'old-fashioned and stifled their passion for learning' (p.433). In this study, too, however, there is a lack of nuanced focus on individual participants. Rather, we see a range of themes presented with support from few lines from focus groups or interviews, which offer a somewhat superficial glimpse into these students' motivations.

Cebolla-Boado et al. (2018) look at what determinants drive Chinese students towards specific universities in the UK. They drew on the 2014 UK Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Higher Expectations Survey, and supplemented this large dataset with six focus groups for illustrative purposes. The core findings suggest that university prestige is the most important driver for the sorting of Chinese students across British universities, along with broader social and cultural advantages that the universities provide. Surprisingly, the cost of study and marketing strategies deployed by universities do not seem to determine the Chinese students' university decision-making. Crucially, though, the authors note that whilst they drew on qualitative evidence to illustrate potential individual-level logics underlying the quantitative patterns, they call for further representative data from *individual students' perspectives* to enable a fuller analysis of Chinese students' preferences and motivations.

Yu et al. (2023) conducted a small-scale one-off qualitative study based on written interview questions with 20 Chinese students who attended non-Russell Group UK universities. They explored the most salient pull factors that have attracted Chinese students to the UK to complete postgraduate taught Master's programmes. Specifically, they examined the shifts in the configuration of the pull factors for such postgraduate programmes between the year 2000 and 2020. The findings reveal that, whilst the UK's core pull factors have remained stable, the decline of British universities' reputation appears to be alarming. As such, the authors suggest that in order to sustain the UK's appeal, universities ought to slow the neoliberal expansion of international recruitment and strengthen the desirable Socratic approach to teaching and learning. This study, as the authors highlight, is not conclusive in that it lacks representation of other Chinese postgraduate students (e.g., those attending Russell Group universities). Also, the lack of dialogic and in-depth data, given the written

nature of the interview strategies employed in this study, would call for more nuanced and richer data in future investigations.

In sum, the specific focus on Chinese students' *initial* motivations and related complexities have usually been ignored by studies on Chinese students or explored superficially either because the research scopes were too broad, or these studies favoured students' experiences happening *after* their arrival in the UK. Also, the very few studies that have examined Chinese students' motivations to study in the UK reaffirm the current literature's call for more empirical work that puts the spotlight on students' individual perspectives (e.g., Deuchar, 2022; Page & Chahboun, 2019). I now discuss the theoretical background sustaining the study of motivation.

Theoretical background: from complexity through ecology to life capital

Researchers have inevitably been unable to offer one single theory which encapsulates the full conceptual nature of motivation. However, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021, p4) suggest that motivation is concerned with 'the direction and magnitude of human behaviour (...) in other words, motivation is responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, how hard they are going to pursue it'. The reason why it has been difficult, if not unrealistic, to define motivation in a way to account fully for its complexities is that motivation not only fluctuates in nature, quality, and form over time, but also shifts as a result of several other factors which may be internal or external to a human being (e.g., identity, emotions, social responsibilities).

As such, it can be argued that motivation exists in relation to other phenomena that interact with one another. To make sense of this complex reality, Ushioda (2009) proposed a *Person-in-Context Relational View*, a theoretical perspective that encourages us to regard research participants as 'real persons' as opposed to 'theoretical abstractions' or 'bundles of variables'. This theory suggests that to study motivation, we need to adopt ontological visions which do not construe learners through individual differences but, rather, understand them more holistically as human beings. This is reminiscent of Kramsch's (2006, p251) call for an 'ecological turn' whereby 'learners are not just communicators and problem solvers, but whole persons with hearts, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities'. Specifically, Ushioda (2009, p220) suggests a focus on "the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives and intentions". This framework thus highlights the interaction between learners as self-reflective intentional agents and their related context(s), here understood as 'the fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of' (Ibid, 2009, p220).

Ushioda's relational framework seems to echo Complex and Dynamic System Theory (CDST) (Dörnyei, 2020). However, Ushioda distances herself from this perspective because the discourses used by CDST researchers often conceptualise people in 'abstract' terms with a focus "on self-organizing 'systems' defined by their components and processes, and where we seem to lose sight of the individual agency and reflexivity of the person whose motivation is under focus." (Ushioda, 2020; p34). I therefore choose to approach the complexity of motivation through an ecological perspective that supports 'a-person-in-context' framework. By *ecological* I mean an empirical approach that, as maintained by Kramsch (2002, p22), aims to 'encompass the totality of the relationships that a learner, as

a living organism, entertains with all aspects of his/her environment. As such, it is a relational ‘way of seeing’ that enables researchers and practitioners to account for phenomena that would otherwise go unnoticed or be unaccounted for.’

To operationalise the theoretical perspective offered by ecology and Ushioda’s relational view of motivation, I draw on the notion of *life capital*. I first introduced this concept in Consoli (2021a) and Consoli (2022a) where I referred to Bourdieu’s sociological reflexivity to argue for an epistemic lens that puts the spotlight on our individual life stories, and how these shape our teaching and learning behaviours. Through the notion of ‘life capital’, I therefore suggest a holistic research lens on the individual and their social practice(s). In (international) educational research, we often conceptualise phenomena through dichotomous categorizations, such as ‘social integration or isolation’, ‘good or bad performance’, ‘intercultural problems or successes’. These expressions represent some terminologies that have contributed to our sense-making of complex realities. As such, I do not intend to impugn the valuable empirical work accomplished by the community, but I do wish to suggest a novel research perspective that celebrates our humanity, acknowledging the unique trajectories of our participants’ stories. This way we may design and execute research projects with the intention of opening our eyes to humans’ life stories with a holistic view of these, rather than limiting our focus on “selected” phenomena and dimensions that are invariably dictated by our research agendas.

Although, as researchers, we will unfailingly have a selective view of our data and findings, by adopting the concept of life capital, we make the commitment to acknowledge our participants’ life stories, thereby doing greater justice to the idiosyncrasies that characterize the lives of the people we research. Therefore, embracing our participants’ life stories as part of our episteme means recognising the “idiosyncratic memories, emotions, dispositions, needs, and desires, to name but a few factors which constitute the complex essence of a human being” (Consoli, 2021a). In particular, life capital can be understood as:

a wealth which every person possesses, a wealth which can be understood through the richness of one’s life experiences. Life capital thus entails memories, desires, emotions, attitudes, opinions and these can be relatively positive or negative and explicit or concealed depending on how the individual manages, shares and employs their life capital. (Consoli, 2021a, p. 122)

The theoretical notion of life capital thus prompts us to understand how someone’s life experiences may shape their behaviour which, in turn, leads us to crystallize (Ellingson, 2009, 2014) our empirical findings (episteme) by combining these with the phronesis (practical life experience) of our participants. In the case of the present study, the concept of life capital becomes valuable to understand which aspects of these Chinese students’ lives contributed to the formation of their individual motivations to study at a UK university.

The study

This paper reports part of the findings from a larger study concerned with Chinese students’ motivations ($N=16$) as they prepared for and completed a postgraduate taught Master’s in Project and Programme Management at a Russell Group University in the Midlands. I first met these students in my capacity as writing tutor on the university pre-sessional — a course in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which helps international students

strengthen their academic skills to fully integrate into the English-speaking University and UK society. Whilst the study was concerned with charting these students' motivations to study and live in the UK from prior to their arrival and throughout their study abroad experience, this paper will focus exclusively on the motivational visions which drove these students' decision to leave China and study in the UK.

Research design

The research community has offered numerous insights to understand Chinese learners in western societies. However, within this rich research arena, there seems to be a pervasive etic perspective and a paucity of results yielded from an emic approach. Therefore, to address this lacuna, I adopted a 'small-lens' methodology (Ushioda, 2016). This means investigating motivation from a nuanced individual- and context-sensitive standpoint, with an eye to illuminating those aspects of motivation that may be lost by doing a study that selectively separates this complex phenomenon from its natural context(s) (e.g., the learner's vision and life experiences).

This small-lens methodology was possible in this study thanks to my dual identities — in the first phase of the study I was a practitioner researcher (Pinner & Sampson, 2021) in my capacity as the students' academic language tutor; in the second phase, I took a more 'traditional' researcher role (Barkhuizen, 2021) by doing narrative inquiry. Therefore, unlike previous investigations, that generally adopted a 'third-party' inquiry approach (Ushioda, 2020) with researchers being complete outsiders with minimal or no insights into the individual students' stories (Deucher, 2022), this paper proposes a more sharply focussed perspective on students' idiosyncratic worldviews and how these shape their motivations to leave mainland China to study in Britain.

Data collection

In the first phase of the study (i.e., during the academic English pre-session which lasted 6 weeks), I collected data through Exploratory Practice (Allwright, 2005), a form of practitioner research which consisted in adapting my teaching materials and procedures into data collection instruments whilst fulfilling the requirements of the academic programme. These classroom activities are called *Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities* (PEPAs) and in the findings (below), these will be referred to as *coursework*. Using this practitioner researcher methodology is conducive to implementing a 'small-lens' approach to researching motivation (Ushioda, 2016). This refers to the advantageous benefits of conducting research in my capacity as a teacher, being part and parcel of the students' community, creating our own pre-session 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999), and using my *teaching as research* (Hanks, 2019). Therefore, I was able to gain nuanced insights into these students' motivations that may be inaccessible to a third-party researcher who is a complete outsider and conducts data collection, usually through questionnaires or interviews, leaving the research site without much interaction with the classroom participants (see, Consoli 2022b for a detailed discussion of this practitioner research methodology).

After the end of the pre-session, I also collected data through 5 or 6 rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with each of these usually entailing the use of a moti-graph, i.e., a line graph where the students charted the highs and lows of their motivation at specific points in time (Chan, 2014). This second phase of data collection spanned across

the whole year of the master's programme these students undertook. Crucially, this second phase of the study benefited enormously from the rapport and teacher-students relationship established during this pre-sessional. I should note, however, that some ethical dilemmas emerged in this second phase. My transition from being the teacher to a more 'traditional' researcher role was not smooth; some students still saw me as a teacher figure and some even construed me as a friend. This meant that I had to navigate the new phase of the study very cautiously in order not to impose myself and my research agenda upon the students' already busy lives. For example, I ensured students understood that I would arrange our interview meetings around their academic schedule and that I would offer monetary compensation for their time. Some of them accepted this; others were more resistant to accepting money from me and I respected this. I also offered another form of compensation in the form of an academic tutorial at the end of each interview where they may bring forward any academic matters I could help with. Furthermore, at all times, I communicated that they may withdraw from the project without any repercussions. Only one student stopped attending interviews for lack of time, but all the others expressed a clear willingness to remain involved in the study. Some saw these interviews as opportunities to speak to me about their academic struggles and obtain some advice, others enjoyed the experience of being 'heard'. (See Consoli, 2021b for further details on these ethical debates.) Crucially, the good rapport established previously during the first phase was conducive to the students openly sharing their stories and views about their decision to study in Britain.

Data analysis

To analyse the data and ensure a nuanced 'small-lens' perspective of meanings, I drew on narrative analysis, 'a distinct mode of narrative inquiry in which storytelling plays a significant role in the analysis of data and reporting of findings' (Benson, 2018 p.598). In other words, this storytelling method consists in uncovering and weaving together story threads from multiple data sources and creating a unified and coherent story or stories (i.e., the findings).

I imported all the data from each student into the software MAXQDA and re-organised the data into coherent stories. This is what Barkhuizen (2011) calls 'narrative knowl- edging', the process whereby the researcher engages in "the meaning making, learning, or knowledge construction that takes place during the narrative research activities of (co) constructing narratives, analysing narratives, reporting the findings, and reading/watching/ listening to research reports". In short, I initially engaged in narrative analysis to turn the large, fragmented datasets collected longitudinally into coherent stories and then proceeded with analysis of these narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). The latter procedure thematically revealed the core findings to answer the following research question: *What was these Chinese students' motivation like prior to their arrival in the UK?* (For a fuller account of this analytical methodology see Consoli 2021c).

I now discuss the core factors that constituted these Chinese students' motivations prior to their arrival in the UK. I will support this discussion with data extracts from a variety of original data sources instead of the final narratives I wrote as part of the analysis process. This decision to only share data from the original sources e.g., the coursework completed during the pre-sessional and the interviews is dictated by the lack of space here, which would not allow me to illustrate the final narratives and, at the same time, develop a discussion that does justice to the meanings embedded in these narratives. Nonetheless, I should note here that drawing on a range of data sources emanating from different points in

time during the research project allowed me to understand the students' motivations from various angles, thereby including an appreciation of their own *early* motivations from different standpoints (i.e. early on when they first arrived, and throughout the course of the study with hindsight). This approach, aligning with the epistemological tenets of narrative inquiry, facilitated a crystallisation of meanings (Ellingson, 2009, 2014) and, ultimately, a complex examination of motivation. Crystallisation in this study was possible through combining the lenses of practitioner research and narrative inquiry to offer complementary insights into the same phenomenon. In this paper, for reasons of space, I will refer to four focal students, *Alita*, *David*, *Megan*, and *May*.

Findings and discussion

The UK as catalyst to become a better Self

All the student-participants showed signs of being driven by an 'imagined' future self, a self which, thanks to this UK experience, would develop into an improved, new version. Alita, for example, had nurtured a longstanding desire to study in the UK and discover her 'authentic self', a dream stemming from her professional life in China where she worked for 6 years and where she felt the inability to express fully her own opinions—see extract from interview-1:

Because I have worked for many years and sometimes you know in order to survive in the complicated workplace you cannot express your real opinion because this is only a job and you have to maybe hide yourself or maybe change a little bit your character to survive or to earn money. So sometimes I feel unhappy in my previous job and in here none knows me and I can become that person that I want to be. (...) Yes this is the reason I want to leave the hometown and study here. I want to learn the new culture (...) I want to broaden my horizons.

I wish to say here that my motivation to study at this university is mainly because I need to live my dream. I want to become a new me, able to use my authentic voice and express all my opinions. My desire is to broaden my vision and understand life through other perspectives. This way I can learn new ways of expressing myself in my future job.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

However, Alita trusted that in the UK she would acquire new skills and develop her 'authentic' voice, and ultimately, stop hiding who she was just to fit in society. What Alita describes here is the liberating sense of 'becoming an individual' which Ding (2009, p316) illustrates clearly with her participant, Huan, a Chinese postgraduate student who recognised the importance of expressing her own opinions and being able to do so to the extent of viewing her 'new' self in the UK as 'a person who likes to argue'. Significantly, Alita's disposition to voice her opinions so openly appears to go against the literature, which, perhaps sounding a little essentialist, continues to describe East Asian students as a homogenous category of people who lack agency and reflexivity (Moosavi, 2022).

In David's case, his sense of 'future self' was so strong that he could already envision the specifics of his future academic outcomes. In fact, despite the understanding that it may

be difficult for him to acquire the ‘western’ management methods during his UK Master’s and employ these in China upon his return, even before coming to Britain he had visualised doing a dissertation on how to encourage Chinese project managers to accept alternative approaches.

My dissertation topic it’s not decided yet but maybe I could study a way to motivate the project managers to accept the new advanced methods (...) after I come back to China I can’t say that I can change China or even I can’t say that I can change my company but at least I think that even when I become a project manager I would like to lead my team using some advanced methods.

(Interview-1)

My main reason to study in UK is that I want to learn from this prestigious university. I want to learn advanced methods of programme and project management and improve the ways in companies in China. Maybe I cannot change the way we do project planning and management but with my experience in this university I can go back to China offer my skills and try.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

On the other hand, Megan had imagined the UK as an environment where she would be able to concentrate on herself and learn new knowledge. Her expectation was that the UK would give her the opportunity to become a better self by ‘calming down’ from a busy life in China, and ‘learn things from a new angle’.

[name of University] is a quiet, peaceful place which is different from Beijing, a big city with a lot of noise and a lot of power, money and a lot of temptations [hmm what do mean by temptations?] I mean distractions you know that you can’t relax and always busy rushing but now I want to calm down and feel peaceful inside and really learn something and not be like people that are busy all the time. I think [name of university] can help me calm down and study something I really want.

(Interview-1)

My motivation to apply for this university and win my scholarship is that I want a new experience of life. I want a different experience that is not busy like in China. My desire is to to learn from the expert professors and the companies in the UK. (...) This experience help me to focus on myself and just my studies and build my future.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

These accounts of imagined selves in their future UK life echo Norton’s notions of identity and investment (e.g., Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). In other words, prior to their arrival in the UK, these students had made the choice of ‘investing’ themselves into this UK experience under the understanding that this would result in shifts or enhancement of their personal and professional identities. Relatedly, Ushioda (2009, p220) suggests a focus on the individual’s reflexive agency as a way to regulate their motivations. As discussed above, I operationalise Ushioda’s framework by taking inspiration from Bourdieu’s theory of capitals but departing from his sociological concern with class domination and associated notions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Instead, I highlight that each person’s story is unique and rich, and that this richness cannot solely be measured

or understood through the above notions of capital. ‘Life capital’, the symbolic wealth of experiences, concrete, envisioned and tangible dimensions of one’s life story, shape the individual’s behaviour. In the case of these students, their unique experiences in China coupled with specific desires for their future influenced their motivations. This perspective resonates with Marginson’s (2014) notion of international student’s ‘self-formation’ that highlights the complexity of an international student’s agency as this emerges and develops at the nexus of a reflexive and complex will for self-cultivation and self-improvement. Importantly, this agentic and reflexive self is continuously (re)modelled ‘in a shifting combination of (a) the given material conditions, including (b) the social relations in which the student is embedded and a partner in making, and (c) the agency freedom or active will of the student’ (p18).

Furthermore, this critical focus on a future ‘better’ self chimes with the social psychological concept of ‘possible selves’ developed by Markus and Nurius (1986). Possible selves represent the future form of one’s self-concept, namely a range of possible life trajectories resulting from the construal of possible future visions (e.g.: Dörnyei, 2020). Specifically, these refer to what an individual perceives to be likely (*probable self*), what they wish to become (*ideal self*), and the undesired possibilities (*feared self*). Critically, Harrison (2018) notes that the interplay between ideal and feared selves is vital to generate stronger motivation. This dynamic interaction between ideal and feared selves is, for example, illustrated by Alita’s desire to become her authentic self out the fear of stagnating in her job in China or David’s desire to develop advanced project management skills which he would propose in China where, he fears, less innovative methods are used.

Furthermore, students’ strong emphasis on professional development through the acquisition of academic skills reflects their concern about the competition in the Chinese labour market which is now measured in terms of ‘which level of university you graduated from’ and ‘whether your subject is popular in the job market’ (Sheng, 2017, p. 729). However, there is other literature that suggests that a purely instrumental perspective is insufficient in building a clear picture of Chinese students’ mobility, and that for many it is a way of self-realization in line with the increasingly dominant imaginaries of active and mobile individuals (Cebolla-Boad et al., 2018).

Pressures from the Chinese society

All participants in this study revealed that their choice to complete a postgraduate degree in the UK was largely influenced by the demanding Chinese labour market. For example, David desired an ‘office job’ but knew this would be challenging to secure in Beijing given the fierce competition and, therefore, a UK degree could help him stand out from the crowd.

In June I got my offer from the university and I became very excited you know my motivation gone up to the top (...) I had some working experience before I came to the UK but I am not quite satisfied with my work because you know my bachelor degree is about civil engineering so I had to spend my time on the construction site which you know the conditions are not good (...) so it’s a bit hard for me to work there (...) so I made a decision to spend some time on these studies and get a higher degree and that means erm I can get more chance to work in big enterprise(...)like in an office [ah so you want to work in an office] yeah I prefer an office [laughs] sitting in an office is much better than working on the construction site.

(Interview-1)

After spending some years of working experience in China I want to go up in the company. But I need to work hard and get a degree from a UK university so I can work in an office. (...) Many people in China have degrees from university but you need to really work hard if you want to work in a good business and have a good life.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

Similarly, having worked for three years as an architect, with a UK master's degree, Megan may be able to work in a higher position e.g., project manager.

The reasons of me to choose to study at [name of University] are quite simple. First of all, MSc is necessary for the future due to the fierce competition in the society. So the tertiary education is a plus for young person. Secondly, I will have more opportunity to get a higher position in a company after learning the methodologies of programme and project management, comparing to my past.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

I think erm it's so important for Chinese students to work hard and get a masters from a good university in the UK or the US...you know, it's like with so many people in China you must find ways to be better than others but there are so many people in for example Beijing is a such a big city with millions and millions of people, so you know if you want a chance to do better than them...you have to work hard and get a very good degree from the UK and learn new methods from professors here (...)

(Interview-2)

These students' accounts reflect the growing perception that studying at a post-secondary institution abroad is a valuable, if not essential, experience for Chinese students (e.g., Kettle, 2017). This is mainly because since 1999, the Chinese government has undertaken an unprecedented acceleration of HE expansion (Bai, 2006), thereby positioning tertiary education as a primary means of advancing social mobility (Mok & Marginson, 2021). However, this is not all good news because, as evidenced by the popular term *nèi juǎn* (in English 'involution'), this has led to a zero-sum competition for opportunities requiring ever-increasing investment, with many graduates feeling 'trapped' and desperate as a result of participating in this competition (Liu, 2021). In other words, a Chinese graduate may be viewed as more competitive if they possess an overseas degree rather than one from China. I certainly do not wish to argue that UK degrees are better than the Chinese counterparts; however, this study reinforces the trend of studying abroad due to the competitive society in China, highlighting for example, the need to enhance one's English in light of a significant labour market premium for proficiency in English.

There are, however, other reasons that guide students' choice to study abroad. For instance, in this study, Alita was a slightly different case because whilst she wished to broaden her horizons and embrace new opportunities, she wanted this more for her own intrinsic personal benefit than the external demands of professional competition. In fact, she highlighted that some people viewed her choice to quit her permanent job in China, at the age of 29, as irresponsible.

some people think that studying abroad at my age is not the correct thing to do because you cannot get a lot of output. (...) it means that memories and experiences are so important for my own life, I am not really keen about the results...you know sometimes the process and the experience and the culture I explore are more important. And maybe when I'm older I have a lot of the happy memories about this experience so this is important for me. But maybe for some other people well this is the worse thing to do. [the worse?] I mean that it is not worth to study abroad maybe for only the memories or only for the experiences. But you know in China (...) the people want to attain their goals. (...) a lot of the population face the fierce competition so, if you want to survive you must evaluate the value about everything that you do. (...) time is very precious and limited for everyone so people can think that my decision was a bad decision.

(Interview 2)

The pressure of leaving China was not just because you know when you lose your job at my age...you sometimes struggle to find another opportunity to settle down. But you know in China you must be attain your objectives and you also must marry before you are too old and you know it's not good for your family...but I am stronger and I want to explore my authentic self and this for me is the main reason I quit my job and my boyfriend in China

(Interview-3)

This would resonate with the argument that age is a crucial factor in China and plays a pivotal role in shaping young people's lives since the Chinese society may impose age and gendered norms, such as encouraging young women to settle down with a job before they turn 30 (Huang, 2012). However, despite being 29, Alita took the risk and left her job to study in the UK for her own personal joy. Her decision therefore seemed to disregard the consequences of *shèng nǚ*, or woman 'left on the shelf' to refer to unmarried Chinese women who spend too long in HE (Bamber, 2014).

This study therefore invites us to examine Chinese students' realities and experiences from an individual perspective to tease out the complexities and contradictions which may be overlooked through a broader dichotomous perspective of a 'normative' life course and 'alternatives' (Martin, 2018). Rather, we ought to question our views and positioning, finding a third space by deCentring our perceptions of 'Others' (Holliday, 2022) and, in this case, recognising the complexities and diversity within Chinese societies as well as the nuanced behaviour that may characterise 'young' Chinese people.

The role of Chinese parents

Societal pressure may not be the only external factor interacting with Chinese students' motivation to study in the UK. There are other influences which emanate from the home/family space, and which may have equally significant impact. One of these is the concept of filial piety or 孝 *xiào* (e.g., Yang, 1997). This value has important implications for the child-parent relationship throughout the lifetime of a Chinese person. It should be noted, however, that this longstanding dimension of Chinese culture in the twenty-first century varies according to different scholars in different contexts (e.g., Croll, 2006; Schans & de Valk, 2011; Tu, 2016). In broad terms, this means that there is a reciprocal relationship whereby parents will do anything to support their children and give them their best chance;

and, in return, children will repay with long-term love and obedience. In this light, a child must respect and honour their parents' choices and wishes (Ho, 1996) even if this means going against one's own desires (Li, 2001). Interestingly, however, only two students out of 16 in this investigation revealed that their motivation to study in the UK was subject to pressures or considerations emanating from the home sphere.

Alita considered herself 'brave' not only because she had the courage to quit her job despite what society may think, but also because she went against her mother who did not endorse her decision to study in the UK. Alita chose to prove herself, which, in turn, shows that her motivational force survived the emotional constraints from her mother and, importantly, the influential pressure of *xiào*.

parents have a strong influence over your choice to study abroad. I trust my mother but I still sometimes feel the need to fight against her opinion maybe because in her eyes I am still a baby erm so I need to prove myself all the time. But you know maybe she doesn't want to let me go because she will miss me when I'm in the UK, but my father was happy for me to go onto this adventure.

(interview 1)

Parents are a big influence on your choices in China. You have to follow your parents' wisdom and you must try not to disappoint them. So my mother was not happy with my choice to study in the UK. She thinks that I should stay in my company and build my life in China. However, my father supported my decision to coming to UK and start a new life to follow my dreams.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-3)

This finding indicates that these days Chinese young people do not necessarily follow long-established practices that may hamper their choices. Rather, this study suggests that we should remain open to the possibility of challenging 'traditional' or normative assumptions, by embracing alternative possibilities, such as Chinese young people upholding their own individuality. This finding aligns with the literature that has foregrounded the notion of 'individualization' in Chinese societies (e.g., Hansen & Svarverud, 2010), thereby pointing to a transformation of family relationships and responsibilities (Qi, 2015). Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, we ought to continue to investigate these phenomena from an individual perspective in order not to fall into the trap of generating yet another set of broad assumptions about the 'alternative' options Chinese young people may have (Martin, 2018). It is, therefore, critical to keep on questioning essentialist perspectives on Chinese students as 'passive' individuals who follow pre-determined 'norms' uncritically. Rather, it is time to delve into deeper understandings of the complexities that may characterise the life capitals (Consoli, 2021a; 2022a) undergirding these students' motivations and behaviours.

On the other hand, David's emotional pressure came from feeling sad about leaving home where he had his parents and close friends. He had even contemplated abandoning his plan of studying in the UK; a prospect that conflicted with the pressure concerning the substantial financial investment his parents had already made for his career.

I have my friends and family back home in China. But, because I can't go all the way because the travel is too long, I almost feel I don't want to go to the UK anymore. My friends and family are home, and I am worried I miss them so much and being away for all

this time. However, my parents have spent so much money on my education to support me and I don't want to disappoint them.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-1)

This finding supports the above-mentioned notion of *xiào* whilst also resonating with other international students who feel pressure because of the financial support received from their parents. This may lead to a form of anxiety over the possibility of disappointing the family in case of failure in the overseas academic experience. I suggest that it is important to open up the dialogue about the anxieties that students in a similar position may experience due to (self?) imposed pressure, which, in turn, may indeed jeopardise their motivation to make a major decision like studying abroad. It is therefore imperative that host universities put in place mechanisms of support to offer guidance over emotional matters of this kind, among others, in a way to support students as they embark upon this unique path of 'self-formation' (Marginson, 2014). Universities usually offer personal tutors for academic purposes, but this study would suggest the need to bolster the support for students' psychological wellbeing, especially in relation to the complexity of facing a new reality of 'hybridity' where their traditional norms and practices enmesh with the international education experiences (Rizvi, 2005). Crucially, making prospective students aware of the provision of this kind of professional help on campus or on-line, through the university's website or specific department webpages, may significantly help those students facing similar dilemmas at the time of making the decision to study abroad.

Picking a specific UK university

If we move beyond the macro-motivation for choosing to study at an English-speaking university and examine the individual reasons for picking a specific institution, we obtain a more nuanced understanding of what makes a UK HE provider appealing. This understanding is particularly relevant for a globalised world where English-medium instruction at higher degree level is now offered by both English-speaking and non-Anglophone countries (e.g., Liu & Liu, 2021). The main factors, which emerged from this study, concern the content of the Master's programme, the university reputation, and its geographical location. All participants expressed an interest in the core subject of programme and project management. For instance, Megan valued the Master's focus on practice and soft skills, which, in her opinion, are sought-after by Chinese employers.

This MSc provides practical experiences like internship and this university is more practical and a taught degree is not research so it is nearer to the companies, but other universities were more play [ah what do you mean by 'more play' at other universities?] people in other institutions work less hard than at this university [what makes you say that?] a lot of people like say this on WeChat group.
(Interview-1)

Also soft skills are harder to get than subjects like mathematics, physics and [this university] seems more practical and can give me these skills plus has a relatively high ranking in the world so this means that after finishing here and gaining these skills I can do whatever I want.

(Interview-2)

David thought that combining his background in engineering with this new subject would make him a successful project manager.

My bachelor's degree is in civil engineering so being a postgraduate student in programme and project management gives me a good chance to broaden my sight and strengthen my understanding of how a programme actually works. (...) my bachelor is focused on construction projects and the methods of construction, but in every industry or company there is a need for programme and management project (...) studying at this university will help me achieve my goal.

(Interview-2)

May thought this specific Master's would give her the technical skills, which, together with her previous teaching experience, may help her set up an educational business.

This department they have external teachers who run their own business and maybe I could learn from a real case and learn how to deal with a reality case (...) and I lacked this experience from before as I only studied and worked as part-time teacher (...) but if you can combine together teaching skills and management skills and maybe you can build your own education company (...) so I chose [name the University] because I could learn practical skills here.

(Interview-2)

These accounts illustrate the importance attached to the specific course content and the desirable professional impact. All participants highlighted an interest in the university's international reputation. For instance, Megan thought that by graduating from a well-respected university, she would become a well-rounded person able to succeed in any aspect of her future career.

I prefer this course in the UK because of the high reputation of the university and this means that you can obtain high competitive skills (...) and the companies prefer those who study overseas rather the students studying in mainland china [ahh] yes it means that even though my English isn't very good I can communicate with you [English speaker] better than the people who study in China and it means that when I go back I can enter international company and during my work I must be more confident than the students who study in China even though their English is good...but because I study here I feel more confident.

(Interview-1)

The reputation of [name of the university] is an important factor for me. I know that companies in China really prefer students who study in overseas universities with good or excellent international rankings. This means that you learn from the best and when you go back to China you have good chances of getting a good job because you have stronger skills and better knowledge than those who study in China.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-3)

David saw the university's reputation as a sign of quality that resonated with his desire of learning about what he deemed as 'western advanced methods of management'.

The UK is a developed country and the management methods here is much better than China (...) in China the project managers don't like advanced management methods but the old-fashioned methods works well, but I don't like that because I think that innovation is much more important so, if you use the advanced management methods to manage a project maybe it works much better than the old-fashioned way...the project managers in China don't realise that but I believe it will make things better, that's why I came to the UK to learn management methods.

(Interview-1)

I am happy to study in the UK in [name of the university] because here I can learn a lot from the professors in this prestigious university. In China, you learn old-fashioned ways to do project and programme management because it's safe and it works. But I think we need to invest in new advanced methods of management and planning. In [name of the university] we can learn from prestigious professors who have industry experience in big UK companies and international businesses. Maybe China needs to learn from people like me that study abroad and can bring these skills back home.

(Extract from coursework-Preessional-week-3)

This finding supports Kettle's (2017) argument that, given the growing provision on the international HE landscape, students now choose in accordance with the quality of the university, reflected on national and international university rankings. Furthermore, this view resonates with Copland et al.'s (2017) study, which underlined the importance students ascribe to the university's international reputation as well as the prestige of the specific prospective course content and relevant teaching staff. This is also in line with Cebolla-Boado et al.'s (2018) finding that Chinese students are well aware of the different rankings such as Times Higher Education, The Guardian, QS, and Shanghai rankings to establish which university is 'better' than another. Interestingly, though, this finding contrast with Yu et al.'s (2023) suggestion that the university prestige is no longer a priority for Chinese students. This might be because the students in Yu et al.'s study were all from non-Russell Group universities whilst the ones in this study all attended a top-ranked UK institution. In other words, despite some discourses suggesting that the relationship between university reputation and international students recruitment is not consequential (Soysal et al., 2022), students still clearly care about where a degree is obtained (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017).

Overall, this study indicates that some universities would naturally enjoy better reputation than others and be more likely to attract international students. However, even less 'prestigiously' positioned institutions can bolster their profile if they outline the specific qualities and the staff profiles that make their degrees unique and of great value for prospective students. This would need to go beyond broad discourses of success and future work opportunities which most, if not all, institutions already promote through marketing strategies. Therefore, by clearly promoting the degree-specific advantages attached to an academic programme (e.g., core activities, teaching and learning methodologies, and unique expertise of their staff), prestigious universities may enhance their profiles even more whilst institutions with a less appealing ranking may articulate their worth to hesitant prospective students.

Conclusion

Current research on international students in HE needs ‘re-animating’ (Deuchar, 2022) because most studies on international students have tended to focus on *deficit* experiences of these students *during* their study abroad and have usually arrived at these findings through large-scale research perspectives, thus giving little to no space to students’ actual voices and *individual* worldviews. Significantly, most studies about international students often conflate into one category students from a range of nationalities and cultural heritage, and those which focus specifically on Chinese students have normally targeted the USA or Australia as contexts. Furthermore, the few studies about Chinese students in the UK have revealed limited discussions about motivation. This is because most investigations have primarily focused on other issues such as English use for social and academic purposes (Copland & Garton, 2010; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000), adaptation/adjustment (Wu & Hammond, 2011), and cultural differences (Busher et al, 2016), therefore confining motivation to peripheral discussions. With this paper, however, I have offered more nuanced students’ perspectives and responded to recent calls for qualitative approaches to the study of international students in HE (Page & Chabboun, 2019).

This study reinforces previous literature’s suggestions that international students opt to study in an English-speaking country to gain a professionally competitive edge (e.g., Kettle, 2017). However, this paper also highlights that other personal forces may be at play which, in turn, could challenge often-reported assumptions about Chinese people. Alita, for instance, disregarded the concept of *shèng nǚ* by leaving a permanent job in China (at the age of 29) to pursue her dream to ‘discover her better self’. This echoes Marginson’s (2014) concept of self-formation in international education, but this study clearly unpacks some of the complexities within each individual case (Martin, 2018). Moreover, whilst this study supports previous literature in suggesting that Chinese students may feel some form of pressure from their parents, previous studies have usually offered superficial, at times stereotypical, indications of this phenomenon, thereby failing to delve into the particulars of this ‘pressure’. Thanks to its methodological ‘small lens’ approach, this study shares a more nuanced understanding of the web of factors which entangle with the feeling of pressure emanating from the parental figures. As such, the idea that parents are a source of pressure or anxiety needs further elaboration in relation to other possible internal and external forces which stem from the students’ life capitals (Consoli, 2021a; Consoli, 2022a).

Finally, this paper suggests that the international reputation of the university and the specific course along with the unique staff expertise may act as strong motives to choose one university rather than another. This finding seems to contradict some recent literature suggesting that students no longer care so much about university prestige (e.g., Yu et al, 2023), which is why future studies that take a ‘small lens’ methodology may be needed. This study reveals clearly the specific factors that characterise university reputation from the students’ perspectives; i.e. moving away from the traditional focus on rankings and looking at the specifics of the programme content and the expertise of individual faculty members. This is particularly important at a time when UK universities rankings are going down and the UK’s standing in the wider HE arena may be overshadowed by the USA, still occupying a top place, as well as new destinations that may increase such competition (Soysal & Cebolla-Boado, 2020).

In sum, the small-scale approach in this study, based upon a longstanding teacher-researcher-student-participants relationship, points to the sheer diversity in the makeup of

students' motivations and, therefore, invites us to investigate students' perspectives through ecologically relevant methodologies like practitioner research and narrative analysis. These 'small-lens' approaches will help us cater for and reveal the worldviews and visions embedded within students' life capitals which might otherwise be ignored or remain underrepresented.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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