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## **Fighting Against Risks and Uncertainties: Chinese University Students' Decision-Making About Study Abroad Under COVID-19**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Building on a theoretical model of decision-making under risk and uncertainty, this paper examines how Chinese college students made decisions about international mobility or immobility during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon interviews with 118 college graduates, the paper finds that most interviewees still prioritized to study abroad, whilst some students as recipients of offers from prestigious Western universities preferred home graduate schools or prioritised employment. We further analysed the divergent patterns of two choices which can be explained by resilience to risks and uncertainties. For those who have given up studying abroad, the symbolic capital and labor market advantages brought by degrees (especially Master degrees) from prestigious Western universities have offset by the risk of the COVID-19. These findings suggest that, in addition to safety, college students will prefer certainty more than before when debating about study abroad opportunities, and the study abroad landscape may change based on this mindset.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, studying abroad, undergraduates, China, risk

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International student mobility (ISM) is among the most visible aspects of the internationalization of higher education, and it has caught much research attention since the 1980s (Altbach, 1989). However, the global COVID-19 outbreak has posed a huge challenge to ISM. Following the outbreak, universities have faced tremendous pressure to respond to the challenge, with international teachers and

students leaving (Peters et al., 2020). The challenges posed by COVID-19 may even reshape the higher education system (Sá & Serpa, 2020).

In addition, the effects of COVID-19 on the cross-border movement of college students, especially when superimposed on changes in international relations and the rise of new nationalism, are worth exploring as their consequences become complicated (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). In this context, students who choose to study abroad may face unprecedented risks in terms of difficulty obtaining visas, delays in their studies, racial discrimination, and threats to their safety (Ma & Zhang, 2021).

China is not only the world's largest provider of international students but also one of the first countries to experience the outbreak of the COVID-19. Therefore, research on the changes in Chinese college students' decision to study abroad is of great significance for understanding the future trend of international college students' mobility globally (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Several studies assessed the possible effects of COVID-19 on studying abroad after the outbreak. The QS 2020 survey reported that 66% of Chinese students surveyed had changed their plans to study abroad because of the pandemic (QS, 2020). In another survey, 76% of the surveyed universities stated that their enrollment of Chinese students had been affected (Martel, 2020). However, our interviews with college graduates who intend to go abroad do not match this pessimistic prediction. We found that although some students gave up their plans to go abroad and even gave up studying abroad after getting an offer, most students still insist on studying abroad in the context of the epidemic. Official Statistics for Chinese universities also show that the impact of the epidemic on studying abroad is mixed. According to statistics released by Chinese universities, compared with 2018, the proportion of college graduates from Tsinghua University going abroad decreased from 26.3% to 14.9% in 2020, while that of the University of Science and Technology of China decreased from 27.8% to 15.2%. However, some universities, such as Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Shanghai International Studies University, maintained similar proportions (Qingta, 2020).

Under the conditions of the COVID-19, Chinese college students' decision to go abroad has differentiated at both the individual and institutional levels. We believe this differentiation needs to be understood in terms of attitudes towards risk and uncertainty. Under the pandemic turmoil, college students have faced a series of risks and uncertainties when making decisions about studying abroad, such as whether they can obtain a visa, whether they can successfully reach host countries, whether their overseas degree will be recognized in the labor market if they switch to online courses, and so on. COVID-19 has also brought psychological consequences to college students, making them anxious and uneasy (Cao et al., 2020). We argue that the pandemic is a natural experiment that provides a good window onto study-abroad decision-making under risk and uncertainty, which can supplement the research on decision-making about studying abroad under normal circumstances. Under the epidemic conditions, why do some students choose to continue to study abroad while others give up opportunities and offers to study abroad? How do they perceive the risks and uncertainties of studying abroad, and make decisions about mobility or

immobility accordingly? What are the factors that would influence their decisions? The answers to these questions are significant to our understanding of the dynamics of international student mobility, and will theoretically enrich the research on decision-making about studying abroad (Dimmock & Ong Soon Leong, 2010).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Educational decision-making involves assessment of a variety of factors including the rationale of university, the fields of study, types of universities, employment and social benefits of university education (Moogan et al,1999; Becker & Hecken,2009). Most research on college students' studying abroad focuses on their decision-making about country destinations and university choice (Bodycott,2009; Kim,2011; Sidhu & Ishikawa,2022). Although some other studies analyze college students' decision of international mobility or immobility, these studies mainly focus on college students' intention and motivation to go abroad, rather than the real choice between going abroad and giving up going abroad (Maringe & Carter,2007; Li et al,2013; Wu,2014; Lörz et al,2016). With very few exceptions, existing research rarely addresses the choice between domestic and foreign higher education institutions, or between continuing studying abroad and giving up studying abroad, because studies on ISM assume that studying abroad is more rewarding than staying at home, such as bringing higher income, gaining Higher-quality education, and opportunities for immigration (Findlay et al, 2017; Du et al, 2021). Lehmann & Trower (2018) pointed out that travel habitus during adolescence would prompt college students to decide to take part in study exchanges. Brooks & Waters (2009) found that some British students will apply to the Ivy League in the United States to get a second chance of success after being unable to enter local prestigious universities such as Oxbridge. Different from the findings of Brooks & Waters (2009), some of our interviewees chose to give up after being offered opportunities to study in prestigious universities such as the Ivy League. We believe that this decision-making requires a new theoretical explanation.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, its effect quickly attracted the attention of higher education researchers, especially researchers in the ISM field. The existing research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility has focused on two issues. The first issue pertains to the effects of the pandemic on the international students' learning experiences. The second pertains to the effects of the pandemic on their choice to move. Our literature review will focus on the second issue. In terms of the effects of the pandemic on the students' international mobility choices, the taken-for-granted positivity of the student mobility experience has been replaced by risk and uncertainty (Cairns et al., 2021). The first risk faced by students who intend to move is safety and health issues, which became particularly important when families and students make decisions about international mobility (Marginson, 2020). For some students, safety rather than university ranking has become the primary consideration when choosing a destination (Yu, 2021). Based on the considerations, some studies have

made pessimistic predictions that student mobility numbers will drop rapidly or that immobility may occur (Cairns et al., 2021; Lim, 2020). A study of interviews with 22 Kazakhstan students found that one-third of the participants gave up offers from foreign universities and chose to stay in domestic universities (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2022). Some scholars have predicted that neighboring East Asian regions will become the first choice for students from mainland China (Mok et al., 2021). However, Buckner et al. (2021) determined that the dominance of English and the high-quality U.S. educational system have not changed in the wake of COVID-19, so the United States will still maintain its dominant position in the global student mobility market.

Peters et al. (2021) focused on the effect of Brexit on international student mobility, with the decrease in the number of international students from the EU providing more opportunities for Chinese students. However, they also noted that, for economic and pandemic reasons, international students will have difficulty finding ideal jobs and staying in the United Kingdom or the United States, which will lead to a decreasing number of international students, and they may choose other non-traditional countries instead.

In sum, previous studies have assessed the possible effects of the pandemic on international student mobility. More Chinese students will stay in East Asia than before to study abroad, consistent with the regional trend of studying abroad in Europe. Scholars have also investigated the students' willingness or intention to study abroad after COVID-19 using survey data (Mok et al., 2021). However, several gaps in the existing research still need to be filled. First, current research on the impact of COVID-19 on study abroad decisions is either based on non-empirical speculation or analysis of intentions. Moreover, these studies do not touch on real choice between mobility and immobility (Peters et al., 2021; Mok et al., 2021). Second, an analysis of how students at Chinese universities have made decisions about studying abroad after the outbreak of COVID-19 has also been limited. Third, foreign degrees as institutionalized cultural capital have high symbolic value and can be converted to advantages in the labor market, which has become an important factor for students in choosing to study abroad (Du et al., 2021; Xiang & Shen, 2009). However, the pandemic has increased the risks and uncertainties of studying abroad. How will students weigh the risks and possible rewards of studying abroad is a question worth studying.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: STUDY ABROAD DECISION- MAKING MODEL UNDER RISK AND UNCERTAINTY**

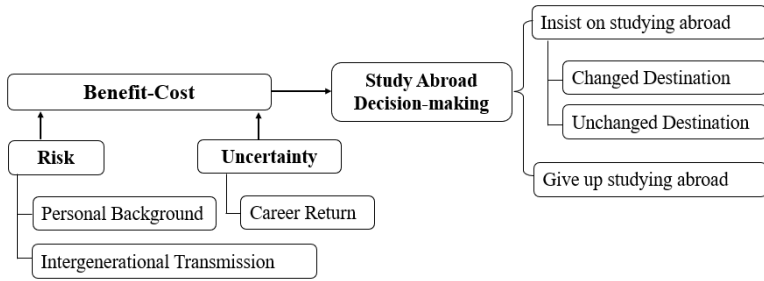
The push-pull model dominates research on Study Abroad Decision-making for many years. McMahon (1992) used the push-pull theory to analyze the flow of students from the third world to world higher education centers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) further crystallized the push-pull theory arguing that the process of international students choosing study destinations involves at least three different stages. In the first stage, students must decide whether to study abroad rather than stay, which can be influenced by a number of "push" factors within their home country. In the second stage, "pull" factors

become more important, so that a destination country becomes more attractive relative to competing countries. In the third stage, students choose a university in the destination country, and a particular institution is favored by students because of various additional "attractions". These factors include the reputation, market profile, curriculum scope, teaching plan, and so on. The "push-pull" model is the most widely adopted theoretical model for the students' decision-making to study abroad (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, this model has limitations. On the one hand, it does not account for individuals' backgrounds and perceived goals, which can be quite diverse (Lee et al., 2006; Van Mol, 2021). Therefore, the push-pull theory cannot explain at the individual level why some people choose to study abroad and others choose not to do so. On the other hand, it places student mobility within a set of "pre-calculated choices and preferences" (Lipura & Collins, 2020) that do not encompass unforeseen possibilities, e.g., COVID-19 epidemic. These limitations made it difficult to explain the study abroad decision-making process (Kim et al., 2018).

In recent years, some studies have tried to overcome the limitations of the push-pull model and included individual factors such as habitus, planned behavior, imagination of geography, and personality characteristics to analyze college students' decision to study abroad (Presley et al, 2010 ;Beech, 2014; Lehmann & Trower, 2018) Li et al (2013) pointed out that novelty-seeking personality (including likely to take risks) plays a role in students' study abroad intention but they do not elaborate on risks. We argue that under the background of the epidemic, college students will pay more attention to the assessment of risks and the certainty of the return of studying abroad when making decisions about whether to study abroad.

Risks and uncertainties are encountered in most aspects of everyday life, from the insignificant and trivial to the deeply serious (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Migration is informed by risk and uncertainty whether for migrants, non-migrants in sending communities, or populations in the destination countries. Studying abroad as a form of migration is inevitably accompanied by various risks and uncertainties, which has been neglected in previous theory about the decision-making of studying abroad (King & Raghuram, 2013). To fill this gap, we propose a theoretical model of study abroad decision-making under risk and uncertainty (Figure 1).

According to Becker and Hecken (2009), people consider costs, benefits, and risks simultaneously when making educational decisions. Leaving familiar cultural environments and social networks, and entering unfamiliar ones are necessarily embedded with risk and uncertainty (Williams & Baláz, 2014). We argue that in the context of the COVID-19, students must assess the possible risks and uncertainties and weigh the benefits and costs of studying abroad.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Study-Abroad Decision-Making Under Risk and Uncertainty**

**Risk and Uncertainty**

Although the terms risk and uncertainty are often interchangeable, they have various connotations (Williams & Baláz, 2012). The former one represents known things, e.g., risk of COVID-19 infection, whereas the latter one means unknown things, e.g., the following influence brought from the infection. We live in an era of global “Risk Society” with a high degree of uncertainty and complexity (Beck, 1992). Faced by international students, COVID-19 represents risk and uncertainty, i.e., a natural risk, followed by uncertainties resulting from policies and institutional environments.

**Benefit-Cost Analysis**

Undergraduate students who decide to study abroad tend to make decisions based on the calculation of costs and benefits. The goal of studying abroad as an investment in global human capital is to obtain higher returns (Zweig et al., 2004).

First, the benefits include expected improvement in skills and qualifications, increased income from better employment opportunities, and cultural experiences.

Second, the costs comprise direct and indirect costs spent to study abroad. The direct costs include the cost of studying abroad (e.g., tuition, transportation, and accommodation). The indirect costs include changing the living and working environment, ceding the opportunity to study in the home country, reconstructing social networks, and changing career paths.

The students’ assessment of the risks and uncertainties involved in studying abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic affects their measurement of the benefits and costs of mobility and ultimately determines their decision.

**Risk Perception**

The students’ risk perception affects their decisions. Risk-averse individuals are more inclined to move (Dohmen et al., 2012). An analysis of internal mobility in the German labor market has shown that attitudes toward risk largely explain

mobility propensity after controlling factors such as age, education, and marriage (Jaeger et al., 2010).

The students' risk perception is influenced mainly by social backgrounds and could be intergenerationally transmitted. Parents who are willing to take risks tend to raise children with similar traits (Dohmen et al., 2012). Thus, students with well-educated parents and better economic conditions tend to be more willing to accumulate international educational mobility experiences earlier and take greater risks in studying abroad (Dohmen et al., 2005; Gerhards & Hans, 2013; Salisbury et al., 2009).

Under the context of COVID-19, the students' perceptions on risk (e.g., safety and health risks) is influenced by their parents. For instance, parents from privileged social classes and good educational backgrounds tend to be optimistic, inclining to persuade their children to continue studies abroad.

### **Anticipation of Uncertainty**

The uncertainty faced by international students has also increased. The career benefits of studying abroad have become uncertain, as competition in the domestic labor market intensifies, despite one study showing that studying abroad results in better career returns (Du et al., 2021). In response to uncertainty, the students' psychological capital, particularly positive psychological competencies such as confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience, is particularly important (Luthans et al., 2006). Students who are resilient and optimistic are likely to persist in their decision to study abroad.

## **DATA AND ANALYSIS METHOD**

This study adopted qualitative inquiry, which can help researchers explore people's perceptions of specific sociocultural activities and phenomena (Merriam, 2016). From August 2020 to May 2022, we interviewed 118 college graduates of Chinese universities. These interviewees mainly came from China's 985 Project and 211 Project universities where Chinese undergraduates studying abroad are mainly concentrated in (Author, 2017). The content of the interviews comprised the interviewees' international mobility experiences, undergraduate education experiences, motivations for studying abroad, application processes for going abroad, and perceptions of the pandemic and the international situation.

Participant recruitment was conducted using snowball sampling. This study had two rounds of interviewees. The first round of interviewees was classmate known to the researchers or recruited through the WeChat and other relevant forums. This study asked the first round of interviewees to recruit additional respondents to participate in the study and was referred to as the second round of interviewees. We established contact with interviewees through WeChat and emails. After informed consent was obtained, interviews were conducted face-to-face or via WeChat voice calls, Tencent meetings, and so on. The interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes. Each interview was recorded with the interviewees' consent. The interview recordings were manually transcribed.

After completing the data collection, this study employed a mixed approach of qualitative methods, combining a data-driven inductive approach with a deductive (a priori) code template approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this way, researchers were able to capture themes that emerged directly from the raw data, while being able to examine the data using analytical models (see Figure 1) constructed by the research team. All authors of this paper were involved in the data analysis. The authors examined and discussed the results of the analysis through group meetings to minimize bias and increase the credibility of the data analysis.

Participants in this study included undergraduates who would graduate in 2020, 2021 and 2022, that is, students who had started to apply to go abroad in the second half of 2019 (before the full outbreak of the pandemic) and in the second half of 2020 and 2021 (after the full outbreak of the pandemic). The respondents' majors covered the humanities and arts, social sciences, economics and management, nature science, engineering, and medicine. Our interviewees could be divided into four groups: those who are studying abroad physically or taking online classes (63.6%); those who have deferred enrollment (2.5%); those who are applying (16.9%), and those who have ceded the opportunity to study abroad and had decided to study or work in mainland China (16.9%). Around 84.7% of the respondents had applied to Master's programs overseas, while 15.3% had applied to doctorate programs (Table 1).

**Table 1: Participants background characteristic**

Characteristics		n	%
Gender	Male	46	38.9
	Female	72	61.1
Type of University	985 Project universities	77	65.2
	211 Project universities	30	25.4
	Others	11	9.3
Majors	Humanities and arts	24	20.3
	Social sciences	24	20.3
	Economics and management	26	22.0
	Nature Sciences	29	24.6
	Engineering	12	10.7
	Medicine	3	2.5
Categories	Studying abroad physically or taking online classes	75	63.6
	Defer	3	2.5
	Applying	20	16.9
	Give up	20	16.9
N		118	
Destinations	American	31	31.6
	Britain	18	18.4
	Continental Europe	9	9.2



	Australia	2	2.0
	Singapore	2	2.0
	Hong Kong, China	6	6.1
	Japan	10	10.2
	Undecided	20	20.4
Degree to pursue	Master	83	84.7
	Doctoral	15	15.3
N		98	

## FINDINGS

### **“As Long as I Can Go Out, I Still Want to Go Abroad”: Cost and Benefit of Learning Abroad Under COVID-19**

Among the 118 interviewees, only 20 chose not to study abroad, while the remaining chose to study abroad despite the pandemic. They planned to continue their studies through local online courses, cross-border online courses, deferred enrollment, change of destination countries, transfer to Chinese–foreign cooperatively-run schools, and so on. Some had been forced to suspend their study-abroad programs due to objective factors such as the status of the pandemic overseas and restrictions on studying abroad, but they were prepared to restart their study-abroad programs when the situation improved and visa restrictions were relaxed.

We found that the students’ willingness to study abroad was not reduced significantly. In their opinion, the benefits brought by studying abroad were still far greater than the cost.

First, they recognized the important role of studying abroad in enhancing individual competitiveness in the labor market, broadening international horizons, and enriching personal experience. One interviewee (computer science, No. 4) who chose to defer for a year after getting three offers, said: “I have planned to get a bachelor’s degree in China and then go abroad to study as a graduate student.” For him, experiencing a different life in a foreign country is an important part of his life plan. Therefore, when he knew that he might not be able to go abroad because of visa tightening and campus closure, he unhesitatingly decided to gap for a year, hoping to go abroad in the next year.

Second, for the undergraduates from top universities that we interviewed, the elite status that they gained through domestic elite universities needed to be consolidated further through international mobility. They try to achieve the transition from the top universities in China to global leading universities to attain distinction. A top university undergraduate who applied to Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, and other prestigious universities stated bluntly when asked why he was considering only “super universities”: “If this university is not better than my university, why should I go?”

Third, from the perspective of academic career-oriented students, despite the rising rankings of Chinese universities, they still fail to rank among the world’s academic centers. Thus, students were still willing to risk studying abroad. As one

interviewee who enrolled in a master program of Cornell University shared, “China and the U.S. are at the center in the field of information technology, both in research and industry. The only threat to the United States is China, but the gap is huge. China is the second, so I think going to the U.S. is the only option.”

Lastly, for those students who chose to study abroad for a Master’s degree and hoped to return to their country for a non-academic career, a foreign degree still had a high symbolic value. These students were more concerned with the symbolic value of a degree from an elite foreign university and the labor market advantages that it brings. Online study abroad has become common because of the pandemic. In our interviews, nearly half of the interviewees participated or partly participated in the online courses. One interviewee who enrolled in an Ivy League university was taking online courses at home stated that she could accept online classes throughout her postgraduate years, as long as her degree was accredited by the Ministry of Education in China. For these students, the diploma was more important than the full overseas experiences. However, there were also some interviewees who still believed that the overseas experience was essential and postponed their enrolment.

Some students did not give up studying abroad because they had already invested plenty of time, money, and energy. They had incorporated studying abroad into their plans early on and made a series of preparations, such as looking for an agency, consulting teachers and senior students, learning English, completing an internship, working on a summer research project, contacting overseas supervisors, and so on. These were sunk costs that they had already paid. Driven by the tendency to continue the endeavor once the investment has been made, they decided to go all the way down the road despite current difficulties. “It’s too expensive. Including the previous efforts to study abroad for these standardized tests, the cost is too large. I can’t afford (to quit)” (University of California, Berkeley, Master of Materials Science and Engineering, No. 5).

The students who applied in 2019 and graduated in 2020 were the most vulnerable group in the face of the pandemic. The outbreak occurred after they had already submitted their applications. At that time, they had already ceded the opportunity for postgraduate recommendation and postgraduate entrance examination in China, and also missed the autumn job recruitment. In this case, their only choice may be to study abroad. In the face of the risks and uncertainties brought by the pandemic, respondents still maintained a strong desire to go abroad, exhibiting a general mentality of “As long as I can go out, I still want to go out.”

### **Calculations of Risks and Uncertainties and Choice of Studying Abroad**

Several risk and uncertainty factors emerged due to the effects of the pandemic, including overseas campus closures, tightening of visa requirements, uncontrollable risk of viral infection, unstable job opportunities, tensions between countries, and rising anti-China sentiment abroad. These factors were among those that the interviewees considered when deciding whether to study abroad.

Students who still chose to study abroad after rational calculation tend to have high risk awareness and resilience to resist risks. Students with strong risk

resilience are generally from advantaged backgrounds, have positive psychological capital and have gone abroad previously. They generally felt a strong sense of control over the future, and they were not worried about future employment prospects. Most of the students who stuck to studying abroad came from advantaged backgrounds. They were less sensitive to the economic costs of studying abroad.

“My mom is a housewife, while my dad is a general manager in a company. They had already saved an amount of money for me to study abroad. They hope that I could go overseas to experience Western culture and improve my language skills” (University of Pennsylvania, Master of Education, No.31)

At the same time, they exhibited a positive psychological state, being more resilient, self-confident, optimistic, and hopeful than those who ceded going abroad when facing future uncertainty (Luthans et al., 2007). This showed that the students’ risk and uncertainty perception were related to their social class and accumulated psychological capital.

“I’m still gonna go, because I won’t start school until next September. I guess the pandemic will be much better then. The virus will be relatively mild in summer. There may be vaccines or better prevention and control measures in the future. I still think that when I re-enroll next year, it will not be as severe as it is now.” (University of Glasgow, Master of Finance, No. 37)

Previous international mobility experience enhanced the interviewees’ resilience to risks. Among the students in STEM fields, many of them had made research visits abroad during the summer vacation at the end of their junior year. This mobility experience played an important role in many interviewees’ intentions to study abroad and their choice of destination countries and host supervisors. Students who have traveled abroad or participated in exchanged programs are more likely to stick to studying abroad because they have a clearer understanding of their study destination.

“I have been to many overseas study camps when I was a child, to visit schools in different countries, to travel and so on. I went to a summer school in Oxford during the summer vacation of my sophomore year. I also went to an exchange program at Columbia University in my junior year. I felt that I was quite used to the Western university atmosphere” (The London School of Economics and Political Science, Master of Media and Communications, No. 32)

### **“I Can’t Take This Risk”: Reasons for Giving Up Studying Abroad**

Among the 118 students that we interviewed, 20 students (16.9%) chose to give up studying abroad. Among the 20 college students, 19 have obtained offers from prestigious universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Singapore, including Yale University, University of Chicago, Cornell University, Oxford University, University College London and other world leading universities. But why is this the case?

First, the risk caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and respondents’ perception of the risk were important reasons to give up studying abroad. Among the 20 students who had given up on their plans to study abroad, they all mentioned the

effects of the COVID-19 situation on their decision-making process. One of our interviewees told us that, while preparing to study abroad, she was also preparing for the national post-graduate entrance examination, and finally chose to give up the overseas offers after she passed the examination.

“In May or June 2020, the pandemic abroad was severe at that time, and I talked with my parents. They suggested that I not go abroad. I thought about it myself and decided that studying abroad is indeed a bit risky at this time.” (Master’s program in China, No. 91)

We also found that students from different social classes had different perceptions of the risks and uncertainties in the process of studying abroad. Students from middle-class families tended to pay more attention to whether the sunk cost they had spent on studying abroad could obtain corresponding returns. After paying much capital and investing much time, they hoped to accumulate symbolic capital through studying abroad so that they could gain an advantage in the job market in the future. Once they believed that the investment of studying abroad could not be balanced with future returns, they were very likely to give up.

“Well, I am not very optimistic about the employment competitiveness when I come back. Except for the Ivy League in the United States or the G5 in the UK, it is quite difficult to obtain a more promising job if I study abroad. Besides, the internship experience is quite hard to gain when students are studying abroad. However, if I am here in China, there is always a way to accumulate internship experiences. So, I finally chose to quit the application to study abroad.” (Master’s program, International Politics, No. 39)

Second, in terms of university ranking and research capacity, the gap between China and other developed countries has considerably narrowed in the most recent decade (Yang, 2017), which explains in part the students’ abandonment of studying abroad. Some of our interviewees believed the quality and international impact of higher education in China are rapidly rising and that those who go abroad for postgraduate study are no longer the best students. This view is consistent with the findings of earlier studies on Korean students studying abroad (Kim, 2011).

“The academic level and the international influence of our universities have been on the rise in all aspects, including the quality of faculty members and students. We are catching up with the United States. This pandemic, I think, is an accelerator.” (Ph.D. program, Physics, No. 89)

Besides, with the increasing number of students back home, an overseas diploma even from a prestigious university can no longer guarantee a promising job (Hao & Welch, 2012). One interviewee said that “I could not take the risk.” For this reason, she finally chose to be a civil servant instead of studying for a master’s degree from Oxford University: “The program only lasts for one year, so if I do not pursue a Ph.D., I would face an awkward situation in the job market when I come back. So, I said I could not take the risk, considering that when I come back and apply for a job one year later, things are not going to get any better.”

Third, health and safety were another important factor in students’ decision-making process. Students who gave up their plans to study abroad showed more

concern for their safety, including not only concerns about social security and personal safety abroad but also the risk of pandemic transmission in foreign countries. "My value preference that has changed. When survival becomes the primary concern, the security interest would accordingly become the primary interest." (Master's program, International Politics, No. 60).

## CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the ISM literature in several respects, and the findings will expand our understanding of the decision-making on studying abroad. At the same time, this case study in the Chinese context provides new evidence to understand and predict the future trend of international student mobility in global higher education.

First, some studies have made predictions about the effects of the pandemic on college students' international mobility; however, empirical studies are still lacking in this area. Based on interviews with 118 college graduates from Chinese universities, this research is among the first to empirically analyze the effects of the pandemic on college students' decision of insisting on or giving up studying abroad.

Second, unlike most studies on study abroad decision makings that focus on decisions about destinations, informed by the concepts of risk and uncertainty, this study focuses on whether people insist on studying abroad or give up study abroad opportunities. The importance of risk and uncertainty in migration decision-making has been explored by existing studies (Jaeger et al, 2010; Williams & Baláz, 2012). However, the role that risk and uncertainty play in the flow of international students has not been explored fully. This article is among the first to analyze the role of risk and uncertainty aversion in decision-making about studying abroad during the pandemic. We propose a theoretical model for overseas study decision-making under risk and uncertainty, which enriches the existing theoretical model. The analysis shows that the attitudes towards risks and uncertainties among students and their families have considerable influence on whether they will choose to continue studying abroad.

Third, our empirical findings ask institutions and policymakers to pay attention to the emerging "immobility turn" (Cairns et al,2021). In our interviews, several interviewees even had given up the opportunity to study at Ivy League universities and Oxford in exchange for a definite opportunity of current employment or domestic graduate study. Previous research has predicted that in the wake of covid-19, international students will place a greater emphasis on safety than before (Sidhu et al,2021). We argue that as the cases of giving up prestigious foreign universities' offers illustrate, in addition to safety, college students will prefer certainty more than before when choosing whether to go abroad.

Fourth, our research finding has important implications for analyzing the equality of study abroad opportunities. Existing studies often explain the gaps in the intentions and opportunities of different social classes in studying abroad from the perspectives of economic capital and mobility experience (Lörz et al,2016;

Lehmann & Trower,2018). We argue that college students' attitudes towards risk and uncertainty which are strongly linked to social class, also need to be taken into account. Our study concurs with existing studies that students' perceptions of risk differ by social background (Dohmen et al., 2005). Students whose parents were in a higher social class and had good educational backgrounds and professional levels had more opportunities for overseas exchanges during the university period. This accumulation of early international education mobility experience encouraged students to continue with their plans to study abroad.

Our research also found that, among the factors affecting the decision of undergraduates in elite universities to go abroad, changes in international relations and the effects of the pandemic are intertwined. In particular, the changes of international student policy as well as visa policy during the epidemic directly affected the destination countries of Chinese international students, some of them even gave up studying abroad, which indicates that international relations have a certain impact on their decision-making process. However, because of space limitations, we have not been able to analyze this effect in this article. How the effects of the pandemic overlap with changes in international relationships and consequently affect college students' decision-making about going abroad is an issue worth exploring in future research.

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