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## **Reversed Student Mobility: Canadian Exchange Students' Motivations for Studying in Mainland China**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In order to promote Canadian students' mobility to China, it is essential to understand their motivations to study in Chinese universities because it influences their learning experiences. Through the application of the push-pull model as a conceptual framework (Altbach, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), this study explores the factors that motivate Canadian exchange students to study in China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 non-Chinese spoken Canadian exchange students from 9 universities. The findings reveal that both push and pull factors affect students' decisions to study in China. The key push factors are learning the Chinese language and culture and personal growth; the primary pull factors are China's potential for economic development, future opportunities, and the availability of exchange programs. This study provides stakeholders with insights into designing exchange programs targeted to students' needs and developing marketing strategies to attract Canadian international students.*

**Keywords:** Canadian exchange students, China, international student mobility, push-pull

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International student mobility has transformed the higher education landscape over the last few decades. It has brought various benefits to students, institutions, communities, and countries (Knight, 2012). At the individual level, academic mobility enriches Canadian students' experiences by developing intercultural awareness and a deep understanding of the global issues, which may increase their competitiveness in the labour market (Teichler, 2004; Trower & Lehmann, 2017). Moreover, "internationally engaged students can contribute a Canadian

perspective to the production, sharing, and transfer of knowledge around the world” (Knight & Madden, 2010, p. 19). Trower and Lehmann (2017) also indicate that study exchanges give less-privileged Canadian students opportunities to seek out international experiences, and studying abroad is proved to have greater positive effects on students from low socio-economic backgrounds. At the institutional level, Canadian universities view international exchange programs as mechanisms to enhance students’ intercultural understanding and competencies, which contributes to their overall employability and career choices in an increasingly global society (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), 2007; Government of Canada, 2020). At the national level, the mobility of Canadian graduate students can promote global knowledge sharing and support Canada’s science and technology strategies (Knight & Madden, 2010). Yet, despite the consistent increase in Canadian students’ participation in exchange and study abroad programs since 2000, only 11% of Canadian undergraduate students undertook an international learning experience by 2017 (Center for International Policy Studies, 2017).

While China is Canada’s largest source of international students, the mobility between Canadian and Chinese post-secondary students has been primarily one-way. Only about 3,500 Canadian students chose to study in China by 2017, which is less than 0.1% of the Canadian post-secondary student population (Davidson, 2017; Education Office, 2018). Although many Canadian universities focus on forging ties with Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) by developing exchange programs and establishing partnerships, domestic students do not appear to show an increased interest in studying in China. Instead, their preferred destinations for overseas learning experiences remain English-speaking countries or western European nations (AUCC, 2014; Government of Canada, 2020). Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC, n. d.) reported the benefits for Canadian students studying in China. As China’s partnership with Canada in trade, technology, and culture is becoming increasingly important, Canadian students who forge connections with China may have more employment and diverse career opportunities. For example, the International Education Strategy shared a comment from a Canadian student who previously studied in China “Being trilingual, mobile, enthusiastic, analytical, and eager to learn and understand enabled me to find a job quickly, which keeps me in contact with China every day and puts into practice my knowledge and skills” (Government of Canada, 2020). Students will also have opportunities to learn about modernization and technological innovation. Further, students can also be immersed in and experience China’s ancient civilizations and unique culture (CLIC, n. d.). Therefore, more effort and attention are needed from the stakeholders to encourage Canadian students to study in China.

Since the number of Canadian students studying abroad is relatively small, only a few studies are available on their motivations to study abroad. The existed studies focus on Canadian students studying in other developed countries, such as the US, UK, Australia, and European countries (Barnick, 2010; Knight & Madden, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2012; Trower & Lehmann, 2017), with no study focusing on Canadian students’ motivations to study in China. Therefore, this

study fills the gap in exploring why Canadian students chose Mainland China as their study abroad destination. By applying the push-pull model (Altbach, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and a qualitative research method, this study explains the push and pull factors that motivate Canadian students to participate in exchange programs in China.

Understanding international students' motivations is essential because their motivations influence their learning experiences and how they handle their experiences in China (Bian, 2013). Moreover, identifying students' rationale for studying in China contributes to an understanding of the context of Canadian students' outbound mobility to China, which allows stakeholders, such as faculty members, administrators, researchers, and program developers, to provide targeted services that can optimize Canadian students' learning environment and improve students' satisfaction with their experience in China. It also provides insights into designing marketing strategies for the government and universities in recruiting Canadian students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Motivations for International Students Studying in China**

The significant factors that attract international students to China can be grouped into three categories: political and economic factors, culture and language, and individual factors. Political and economic factors include China's potential and improving economic development, the establishment of bilateral trade relations and bilateral mutual recognition agreement, and the construction of international education policies (Bian, 2013; Ding, 2016; Fang, 2015; Jiani, 2017; Song & Liu, 2014). The second category is China's unique culture. For instance, some students are fascinated with learning the unique Chinese culture and Chinese language (Bian, 2013; Ding, 2016; Hu et al., 2016; Jiani, 2017). As for the third category, the primary individual factors include greater personal growth, gaining international and travel experience, improving cross-cultural awareness and competence, and contributing to future professional development and increasing job opportunities (Bian, 2013; English et al., 2016). In addition to the three categories, the availability of scholarships and funding is also an essential factor that international students consider before choosing to study abroad (Jiani, 2017).

English et al. (2016) surveyed American and European students about their motivations to study in China and concluded that the most motivating factors are personal growth, travel opportunities, and professional/career advancement. On the other hand, the primary reasons they are against to study in China are the low academic quality and research environments in Chinese universities (Jiani, 2017). For instance, Ding (2016) points out that the quality of higher education in Shanghai, as indicated by outdated and boring course content, is not sufficiently attractive to international students. Additionally, compared to Latin American and Asian peers, North American students did not acquire a strong academic motivation to China. Instead, they viewed Chinese universities' lower admissions standards as influencing their attendance. Although most students surveyed had

not decided on their future plans, they expected to improve their competitiveness in the job market after acquiring the learning abroad experience. Among the international students surveyed, almost all North American students preferred to work in their home countries (Hu et al., 2016).

Overall, international students' motivation for studying in China can be regarded as financial, economic, political, and individual factors. Financial factors refer to scholarships and funding opportunities. Economic and political factors are China's optimistic economic development prospects and improved policies and administration systems related to international education. Finally, individual factors include learning the Chinese language and culture, enhancing cross-cultural abilities and career development.

### **Canadian Students' Motivations for Studying Abroad**

As student mobility trends may differ from region to region, Knight and Madden (2010) address that it is essential to understand students' rationales for studying abroad because it informs administrators and educators in higher education of students' needs (McCarthy et al., 2012). In general, international students study abroad for various reasons, including seeking better education at institutions with a more prestigious or specialized field of study, enhancing their cultural competencies or language skills, and improving employability chances (McCarthy et al., 2012; OECD, 2020). Altbach (2004) emphasizes that most students from developed countries choose to study abroad to gain a global perspective and experience. Trower and Lehmann (2017) interviewed 17 Canadian students about to undertake exchange programs (UK, US, Australia, and Europe) from a Southwestern Ontario university. They concluded that students decided to study abroad for personal growth and escape temporarily from the frustrations and pressure of being an undergraduate student. More importantly, credit recognition is essential when choosing their study destination (Trower & Lehmann, 2017). McCarthy et al. (2012) surveyed 87 Canadian students at a small private college in New York and found that the unavailability of desired programs in Canada and the qualification recognition are critical factors that affect students' decisions to study in the US. Knight and Madden (2010) proposed that Canadian doctoral students' primary rationales and motivations to engage in short-term abroad experiences are enhancing career opportunities, gaining life experiences, and attending conferences and workshops for their research.

Trilokekar and Rasmi (2011) examined Canadian students' perceptions of and attitudes toward international education and their awareness of education abroad opportunities at York University in Toronto. By surveying and interviewing 77 undergraduate students, they suggest that students' intent to study abroad is associated with their "perceived social and institutional support and academic hassles at the host and home institution" (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011, p. 495). The majority of students (97%) who are optimistic about studying abroad perceive strong institutional support and fewer academic challenges. By contrast, students not intending to study overseas identify more academic and social difficulties (e.g., language barrier, culture shock, and loneliness) and few social

or institutional supports. Their findings also reveal that students prefer long-term programs (year/semester-long) to short terms because they may not obtain the full benefits or achieve their goals through short-term programs (Trilokekar & Rasmi, 2011). Lastly, Canadian students attribute their reason for studying in Australia to taking time out to release the pressure from undergraduate study in their home university while obtaining novel life experiences without losing time to achieve their goals (Barnick, 2010).

### **The Push-pull Model**

The push-pull model serves as a conceptual framework for this study. Altbach (1998) presented the push-pull model, one of the most dominant frameworks to explain international students' motivations and reasons for studying abroad. According to Altbach (1998), the push factors are related to the unfavorable conditions or context of home countries that initiate students' decisions to study abroad; pull factors include the opportunities and facilities that make host countries attractive to international students.

The push and pull factors were categorized into three levels: national, institutional, and personal. At the national and institutional level, the push factors include limited access to higher education in home countries, poor quality of education, improved opportunities to migrate after graduation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and political and economic instability (Altbach, 2004). The pull factors involve economic wealth (Altbach, 2004) and prosperous future development of the host country (Jiani, 2017; Wu et al., 2021), historical connection and geographic proximity between host and home countries, cultural commonality, the quality of education, availability of specific programs and scholarships, costs and financial support, immigration opportunities (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Other reasons are institutional reputation, faculty quality and admission requirements (Chen, 2007; Wu et al., 2021).

At the individual level, the push factors are understanding and experiencing a Western culture, improving self-understanding, academic and professional growth and job prospects (Chen, 2007; Li & Bray, 2007; Wu et al., 2021), seeking novel learning opportunities and experience (Wu et al., 2021). The pull factors can be the recommendation and influence from friends and families (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and the positive impression of the host country (Wu et al., 2021). The push-pull model was applied to explore international students' motivation to study in China. Gbollie & Gong (2019) explored African and Asian students' motivations to study in China and revealed that the availability of scholarships, China's flexibility in visa and program entry, and better education quality are important push-pull factors. They also discovered some new pull factors, including citizens' attitudes such as hospitality and receptiveness, good image and the developmental potential of the country. Yang et al. (2021) tested 116 international students in Jiangsu Province and found that leisure and escape from the current situation, socialization, and learning culture are the top push factors, while traditional festivals, financial budgets, and historical sites are the three main pull factors.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study applied a generic qualitative research method to understand Canadian exchange students' motivations to study in China. Generic qualitative inquiry, also known as basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), is employed to meet the research objectives than a single, established research method (Kahlke, 2014). According to Caelli et al. (2003), generic qualitative studies demonstrate some or all of the characteristics of qualitative research rather than fitting within a specific methodology, such as ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology (Kahlke, 2014). Generic qualitative research simply seeks to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 2009, p. 11). Therefore, generic qualitative research is suitable for this study because it allows us to gain a deep understanding of Canadian exchange students' perspectives on choosing China as a studying destination. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 participants.

### Participant Recruitment

Purposeful and snowball sampling approaches were used to recruit non-Chinese speaking Canadian students who completed exchange programs in Chinese universities between 2016 and 2022. Pseudonyms were used for all the participants.

**Table 1: Information of the Participants**

Participant	Home institution	Host Institution	Exchange Duration	CILC Funded
Daniel	University of British Columbia (UBC)	Fudan University	4 months	Yes
Steve	University of Regina (U of R)	Jilin University	4 months	No
Mark	U of R	Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance	1 month	No
Kaley	U of R	Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance	1 month	No

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Jack	UBC	Tsinghua University	11 months	Yes
Michael	UBC	Tsinghua University	11 months	Yes
Alex	University of Alberta	Tsinghua University	10 months	Yes
Tyson	University of Calgary	Tsinghua University	4 months	Yes
Sophie	McGill University	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	4 months	No
Ben	Queen's University	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	4 months	Yes
Tom	University of Ottawa	Nanjing University	4 months	Yes
Cindy	Carleton University	Nanjing University	10 months	Yes
Tiffany	University of Montreal	Shanghai University of Finance and Economics	4 months	Yes
Jessica	McGill University	Tsinghua University	4 months	No

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Because the exchange programs between Chinese and Canadian universities were canceled or postponed due to Covid-19 in 2020, all participants completed their exchange programs prior to 2020. As illustrated in Table 1, the participants were mainly from economics, commerce, and international relations. One participant was from environmental science, and another was from Law. Moreover, most participants (11 out of 14) chose universities in Beijing and Shanghai, specifically high-ranking universities, such as Tsinghua University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It is also worth noting that although all the participants are Canadian citizens, three had Chinese, South African and Arabic origins, respectively.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In-depth interviews were conducted on zoom. As a qualitative research technique, in-depth interviewing means “conducting intensive interviewing with a small number of respondents,” which allows the researcher (interviewer) to deeply explore the respondents’ perspectives on “a particular idea, program, or situation” (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p. 3; Guion et al., 2001). Some interview questions include “why did you choose China as a study destination?” “Can you tell me your expectations before going to China”? After collecting data, the inductive approach was applied for data analysis because it aims to extract codes, develop themes from the raw data, and establish links between research questions and findings (Thomas, 2003). In the initial stage, the interviews were transcribed, (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second step was coding, including making sense of the data and dissecting the interview transcripts with descriptive codes (Gay et al., 2012; Saldana, 2013). In the third phase, the initially coded data was categorized regarding the conceptual framework and research questions (Merriam, 2009). Lastly, the concepts were identified and interpreted from the themes (Creswell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994) .

## **RESULTS**

The findings demonstrate that both push and pull factors play a role in motivating Canadian students to study in China. Push factors are mainly intrinsic, including personal growth, intercultural awareness and competencies, learning the Chinese language and culture, benefiting future careers, seeking adventures and novelty. Moreover, the influence of family and community and a positive impression of China from past trips were also mentioned by several participants. Two participants also expressed their interests in Chinese architecture. The pull factors are mostly extrinsic, including China’s prosperous future and rapid economic development, the unique Chinese culture and political system, interesting architecture, the reputation of the institution, the availability of specific programs and scholarships, and the promotion of the exchange programs.

### **Learning Chinese Culture and Language**

Understanding the Chinese culture and language is the most significant push factor, which goes hand in hand with enhancing their career prospects and improving intercultural competency. Most participants expressed interest and passion in experiencing the unique Chinese culture and improving Chinese skills. Respondents shared such opinions:

I figured if I was familiar with China and Chinese business and Chinese culture and the language, then I would have an asset throughout my career. It would help me in my career. (Alex)

I wanted to go there to really understand the culture and how it operates and stuff there because I saw it as a benefit as I progressed in my career. (Mark)

Although none of them could engage in conversations in Chinese, some of them started to learn Chinese before leaving for China through the Confucius institute and university programs. Therefore, studying in China allows them to immerse themselves in the language environment and learn Chinese. Furthermore, their motivation to learn Chinese culture aligns with the pull factor, that is the unique Chinese culture. Three participants expressed that they wanted to go somewhere “unique” and “different.” One participant further explained that compared to European countries, China is “another level of cultural difference” (Cindy).

Additionally, in terms of gaining intercultural awareness and improving intercultural abilities, two participants expressed their desire to get first-person perspectives and experiences of China.

Because there’s a lot of bias and misconceptions about China in the media. I wanted to go and experience it myself and get first-hand experience. (Cindy)

I knew that the world was growing and changing before and I was fascinated and I really wanted to understand from a first person perspective how the world was changing and maybe try to understand the future. (Oliver)

### **Stepping out of Comfort Zone**

As one of the key indicators to study in China, more than half of the participants decided to study in China because they wanted to step out of their comfort zone, which is intertwined with seeking adventures. Four respondents view China as an “extreme,” which is “completely different from Canada.” They are challenged to “step out of their comfort zone” by experiencing new things. One participant commented on the population size in Shanghai,

Regina has 200,000 people and then going to Shanghai with 40 million people, I wanted to experience that. I want to have a completely different culture from the food to the language to all those things. (Mark)

### **Promotion of Exchange Programs**

The promotion of exchange programs is a significant pull factor that motivated Canadian students to study in China, which was mentioned by eight participants. They heard about the exchange opportunities from their home universities, faculties, and other relevant organizations. Regarding their

home institutions, some faculties organized exchange and study abroad information sessions and gave presentations, and China was one of the studying destinations (Sophie, Kaley). Steve saw a poster about the exchange program on campus. Alex's decision to study in Tsinghua was recommended by the international office at his home university (U of A). He explained that his university did not have an official exchange program with Tsinghua University, but he could still study there because of the CLIC. Mark's faculty made an effort to promote the exchange opportunities, as he said,

it was really promoted by our dean and various faculty members. I remember them talking about it as like, it's a really great opportunity when you get into third and fourth year, like, you should think about it. (Mark)

For Tyson and Tom, the representatives from the Chinese Bridge Competition and Ontario/Jiangsu (OJS) Exchange Program gave presentations in their home universities.

### **China's Future Development Prospects**

The most influential pull factor is students' belief and expectations in China's future development potential, which is also linked to their employment and career opportunities in the future job market. Almost all the participants mentioned China's rapid economic development and increasingly important role in the global economy and market as the primary pull factors to study in China. Participants make such statements:

China's presence is growing every year and they're having a big influence on everybody else in the world. (Daniel)

Because it's the second largest economy in the world, so having more sort of knowledge there would be very helpful from a career perspective. (Jack)

Moreover, students' descendants also play a role in students' decision to study in China. All the participants are Canadian citizens. However, one is of Mainland Chinese descent but was born in Canada. One is of South African descent but was born in Canada as well. The other one was from an Arabic country but immigrated to Canada. For example, the participant with Chinese heritage commented that his family played an essential role in deciding to study in China as some of his family live there. Another participant said, "with the Belt and Road initiative and all the diplomatic ties between China and African countries, I was really curious to learn more about the politics and the economy of China" (Sophie). Additionally, the Arabic student believed that some core Chinese and Arabic values regarding family and community are similar, and she was curious to learn about them.

### **Availability and Compatibility of the Program**

Almost half of the participants noted that the availability and compatibility of the programs were critical when they decided to study in China. Jessica is the only participant who regarded the educational quality as a pull factor. According to Jessica, “Tsinghua offered a really great international law training program in English.” When being asked about their motivations to study in China, participants employed descriptors such as “fit in my degree,” “compatible with my program,” and “relevant with my majors.” Six students stressed that all the classes they took as a part of the program were related to their degree. For instance,

Nanjing University had courses which were compatible with my program of study, so I’d be able to take courses that would actually count towards my program. (Tom)

There weren’t a lot of other exchange opportunities that I was interested in, mainly because they didn’t fit with my degree. (Tyson)

Tiffany particularly pointed out that she was looking for a particular program that does not only include classroom learning experience but the working experience. Hence, the exchange program she participated in included studying/working in a Chinese company. Furthermore, students who chose to participate in exchange programs did not want to postpone their planned graduation date. Therefore, the time of the course offerings and duration of the programs were also considered by some participants.

### **Accessibility of Funding and Scholarships**

Even though most participants received scholarships or funding to study in China, the accessibility of funding was only mentioned by two participants as one of their motivations. For one participant, the funding and extra bursary allowed him to travel around while taking courses (Tom). For the other participant, money was a concern. He said, “I probably couldn’t have afforded to do an exchange out of pocket, and I wouldn’t have been able to go to China if there wasn’t that scholarship as well. So that Chinese government scholarship really did make it possible for me to go” (Tyson). However, it is worth noting that students who received funding from the CLIC emphasized that it was beneficial because it covered their residency fees and gave them a monthly stipend. Therefore, several students encourage potential students to apply for it because “the application process was very simple” and “they basically gave the funding to everyone” (Michael).

## **Selecting Cities and Universities**

Although students' decisions to choose the city and university were not inquired about during the interviews, some participants described why they chose a specific university or city, including the availability of information, institutional reputation, and geographical location. In terms of the cities, it is not surprising that Shanghai and Beijing are the two most popular cities among all the participants as they are more familiar with these two cities. Daniel noted, "I knew that Beijing was the government center of China, whereas Shanghai would be the financial center. A lot of business and commerce, and that is something that I'm more interested in." However, Jack indicated that he would choose a second or third-tier city if given another chance because there were a lot of foreigners in Beijing, which did not push him to step out of his comfort zone and interact with locals.

Regarding the choice of institutions, "the reason I chose to go to Nanjing University is that they had any information available about any courses, and I had zero information about any other universities" (Tom). Three participants attribute the institutional reputation and rank as the reason for choosing a specific university, especially Tsinghua and Fudan University.

## **DISCUSSION**

Although China is becoming a popular destination for international students, the number of North American students studying in China remains small compared to students from other Asian countries or the Belt and Road Initiative countries. China continues the effort to attract international students; however, the deteriorated relations between Canada and China since 2018 (International Institute for Strategic Studies) and the Covid-19 breakout in 2019 will likely impact Canadian students' decisions to study in China. One participant said, "I don't think I would go now, just based upon all the political stuff that's been going on and the tensions between China and Canada" (Kaley). This is also reflected in Dehaas (2016)'s report that a bigger concern to study in China is safety, such as human rights abuses. Zhao et al. (2022) argue that international students play a significant role in constructing an unbiased country image of China; exchange programs help countries establish stable ties and strong relations. University of Toronto professor Lynette Ong also states that the best way to challenge China is by building people-to-people ties and connections (Dehaas, 2016). Additionally, five participants who had been to China before implied that the positive experience from previous trips to China was one of the reasons they decided to study in China, which supported Wu et al. (2021)'s findings that students' positive impression of China was one of the motivations.

The push and pull factors were discussed in the previous section from three levels: national, institutional, and personal. The findings suggest that both push and pull factors are essential in motivating international students to study in China. The push factors are mainly personal. Canadian students who chose to

study in China were not pushed by unfavorable conditions in their home country, which was common in studies exploring international students from less developed regions (Altbach, 1998; Li & Bray, 2007). Instead, it is more a personal choice for self-improvement, such as stepping out of their comfort zone, learning about learning Chinese culture and language, and benefiting future careers.

Second, the pull factors are mainly at the national and institutional levels, with China's prospect and potential economic development and the availability and compatibility of programs being the critical pull factors. The study also found the origins of the three participants play different roles in their decisions to study in China. For instance, the participant with Chinese heritage was mainly influenced by his family. The participants with South African and Arabic origins were impacted by the relationship and connection between their home country and China, and the cultural commonality, which supports the pull factors proposed by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002).

Further, the availability and compatibility of programs are primary pull factors related to students' study fields and majors. The respondents are mainly from four majors: business and economics, international relations, commerce, and law. Therefore, programs could be developed targeted at these majors. For instance, Jack and Daniel majored in the international economy and international relations. One of the pull factors for them is China's different political system. Therefore, incorporating opportunities to learn about China's politics should be considered when developing the programs. Additionally, funding and academic qualities are essential motivations for students choosing to study in China in several studies (Gbolliie & Gong, 2019; Jiani, 2017; Yang et al., 2021). The International Education Strategy also identified the cost of studying outside of Canada and difficulties in transferring credits as key barriers for Canadian students to study abroad (Government of Canada, 2020). However, in this study, only two participants view scholarship as an influential factor and another two view academic quality as a reason to study in China. This observation is similar to Wu et al. (2021)' study, which concluded that the perceived quality of education and budget are second-tier motivations. It is likely because the expense of studying in China is lower compared to studying in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Although most participants do not perceive finance as a reason to study in China, many view CLIC funding as helpful. The CLIC, launched in 2016, connects Canadian students with full-funded opportunities (CLIC, n.d.). Also, China's Ministry of Education covers almost all costs, including application fees, tuition, insurance, and a monthly stipend. Currently, ten Canadian universities participate in this program. However, most students are unaware of these study opportunities in China (Dehaas, 2016). Thus, government and institution-sponsored scholarship and funding opportunities should be promoted to attract potential students.

Fourth, the findings indicate an emerging pull factor not proposed in other studies: the promotion of exchange programs. Most participants stated they chose China as a studying destination because of promotions from their home universities, faculties, and other organizations. Two participants also agreed that more promotion of such opportunities was needed. For instance, Daniel said,

It seems more like the UBC Go Global were biasing or pushing people towards going to Europe or Australia, which is the most popular places. But I think if there was more emphasis on going to China, more people would have gone to China even before choosing which university to go to.

This is also consistent with Dehaas (2016) 's report that China spends heavily on cultural exchange through international education, but it does not give enough promotion of its study opportunities. For instance, at the 2016 Study and Go Abroad Fair in Toronto, "more than half the floor space was taken up by recruiters from the U.K. and U.S., with some officials from Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands and South Korea, but no one was pushing China" (Dehaas). Hence, promoting exchange programs is essential for Canadian students and stakeholders from Canadian institutions to learn about the opportunities. Also, the home and host universities should strengthen their collaboration and communication to promote opportunities among the students in various ways.

The availability of information is another point worth discussing. One respondent argued that the availability of information is why he selected a specific university, including online information about the institution and courses. He further noted that he reached out to another potential university and received no responses. Also, two participants said that the information they received from former exchange program participants was helpful. This point was highlighted in Branco Oliveira and Soares's (2016) study that the candidates tend to choose a university and program they can gather the most information about. The institutions might be perceived as unwelcoming due to the lack of reply or information (Mortimer, 1997).

As high-ranking universities in Beijing and Shanghai are most popular among Canadian exchange students, high-tier universities such as Tsinghua or Fudan should set an example to other universities in terms of program development and promotion/recruitment strategies. For example, training opportunities should be provided for faculty members and administrators to communicate and share experiences regarding international students' teaching and services. Lastly, it is worth noting that five participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the academic quality as they expected the courses to be more challenging so that they could learn more academically. The low academic quality was mentioned by Jiani (2017) and Ding (2016) as one of the primary reasons that North American and European students are against studying in China. For example, Ding (2016) points out that the universities' educational quality in Shanghai is not sufficiently attractive to international students. Hu et al. (2016) also note that North American students did not acquire a strong academic motivation to study in China compared to their Latin American and Asian peers (Hu et al., 2016). Further, five participants in this study expressed their dissatisfaction with the academic quality in their host institutions by noting that the class is "overly easy," "not challenging enough," and "not like an

undergraduate level course.” Accordingly, Chinese universities should pay attention to quality education, making the curriculum more challenging and high quality for international students. For example, they should develop English courses at the same difficulty levels as courses in Chinese.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored Canadian students’ motivation to participate in exchange programs in Mainland China. This study applied the push-pull model as the conceptual framework and used in-depth interviews as the data collection technique. The findings suggest that studying in China is a self-motivated decision for Canadian exchange students. The main push determinants are stepping out of their comfort zone, learning Chinese culture and language, and benefiting future careers. The strongest pull factors are China’s prospect and potential economic development and the availability and compatibility of programs. Moreover, it generates a new pull factor: the promotion of exchange programs.

Exploring Canadian students’ motivation to study in China allows us to understand their expectations to provide targeted services. Also, these findings provide practical implications for developing exchange programs and marketing strategies. First, as most students are interested in the Chinese language and culture, the program developers and faculty members should incorporate learning opportunities related to the culture and language, such as visiting historical places, celebrating traditional Chinese holidays, and workshops on teaching language for basic communication, which should also be highlighted in marketing strategies. Second, the primary pull factor is China’s potential for economic development and prospects for future opportunities. Additionally, students’ positive impression of China from previous trips was also a determinant factor for some participants. These two factors and the above statement by Kathy indicate that the relationship between the two countries is essential in students’ decisions to study in China. Therefore, when designing marketing strategies, the host university should put emphasis on portraying and delivering a positive image and promoting the safety and security about China through word-of-mouth, such as its bright economic development and the role that China plays in the world.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation is that the study only focuses on students who participated in exchange programs; thus, it cannot represent other types of programs, such as language, volunteer, or entrepreneurship. Another limitation is the small sample size. Due to the small participant pool and the postponed or canceled exchange programs for the past three years, only 14 students who studied in 7 Chinese universities agreed to participate in the interviews. Therefore, this sample may not represent all Canadian students or all Chinese universities. Further, all the participants completed their exchange in China before 2019; thus, their memories of their motivations to study in China could have been influenced by the experience. Future research can investigate the motivation of potential students interested in studying in China or those exchange students who just came back from China and

their learning experiences in China. Future studies can also explore why students choose not to study in China.

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