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Exploring Factors Reflecting Chinese Students' Study Abroad Destination Choice: A Case Study of Chinese Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Japan has become the most popular study destination among non-English-speaking countries in Asia. Within the broader literature on students' personal motivation and parental influence, this study examines how Chinese students construct motivational factors when Japan is chosen as their study destination. In this study, 17 participants at a Japanese university were interviewed via semistructured interviews to collect data. This study employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis process: raw data coding, data categorization, and thematic development. The findings revealed that the push factors identified by the participants included cultural, educational and career development aspects. The pull factors encompass social factors such as a stable society and convenient lifestyle in Japan, as well as natural environmental features, including beautiful landscapes and scenic views. The study concludes that both push and pull factors play significant roles in motivating Chinese students' desire to study in Japan. Analyzing the distinctive features of these factors contributes to a deeper conceptual understanding of the motivation behind Chinese students' choice of Japan as their study destination.

Keywords: Chinese International Students, Motivation, International Students in Japan, Push-Pull Model

Over the past four decades, the significant growth of international student mobility has been seen as an important indicator of how China has constructed modernization and navigated globalization. In 1898, after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, the leader of the country started to reconsider the construction of the country and its relationship with its close neighbor—Japan. The emperor and his supporters decided to send talented students to learn modern Western

knowledge in Japan, marking the beginning of the story of sending students to study in Japan. Since then, the number of Chinese international students in Japan has doubled to reach two hundred thousand.

Five major periods have influenced the mobility patterns of international students in Japan. First, in the late 19th century, factors such as political corruption and economic crises led to the decay of the Qing empire from within, whereas foreign invasions and Western military threats led to the empire's wreck from the outside. The nation was teetering on the brink of collapse. To protect and save the country, the leader of the Qing empire sent students at public expense to study in various Western countries.

The second period started after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, when Japan became the window for Chinese scholars to see the world. Third, in the early 20th century, the Qing dynasty collapsed, and the Republic of China was established. During this time, government-funded student programs diminished because of the successive years of warfare between warlords. Meanwhile, self-funded students became more common, with France becoming a popular destination for Chinese scholars and nationalists.

The fourth period occurred in the middle of the 20th century after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Chinese central government tended to send students abroad to build strong connections with the Soviet Union and other communist countries. The final period began in 1978, following the launch of the Open-Door Policy (Ebrey, 2010; Friedman, 2005).

From a social-cultural perspective, there are three reasons why Chinese students choose to study in Japan. First, the Japanese government offers different types of scholarships to support international students studying in Japan. Additionally, Japanese universities provide opportunities for tuition reduction, which alleviates the financial pressure of studying abroad.

Second, *kyuku*¹ provides comprehensive academic services to Chinese students applying to universities in Japan and offers training courses to help them improve their language and academic skills. Third, Japan shares a similar cultural background with China, and Chinese Tang culture has greatly influenced Japanese culture, particularly in areas such as cuisine, the kanji writing system, and musical instruments.

From an academic perspective, the transition of international students to a host country has attracted researchers who focus on factors such as social integration, motivation, push and pull elements, and acculturation (Chirkow et al., 2008; Guns, Richardson, and Watt, 2012; Pan et al., 2007b; Yu and Downing, 2012). In fact, previous research has indicated that adjustment problems are often linked to self-motivation. Findings suggest that adjustment problems are normally associated with social isolation, language barriers, social stress and academic difficulties (Barron, 2006; Justice and McLachlan, 2009). These results also

¹ *Jyuku* offers supplement lessons to help students improve their academic skills and to enrol in Japanese universities.

revealed that international students maintain high levels of mental frustration, cultural misunderstanding and loneliness in the host country.

Given that motivation is a key variable influencing adjustment, it warrants substantial attention. Most previous studies in the field of motivation have focused on psychological issues and mental well-being, as well as factors such as political statements, social influence and parental selection (Kem & Madden, 1998; Kumar, 2008; Lawley & Perry, 1997; White & Woods, 1980).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) argued that the decision to study abroad includes three distinct factors: (1) the student's desire to study in a foreign country; (2) the choice of host country; and (3) the selection of higher education institutions in the host country. They identified six factors influencing decision-making: (1) personal recommendations; (2) knowledge of the host country; (3) expenses in the host country; (4) living environment; (5) geographical location; and (6) social connections. Muche and Wachter (2005) examined the level of importance by means of personal willingness to choose a host destination. The findings indicate that course characteristics are more important than country characteristics. Their results indicate that the decision-making process often starts with course selection rather than country choice. Once the host country is selected, students are likely to tolerate administrative difficulties, enrollment delays, and a less favorable environment, while expenses become a less critical factor. However, few studies have specifically examined the motivations of Chinese students to choose Japan as a study destination. Moreover, the connection between motivation and host country selection, as well as the push factors from mainland China, remains understudied.

By applying push-pull theory as the theoretical framework, this study lists factors that influence the construction of self-motivation in choosing Japan as a study destination. Through in-depth interviews with participants in Japan, this study aims to provide insights into the motivations of Chinese students and highlight the potential push factors that lead them to select Japan as their study destination.

Study Abroad Trends and Historical Events

According to the documentation archive, Rong Hong was the first student to study in the United States, recognizing the value of Western civilization and ideologies, which he promoted upon his return to China (Yao, 2004; Ebrey, 2010). The emperor of the Qing decided to send thirty young boys to the United States to study advanced technologies to revitalize China. Although this program ended in 1881 because of political conflicts, studying abroad became fashionable and gradually gained popularity. Many leaders of the Chinese central government, such as Sun Yat-Sen, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, had experiences pursuing degrees abroad.

During both the World Wars, Chinese students and scholars constantly moved to developed countries, such as the United States, France and Japan, to study. After World War II, the Chinese Communist Party took over the regime and began sending students to study in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries rather than in capitalist countries such as the United States and Japan

(Friedman, 2005). There are several reasons to explain this phenomenon, the most important of which is leaders' concern that their international allies would feel betrayed if students were sent to capitalist countries. Simultaneously, capitalist countries experienced dramatic economic and technological development, with the United States emerging as a superpower and Japan dominating the Asian market. With the constant flow of cultural and scientific exchanges among different countries, international students from developing countries to developed countries are seen as a means for national growth and enhancing global reputation (Yao, 2004). However, China, in contrast, restricted information exchange with Western countries and neighboring Japan.

During the time of Mao Zedong's leadership, China experienced an unexpected movement—the Great Cultural Revolution. The emphasis on physical labor and the suspension of cultural scholars hindered China's economic and technological development, as the rest of the world has developed rapidly. The country suffered severe incredible damage to its culture and civilization, with the education system disrupted, as no schools were open, the examination system was abolished, and social education focused on the discrimination and persecution of educated individuals (Ebery, 2010).

China subsequently became isolated from the rest of the world and had difficulty developing its own nation, and scientific research and technology inventions halted. In 1978, following the new leader of Deng Xiaoping, the Great Cultural Revolution was enacted, and he played a central role in promoting the idea of sending Chinese students abroad to acquire advanced technologies, with the goal of enabling them to contribute their knowledge and skills to national development. The reform and opening-up policy was launched in the early 1980s, and the government decided to restart the program of sending students to study abroad. However, the destination, length of stay, and field of study are all determined by the government (Wang, 2009).

According to directives from the Communist Party, the Ministry of Education published the "Notice on Increase of Overseas Students." In the early years of the Open-Door Policy, most students pursued studies in scientific technologies, medicine, and agriculture (Yang, 2000). By the end of September 1980, the Chinese government had sent 5,192 students to 44 countries, including 1,835 students to the United States, 614 to Japan, 578 to the Federal Republic of Germany, 545 to the United Kingdom, 314 to France, and 288 to Canada. Approximately 80% of these students were sent to these six countries, whereas 20% were distributed among other nations (Yu, Jiang & Zhu, 2001).

As Wang (2009) noted, Japan and Germany were chosen as study destinations because both countries demonstrated a keen interest in establishing connections with China and expressed positive expectations for receiving Chinese students. Additionally, both Japan and Germany emphasized the importance of collectivism, leading the Chinese government to believe that students would be easier to manage and more likely to adhere to central government instructions in these countries.

THE PUSH-PULL FRAMEWORK

The literature on motivation for studying abroad presents a rather confusing picture. There is no single comprehensive scale that scholars can use as a research instrument without needing to modify the definitions and essential components of the motivational factors involved.

In exploring the factors that influence students' choices for studying abroad, much of the literature has focused on psychological issues, social background, family finances, government policies, prospects for future immigration, university rankings, and employment opportunities in both domestic and international contexts, as well as issues related to the Hukou² systems (Zwart, 2012; Yang, 2007; Gatfield & Chen, 2006; Vroom, 1964; Wang, 2004).

Research conducted by Hung et al. (2000) identified three motivational factors that motivate Chinese students to study abroad: the possibility of migration after graduation, high-quality educational resources, and lower tuition fees and living costs. These findings provide international education providers with a deeper understanding of Chinese students' essential needs and can also enhance the recruitment process.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also identified four important motivation factors: the perception that overseas courses are superior to local academic institutions; higher enrollment in particular programmes; a desire to live in a foreign society and gain a better understanding of its culture; and an intention to immigrate after graduation. Sanchez et al. (2006) further distinguished between motivation to study in a foreign country and the intent to study abroad, suggesting that the latter is rooted in decision-making processes, with academic motivation and social ties in the host country being the most influential factors in sojourner motivation studies.

Anderson and Lawton (2015) consolidated the work of Sanchez et al. (2006) and Nyaupane et al. (2011) and created four measurement scales: world enlightenment, personal growth, career development, and entertainment. They argued that these four aspects effectively illustrate the factors influencing sojourner motivation in various contexts. Kitsantas (2004) and Wiers-Jenseen (2003) suggested four motivational factors for sojourners: academic expectations, cross-cultural experience, future careers and family background. Additionally, Aresi et al. (2017) developed the Multidimensional Motivation to Study Abroad Scale (MMSAS), which includes nine scales: personal growth, improved academic knowledge, foreign language skill acquisition or improvement, expectations from others, cross-cultural interest, a desire to escape familial obligations, career perspectives, independence, and leisure.

Recently, Lee and Stewart (2022) applied push-pull theory to examine the factors attracting students to study in the Republic of Korea. They concluded that social network influence, cultural appeal, institutional attractiveness, and

² Hukou: household registration system in mainland China which identifies a person's social status, family background, educational background, and residential location.

experiential motivations constitute the primary motivational factors. Similarly, Ngoc Ha, Hoang, Knight, and Hurley (2023) identified 27 pull factors that attract international students to select Australia as their study destination, reaffirming the strengths of the Australian education system, social network recommendations, and the physical environment. Notably, migration prospects and English language proficiency emerged as significant pull factors.

Miyoshi (2019) studied Chinese students choosing to study in Japanese institutions. He emphasized that the desire to experience foreign culture, the possibility of receiving scholarships, and the pursuit of high-quality education are the main pull factors attracting students to Japan. Moreover, Yukawa (2021) noted that career development can be a key prospect for foreign students. Japanese academic institutions and local governments provide career services to increase employment rates.

Weng and Tachiwaki (2021) examined the application periods and requirements of state universities in Japan, providing a general overview of how foreign students apply to universities. Foreign students are usually tested on different subjects, such as Japanese, science, comprehensive subjects, and mathematics. Applicants can submit their applications up to four times per year to gain admission to universities, which makes this process distinct from the Chinese gaokao³. While previous studies have identified numerous factors essential for understanding study abroad procedures, there is currently a lack of research focusing on how these factors influence students' willingness to study in Japan. This study initiates a discussion on both the push factors from China and the pull factors from Japan in the context of choosing Japan as a study destination, thereby contributing to filling the academic gap in understanding motivational factors.

Previous factors and push-pull theory are applied as the theoretical framework for this study. This study aims to explore the motivation factors on the basis of qualitative analysis. Specifically, the questions guiding this study include the following:

Table 1 Theoretical framework of the study

Push-pull model	Research question
Push factors from motherland: - Educational factors - Personal factors - Employment factors	What motivate Chinese students to study abroad?
Pull factors from destination - Educational factors - Social-cultural factors - Socioeconomic factors	What factors attract Chinese students to study in Japan?

³ Gaokao is the short term for Chinese Universities Entrance Examination, students can take this exam once a year to gain admission to universities in China.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research describes the current motivational factors influencing Chinese students' selection of Japan as their study destination. A qualitative research method was applied to examine the research questions effectively.

This study used semistructured interviews to obtain in-depth information for model development. Qualitative analysis allows for detailed exploration and attention to nuances, enabling the identification of overlooked information within the context. The guiding questions focused primarily on 'why' and 'how' and explored the reasons behind students' choices to continue their studies in Japan. To thoroughly understand the complexities of Chinese students' decision-making processes, an inductive approach was applied for model building. This approach involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories to extrapolate meaning from the collected raw data (Patton, 2002).

Participants and Context

Field work was conducted in collaboration with S University in the Kansai region of Japan. This university was selected for its reputation in higher education, ranking among the best institutions in Japan.

A connection was established with the Chinese student organization at S University in December 2023, following the approval of the research ethics committee. Participants were recruited through theoretical sampling, aimed at creating a theoretical model on the basis of the diverse backgrounds of individual cases. This study recruited participants through two methods: (a) teachers distributed a "Call for Participants" flyer in each class, and (b) snowball sampling was used with the respondents. The standards for participant selection should be as follows: (a) above the age of 18; (2) have a Chinese passport and have not been registered with the permanent resident in Japan; (3) agree to perform follow-up interviews two to three times after the first interview; and (4) have started their undergraduate studies in Japan and have never previously studied in Japan. At the end of the selection criteria, 17 participants agreed to perform the follow-up intervention.

This group comprised six female students, labeled F1 through F6, and eleven male students, labeled M1 through M11. The ages of the participants ranged from 18--24 years old at the time of the interviews in December 2023.

The participants' fields of study included engineering (three students), mathematics (one student), sociology (three students), literature (two students), biology (two students), agriculture (three students), and physics (three students). They were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and would not affect their course grades and that their responses would remain anonymous (see Table 2).

Table 2 Participants profile

Name	Age	Year in the University	Major
F1	21	4	Sociology
F2	20	3	Sociology
F3	22	4	Engineer
F4	19	1	Biology
F5	22	2	Literature
F6	18	1	Mathematics
M1	23	4	Agriculture
M2	21	3	Literature
M3	18	1	Agriculture
M4	19	1	Sociology
M5	19	1	Engineer
M6	20	1	Engineer
M7	21	2	Agriculture
M8	22	3	Biology
M9	23	3	Physics
M10	24	4	Physics
M11	21	4	Physics

Instrument

This study used online face-to-face chat software (Skype) as the interview tool to collect the data. To avoid connection problems, each interview began with a warm-up chat lasting three to five minutes before the actual interview started. Whenever the researcher had difficulty hearing the responses, the interview was suspended and resumed once the internet connection was stored. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, with an average duration of approximately 50--90 minutes per participant. All the participants were required to use a webcam during the interviews, which allowed the researcher to observe their facial expressions and ensure accuracy. After each interview, all the recorded data were transcribed into written format, with a total of 72,309 words transcribed into a Word document.

The participants were informed that the interview process would be recorded and stored on a hard drive. The guided interview questions developed for the study focused on decision-making and included the following topics: (1) reasons for studying abroad, including push and pull factors; (2) the choice of country; and (3) the choice of institution. Additional questions addressed influential factors proposed by previous scholars and highlighted concerns regarding the host country, drawing from the work of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Specific inquiries have examined decision-making processes related to studying abroad, knowledge

about the host country, sociocultural familiarity, geographic proximity, and the reasons for selecting Japan as the destination.

Interviews are considered one of the most effective methods for gathering qualitative data because of their high levels of participant engagement, response rate, and retention (Reppel, Gruber, Szmigin, & Voss, 2006). Other advantages include time efficiency, minimized social pressure, and the ability to record responses, which reduces the risk of forgetting key information.

Thematic analysis

To gain insights into why Chinese students are willing to select Japan as their study destination, this study employed a three-stage qualitative data analysis process: raw data coding, data categorization, and thematic development (Saldana, 2021).

Raw data coding involves selecting, focusing, and simplifying information derived from the transcripts. An elementary coding method was used to analyze lexical cohesions within the raw data collection. Data categorization organizes the codes generated from the initial coding process, ultimately facilitating conclusion drawing. At this stage, thematic codes emerge, allowing for the categorization of codes identified during the initial analysis. Conclusion drawing refers to determining what the thematic codes signify in relation to the research questions (see Table 3.)

In addition to the qualitative research approach, transcripts were analyzed word by word and line by line to uncover potential hidden information in participants' responses. Before coding, the transcripts were reviewed to highlight various elements involved in selecting destinations. Significant statements and quotations were also marked for conceptual framework construction. This process allowed for categorization on the basis of multiple perspectives rather than predetermined notions.

Moreover, applying coding in qualitative analysis enables a detailed examination of participants' thoughts and decision-making processes, which may be overlooked in quantitative approaches. The semistructured interviews were designed to guide the conversation, employing open-ended questions to identify push and pull factors influencing host country selection (Naeem, et al., 2023).

During the coding process, initial push and pull factors were identified, and various categories were subsequently coded and defined. These categories were informed by literature, including economic status, sociocultural issues, educational concerns, and career development opportunities (see Table 3). A detailed analysis of these findings is presented in the following sections.

Table 3 Sample of thematic analysis

Respondents	Open Codes	Category	Theme
F1: If I enroll in a university in China, I probably <u>cannot choose the subject</u> (sociology) that I truly like. I heard that some people need to change their majors in university.	Cannot choose subject Change major	Subjects selection	Push factor: Academic performance
M3: My major is agriculture; I want to <u>dedicate my time to agricultural research</u> rather than waste time studying politics.	Dedicate to agricultural research		
M2: I wanted to study at S University because it is not only the <u>top university</u> in Japan but also one of the <u>top universities in Asia</u> .	Top university	Education sources	Pull factor: educational factors
M3: Japanese education is <u>leading in Asia</u> . I visited their <u>lab</u> before applying, and I believe I can fully <u>enjoy my studies</u> at S University.	Leading in Asia Enjoy my studies		

FINDINGS

Push Factors from the Home Country

Personal growth, career development, and subject availability are important components in constructing push factors to influence students’ ability to study abroad. Language barriers seem to have less impact on the decision-making process of studying abroad. The following sections present the push factors from six aspects: personal growth, educational factors, acquaintance recommendations, language improvement, future career, and economic factors.

Personal Growth

The importance of personal growth was mentioned by each participant in the interviews. In general, broadening one’s horizons, having the opportunity to communicate with foreigners, and fostering friendships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds were cited as the most important reasons for studying abroad. Chinese students often gain insights into a country through various platforms, with media and books serving as primary sources of information about their chosen destinations. Studying abroad provides them with a valuable opportunity to explore a foreign country through their own experiences.

F4: Although my parents run a business between China and Japan, I had never been to Japan before starting my degree program. I wanted to live in a foreign country and sought independence.

Another aspect identified under the theme of personal growth was the experience of living alone and gaining knowledge about Japanese culture.

M8: I enjoy reading Japanese manga and watching anime. I want to experience the Japanese way of life; for example, I plan to join clubs at the university and participate in anime events in Tokyo. I believe it will be an unforgettable experience.

Additionally, F1 emphasized the importance of embracing a different lifestyle overseas: “Monotonous is the only word I would use to describe my life in my hometown. I am still young, and I want to experience something different in another land. I think Japanese culture is diverse; at least, in my opinion, it seems to accept various cultures. For instance, people can have different dress codes in Shibuya and engage in activities that interest them.”

Educational Factors

Education and its associated categories were reported as the top priority for pursuing degrees abroad. The participants identified course offerings, freedom of subject selection, availability of subjects, and course content as the main push factors from the perspective of the home country.

F1: If I enroll in a university in China, I probably cannot choose the subject (sociology) that I truly like. I heard that some people need to change their majors at university.

M3: My major is agriculture; I want to dedicate my time to agricultural research rather than wasting time studying politics.

In Chinese universities, politics is a compulsory subject to learn, and students need to pass exams at the end of the semester to graduate. Participants M3, M8 and M10 expressed concerns about spending excessive time studying politics instead of focusing on their majors. Consequently, studying abroad appears to be the only option for them to avoid unfavorable subjects.

Acquaintance Recommendation

Chinese students prefer to listen to the opinions and ideas of people they know. As pointed out by F6: “My cousin studied at Waseda University in Japan, she told me that Japan is the best place to pursue a university degree and that she enjoyed her time at the university.”

F4: The opinions of my friends and relatives are important to me. I would like to follow their opinions; I think it is safer than making decisions on my own.

M2 and M6 also mentioned that they had friends who had already started their studies in Japan.

M2: "My best friend started high school in Japan; he sends me postcards every new year and always shares his high school life stories with me."

M6: "My father works for a Japanese company and used to visit Kyoto three or four times a year for meeting. He always brings me omiyage (souvenir), such as books, snacks, sweets and clothes. He encouraged me to study in Japan, and he recommended S university."

Language improvement

For 14 out of the 17 students, language was a major motivating factor for studying abroad. F5 stated, *"I want to be a Japanese teacher in my hometown."* A similar sentiment was expressed by M2: *"I want to be an anime script writer in the future, as you know, Japan is famous for its animation industry, so it is necessary to learn this language."*

For those students who are studying in Japan, Japanese is no longer merely a medium of instruction on campus; it is a useful tool for expanding their basic knowledge and enhancing their skills and employment opportunities in the future.

M9 shared his perspective on language learning, stating, *"I think Japanese is easier than English, and I feel it would be a plus if I can speak Japanese during future job hunting."*

Employment opportunities seem to be a motivational factor pushing students to choose Japanese as their second language. M10 also mentioned, *"Most vehicles and industrial machines were developed and investigated in Germany and Japan, and it was necessary for me to learn a new language if I want to find a better job, I tried to learn German, but it was too difficult. I changed to learn Japanese; it was easier for me. In addition, I think I can improve my language skills if I spend a few years in Japan."* This again highlights the necessity of language proficiency for better job prospects and the opportunity to enhance language skills while abroad.

Future Career

The significance of future career prospects was identified as a key push factor for students to study abroad. Thirteen out of the 17 participants mentioned that studying abroad or spending an extended period abroad is beneficial for their future careers and their understanding of foreign cultures in today's globalization.

The participants emphasized the connection between studying abroad and future career opportunities. F3 stated, *"I believe that studying abroad can contribute to my job-hunting success after graduation."*

F4 noted, *"Receiving a degree in Japan extends my application options during the job application process. For example, I can work as a teacher, in an international company, or as a researcher."*

F4 also emphasized the importance of obtaining a degree in Japan: *"I want to prove that I am capable of achieving a better life; I can secure a well-paid job after graduation."*

Economic Factors

The reasons for traveling overseas can vary, but one of the most important prerequisites upon which people agree is the state of household finances. In China, parents often act as financial sponsors, covering tuition fees, accommodation costs, travel expenses, and daily living costs for their children in the host country. Many middle-class Chinese families have earned enough money due to opening and reform policies to support their children in pursuing degrees overseas.

The participants provided insight into their financial situations. M2 stated, *"My parents would pay tuition fees for me; both of them work as managers in a company."* M5 noted, *"Although my mother is a housewife, my father can support me in completing my degree overseas. He runs a small business in my hometown."*

There are multiple push factors that promote Chinese students' interest in studying abroad. On the basis of the interview data, the majority of participants are influenced by their family members and the people around them. While improving language skills and gaining insight into globalization are significant factors that prompt students' interest in studying abroad, career development and subject selection may be even more important.

Pull Factors from the Host Country

The interview results revealed four pull factors from the host country: educational factors, cultural factors, geographical factors, and socioeconomic factors. Notably, educational and cultural factors play significant roles in

motivating Chinese students to select Japan as their study destination. Surprisingly, 10 out of the 17 participants identified geographical factors as one of their reasons for choosing Japan. They noted that Japan is geographically closer to China and emphasized that ticket fares are cheaper than traveling to Western countries such as the U.S.

Educational Factors

Higher education in Japan is offered in various forms, including universities, junior colleges, colleges of technology, special training schools and community colleges. In general, universities are divided into three categories: national universities, which were originally founded by the Japanese government, such as the University of Tokyo and the University of Kyoto. The second type is public universities, which were established by regional public entities, such as Aomori Public University, Kyoto City University of Arts, Aichi Prefectural University, and private universities, which were established by private educational corporations, such as Waseda University and International Christian University.

The interview data show that “high-quality higher education” plays an important role in explaining why education is an essential factor in encouraging Chinese students to choose Japan as their study destination. For Chinese students and their parents, better education means a better future (Qing, 2009).

Japanese education is ranked among the best in Asia. Unlike China’s University Entrance Examination, which is known for its all-or-nothing concept, students in Japan have more opportunities to take entrance exams for different universities at their discretion.

Additionally, Japanese education is generally recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Education, enabling students to secure well-paid positions in leading companies in China. The belief that a good education leads to a better future aligns with the expectations of Chinese parents for their children. Thus, the educational factor emerges as the most significant motivational driver for students studying in Japan. M2 stated, “*I wanted to study at S University because it is not only the top university in Japan but also one of the top universities in Asia.*” M3 also shared similar thoughts: “*Japanese education is leading in Asia. I visited their lab before applying, and I believe I can fully enjoy my studies at S University.*”

Cultural Factors

The results revealed that the popularity of Japanese anime has become a major influential factor influencing Chinese students in choosing Japan as their study destination. The results indicate that popular anime has become ingrained in daily life, with young people in China tending to watch Japanese anime and adopt Japanese cultural values. The participants expressed their enthusiasm for Japanese culture. F3 stated, “*There are many anime stores, for example, Animate.*”

I also enjoy reading Donjinshi⁴; I visited Toranoana and K-Books⁵ when I traveled to Japan. If I can study there, I cannot imagine how happy I would be.” F5 also mentioned in the interview, “My favorite anime is Onran High School Host Club⁶, I dream of walking on a cherry blossom campus.”

The Japanese Ministry of Education and Technology recognizes anime and manga culture as a means of outreach and spares no effort in promoting traditional Japanese culture alongside Japanese anime. Additionally, cherry blossoms, or “sakura,” are iconic symbols of Japanese culture. The interview data highlighted themes related to flowers, the national representative flower, and sakura culture. The appreciation of spring views and the beauty of sakura have also been reported as motivating factors for Chinese students to visit Japan and study there.

Geographical Factors

We often say that Japan and China are neighbors connected by a narrow strip of water, and both countries have a long history of friendly exchanges. This slogan often appeared in the interview data. It emphasizes the geographical proximity of Japan and China, highlighting the desire of the Chinese to study in Japan.

F6: The flight duration is two and a half hours from Kansai airport to Shanghai. If I take Air Spring, the flight ticket ranges from 500 yuan to 1000 yuan (approximately 70 dollars to 140 dollars). I can even travel back to China every month!

Although distance is not a significant barrier to moving abroad, Chinese citizens tend to prefer relocating to countries that are geographically closer to their homeland. Additionally, affordable flight tickets and convenient flight systems serve as motivating factors for students in Japan.

Socioeconomic Factors

Social stability has been emphasized as an important factor motivating students to study in Japan. For example, M2 mentioned, “My parents regard Japan as a safe country; they travel to Japan once a year for business.”

The interview data also revealed that convenient transportation is a significant appeal that contributes to the vibrancy of Japanese society.

⁴ Donjinshi refers to self-published works, typically created by independent artists, the content of donjinshi encompass a wide range, including manga, fan art and fan fiction.

⁵ Totanoana and K-Books are popular manga stores in Japan, they sale original manga works and Donjinshi.

⁶ Onran High School Host Club is a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Bisco Katori. It was published by Hakusensha’s LaLa magazine (Bisco, 2003).

Additionally, Japan is well regarded for its affordable tuition fees and ability to pay for part-time job opportunities.

As participant F4 stated, *“My father told me if I want to buy those expansive cosmetics, I have to pay for them myself. I am currently working part-time in a grocery store, where the hourly wage is 1010 yen (approximately 6.7 dollars).”*

Similarly, M5 mentioned, *“I work as a teaching assistant at my university; the hourly wage is 1500 yen (approximately 10 dollars). I work four hours per week. Recently, I found another part-time job at a hotel, where the hourly wage is 1100 yen (approximately 7 dollars).”*

Engaging in part-time work seems to be common among Chinese students in Japan. Fifteen of the 17 participants in this research reported that they can easily find part-time jobs and enjoy earning pocket money through these positions.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to determine what motivates Chinese students to pursue a degree in Japan. The motivational pull factors can be categorized into educational, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects. Japan is renowned for its high-quality education, and Chinese students select Japan as their study destination with the expectation of broadening their horizons and developing an international perspective. Additionally, Chinese parents believe that international education provides their children with better future opportunities and helps them stand out in the competitive job market.

One significant factor influencing Chinese students to continue their studies in Japan is the popularity of Japanese anime and culture in China. Chinese students often become interested in Japan through media promotion.

Furthermore, this study indicates that political aspects do not serve as a significant factor in pushing Chinese students to study in Japan. Some research has identified the Hukou system as a push factor from the home country perspective. However, no participants in this study reported the household registration system as a reason for their decision to study abroad.

In terms of pull factors from the host country, geographical aspects emerged as a newly identified motivation for Chinese students' decisions to study abroad.

Future research should include ethnographic studies at Japanese universities to explore the challenges Chinese students encounter in Japan and the strategies they employ to overcome them. The results contribute to the understanding of international students' sense of belonging while studying abroad.

Chinese students play a significant role in the internationalization of education through their global mobility. A clearer understanding of the motivational factors influencing their intention to study abroad can ultimately benefit educators, institutional organizers, and any stakeholders interested in understanding the experiences of Chinese students abroad. Given the literature, further research on Chinese students overseas will provide deeper insights into China's modernization and globalization.

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