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Being Privileged but Challenged: Understanding Chinese International Students' College Choice Process

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores how Chinese international students at a state university navigate the U.S. college choice process. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 Chinese international college students at a large public research university located in the northeastern U.S., this study explains how these economically privileged students regard studying abroad as a “Plan B” substituting Gaokao (the Chinese College Entrance Examinations) and as an opportunity to access high-quality higher education. This study argues that these economically privileged students are challenged while navigating the college choice process because of the lack of cultural support from parents and private agents and the lack of connection with the college community before arriving in the U.S. This study sheds light on international students’ college choice process and this group of students’ specific needs at each stage. This study suggests that institutions outreach prospective international students by holding summer camps or virtual open-house opportunities.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, college choice, qualitative research, study abroad

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, U.S. higher education institutions prioritize internationalization in their strategic planning to enhance global mobility (Altbach & Peterson, 1998). This includes fostering collaboration with foreign institutions as well as hosting and recruiting international students (de Wit, 2011; Knight, 2004). Hosting and recruiting international students not only provides financial benefits to institutions but also contributes to campus diversity and enriches classroom experiences (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach & Peterson, 1998; Choudaha, 2017). According to the Institute of International Education (2024), the number of international students studying in the U.S. has increased by 105% since 2000, accounting for 5.9% of total U.S. enrollment. China continues to be one of the largest leading sender countries in the 2023-2024 academic year, with 25% of international students in the U.S. coming from China (IIE, 2024).

Understanding the decision-making process of Chinese international students when they choose to study abroad and select colleges is crucial for higher education institutions and professionals to better plan for international student recruitment. Previously, the push-pull migration model was widely applied to understand the decision-making process of Chinese international students studying abroad. This model identifies both push and pull factors that interact to influence students' choices (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Push factors encompass social, political, and economic forces within the home country that initiate a student's decision to pursue education overseas, such as the growth of the Chinese economy and intense competition for college entrance due to the large population in China (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). On the other hand, pull factors refer to the attraction of studying in a particular foreign country, including the institution's worldwide reputation, recommendations or influences from peers or relatives, and the perceived value of the degree received (Mazzarol et al., 2001).

However, the push-pull model neglects important individual-level factors that can shape students' decision-making processes. These factors include family social background, parenting style, cultural emphasis on education, and students' prior social and schooling experiences. These individual-level factors play crucial roles in shaping students' motivations and preferences in regard to studying abroad for college (Kim et al., 2018; Liu, 2016; Ma, 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider these additional factors alongside push and pull factors to understand Chinese international students' college choice process comprehensively.

In studies of international students' college choices, researchers have regarded international students as a homogenous group (Alfatal, 2017; Chen, 2007; Daily et al., 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Because of economic, political, and sociocultural differences, the purposes, preferences, and experiences of college choice vary for students from different countries (Kim et al., 2018; Teranishi et al., 2004). Few studies have focused specifically on Chinese international students' college choice process, despite China being one of the major countries sending international students to the U.S.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of Chinese international undergraduate students when deciding to study abroad and their college choice process, using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice as a framework. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese international undergraduate students decide to study abroad in the U.S.?
2. How do they search for colleges and universities?
3. What factors contribute to their decision to enroll in their current university?

This qualitative case study focuses on exploring the path of Chinese international undergraduate students from Chinese high schools to a public research university in the U.S. It sheds light on the underlying reasons behind their decision to study abroad and delves into the specific needs and considerations they have when selecting colleges. By conducting in-depth interviews and analysis, this study fills the gap in knowledge and understanding of the college choice process of Chinese international students.

In general, this paper examines how economically privileged Chinese international undergraduate students at a public research university utilize their privilege to pursue studying abroad as "Plan B" to access high-quality higher education, replacing the Gaokao system. This study illustrates the various roles that factors such as rankings, academic preparation, and financial considerations play in these students' decision-making processes. Moreover, this paper argues that, unlike wealthy and high-performing Chinese students aiming for the international elite pipeline since a young age (Lee & Wright, 2016; Liu, 2020), these economically privileged students face challenges while navigating the college choice process due to limited knowledge about U.S. colleges, a lack of official sources of information, and insufficient connections with higher education institutions in the U.S. By addressing these aspects, this study provides valuable insights for institutions seeking to recruit international students and establish international campuses. This research contributes to a qualitative understanding of the college choice process of Chinese international students and helps inform strategies to support and accommodate the needs of economically privileged Chinese international undergraduate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

College Choice Research in the U.S.

Researchers have investigated U.S. domestic students' choices of colleges from different perspectives. From an economic perspective, the individual decision to attend college was based on estimating the economic and social benefits of attending college (Manski & Wise, 1983). From a sociological perspective, researchers have examined the influence of socioeconomic characteristics and academic preparation on high school graduates' choices to attend a particular type of college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). From a marketing

and branding standpoint, institutions' intentional recruitment efforts and students' considerations as consumers were examined (Paulsen, 1990; Stephenson et al., 2016).

Research has also demonstrated the role of significant others, such as parents, schoolteachers, and counsellors, in college choice decisions (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018; Weis et al., 2014). For example, Weis et al. (2014) reported that affluent and middle-class parents tend to be highly involved in their children's college-going process, whereas low-income parents may have less involvement but still have high expectations for their children to attend college. The role of schoolteachers and counsellors in students' college choice process varies among domestic students. Some studies have shown that counsellors are helpful, whereas others have revealed a different perspective (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Gast, 2016; Reddick et al., 2011).

International Students' College Choice

In addition to examining college choice models for domestic students, researchers have explored the factors that influence international students' choices of destination countries and colleges for studying abroad (e.g., Alfattal, 2017; Chen, 2007). For example, Alfattal (2017) focused on international students studying in the U.S. from different countries around the world. The study examined the factors influencing students' choices in comparison to domestic American students. International students' college choices were more influenced by factors such as the reputation and quality of the institution, word-of-mouth and family recommendations, printed recruiting materials and videos, opportunities for integration, and on-campus living arrangements. Similarly, Chen (2007) examined East Asian students studying in Canada and identified key factors that shape students' choices to study abroad destinations. These factors include reputation, scholarships, and the cultural and demographic environments of the campus and surrounding city.

Like domestic students, international students' parents also play a significant role in helping their children find higher education opportunities abroad (Alebeek & Wilson, 2019). In the case of Chinese international students, Lin (2020) discussed the role of cram schools. These schools "not only coach students on test preparation and 'how to study abroad' but also adopt organizational framing to instill in students 'why to study abroad'" (Lin, 2020, p. 259).

Stratification of International Students' College Choice

International students' college choice process has been stratified (Lee & Wright, 2016; Liu, 2020). Lee and Wright (2016) examined "elite international student mobility" by demonstrating the abundant resources in high-performing and high tuition fee IBDP (International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme) schools in China. By playing "university admission games", such as rigorous curricula, additional skills, and practical guidance from counsellors and college representatives, elite international schools prepare students for top-ranked

universities worldwide (Lee & Wright, 2016). As the elite international pipeline serves wealthy families, it has been argued that it increases educational inequality—less affluent students may not be able to compete in global university admissions (Lee & Wright, 2016). Liu (2020) focused on emerging international curriculum programs in elite public schools in China. The privileged urban Chinese students in Liu’s (2020) study were also immersed in elite preparation for elite U.S. colleges, which demonstrated how elite classes and institutions reproduced advantages with local and global forces.

The literature indicates a gap in studies on Chinese international students’ college choice process, especially beyond the elite pipeline. Thus, this study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the college choices of Chinese international students who enroll in a public state university in the northeastern U.S. on the basis of phases defined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Furthermore, given the significant actors’ roles and different factors in choosing a higher education destination, this study also investigates the roles of significant others and different factors throughout the college choice process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice. The model consists of three phases: predisposition, the search process, and choice. The reason for choosing the model is that it focuses on the stages of students’ decision-making, which is aligned with the purpose of investigating how Chinese international students navigate the process of choosing a specific university as their destination.

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model demonstrates how “students move toward an increased understanding of their educational options as they seek a postsecondary education experience” (p. 208). Each phase involves the interaction of individual and organizational factors, ultimately leading to outcomes. The first phase is the predisposition, in which students determine whether to pursue higher education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Factors such as socioeconomic status, attitudes of parents and peers, and high school characteristics influence students’ plans for postsecondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once students have made the decision to attend college or university, they enter phase two: search. During this phase, they actively seek and gather information about colleges and universities (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This process may involve navigating online resources, meeting with advisors and college representatives, and visiting colleges of interest. Through these interactions, students develop a choice set of potential institutions. The third phase is the choice stage, where students evaluate their choice set and decide on a specific institution to enter (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Although international students might weigh different factors from domestic students (Alfattal, 2017), they experience the same choice stage of making the final decision about their destination.

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model has been one of the most commonly used models for understanding students’ college choices since it was

published (Iloh, 2019). It frames not only U.S. domestic students' college process but also expanded to be used in studies of international students' college choices. For example, Alebeek and Wilson (2019) integrated Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model with push and pull factors related to how international students choose U.S. colleges and provided a descriptive understanding of how international students make their college choice decisions. The case study in a public, regional university in southeastern United States revealed that international student college decision-making is a multivariate process in which predisposition, search, and choice factors play a role in the decision to choose the U.S. as their host country and the decision to attend a particular institution (Alebeek & Wilson, 2019).

To answer the research questions, this paper uses Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model as a lens to understand Chinese international students' college choice experience in the stages of predisposition, search, and choice and how their navigation of the three stages leads them to their final decision of the specific university. In the phase of predisposition, where Hossler and Gallagher (1987) focused on whether to attend college, this paper expands on this concept to determine whether to study abroad in the U.S. for college. For Chinese international students, their first step in college choice is not only to determine whether to attend college but also to determine whether to study abroad. Understanding students' experience in the stages of search and choice answers the second and third research questions.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used a qualitative case study as the methodology. A case study is defined as an in-depth description and analysis of "a bounded system", meaning that a researcher names what is in and out of the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 37; Yin, 2014). In this study, Chinese international undergraduate students who chose to study at the State University¹ served as the case. Each participant is treated as a unit of analysis, and the State University itself is the boundary for the cases.

The case study is appropriate when the researcher is trying to answer how and why questions, investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) within its real-life context, and cannot clearly separate the context and the phenomenon (Yin, 2014). This study aims to determine how Chinese international undergraduate students navigate the three phases of the college choice process defined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and finally ended up at State University. These decision-making behavioral events occur in complex real-life contexts and involve interactions with families, peers, schooling, and larger social changes such as the globalization of education.

¹ All names of students and institution are pseudonyms.

Research Site

This study was conducted at State University, a public research university in a mid-sized city in the northeastern U.S. State University is ranked in the “very competitive” category according to the 2017 Barron’s Selectivity Categories. In the fall of 2019, the institution had an approximate enrollment of 32,000 students. The State University is recognized as one of the major host campuses for international students in the U.S., with over 4600 international students, comprising more than 14% of total enrollment. Among these international students, those from China, India, and Korea represent the largest populations. International applicants whose native language is not English are required to achieve a minimum TOEFL of 79 (internet-based) or 550 (paper-based) to be considered for admission.

The State University was chosen as the research site due to its status as one of the major host campuses for international students, aligning with the study's focus. Additionally, many large public research universities across the U.S. also have a significant population of Chinese international students. While the purpose of a qualitative case study is not to generalize findings, this study, which was conducted at State University, can provide valuable insights and implications for understanding the experiences of Chinese international students in similar institutions.

Participant Selection and Description

Purposeful and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify participants. Initially, four Chinese international students at State University were approached, and they referred to an additional six participants, resulting in a total of ten. All participants were undergraduate students at State University when this study was conducted, and they self-identified as Chinese international students. It was necessary for participants to have a current student status to ensure that they had gone through the college choice process within the past five years. The participants differed in terms of gender, major, and year of college. Among them, six are women, and four are men. Four participants were pursuing business majors. Three participants majored in mathematics. One participant was undecided about major, and the remaining two participants were studying psychology or mechanical engineering. In terms of academic year, four participants were freshmen, three were juniors, and the remaining four were seniors. All participants were Chinese citizens born and educated in China before attending State University.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the participants. Each participant was interviewed once, with the interviews lasting approximately 1.5--2 hours. The interviews took place in an appointment-required meeting room in the university library. Prior to each

interview, written consent was obtained from the participant, who granted permission for the recording, transcription, and subsequent analysis or use of the data collected from them. The interviews followed an interview protocol that aimed to learn about the students' experiences during each phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. Whenever students mentioned the roles of significant others, such as families, friends, teachers, or private agents, follow-up questions were asked to capture the impacts of those individuals. As the researchers and the participants were native Mandarin speakers, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin. Conducting the interviews in the participants' native language helped create a comfortable environment and ensured the collection of maximum and accurate data. Fieldnotes were taken during and immediately after the interviews to capture additional observations and insights.

Data Analysis

The recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed. These transcripts, along with fieldnotes, were uploaded into ATLAS ti., a qualitative data analysis software program. In the initial cycle of analysis, the authors adopted the structural coding strategy outlined by Saldaña (2016). The structural coding strategy is appropriate, "especially for those employing multiple participants, standardized or semi-structured data-gathering protocols, hypothesis testing, or exploratory investigations to gather topics, lists, or indexes of major categories or themes" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 98). A code list was created on the basis of the interview protocol. For example, a code such as "reasons for studying abroad" was established to capture responses to questions regarding how students made the decision to study abroad. As the first two transcripts were being coded, some of the major structural codes were refined into more detailed subordinate codes. For example, the code "reasons for studying abroad" was broken down into "reasons for studying abroad – Gaokao Pressure", "reasons for studying abroad – peer influence", "reasons for studying abroad – family influence", and "reasons for studying abroad – negative schooling experience (academic/social)". These codes were subsequently grouped into three families that aligned with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase college choice model: predisposition, search, and choice. This grouping strategy helped frame the information presented in the findings section of the study.

Positionality

During the data collection and analysis stages, we were cognizant of our positionality and identity as both insider and outsider researchers. As both authors were Chinese international doctoral students, we held the advantage of being insiders within the Chinese international students' community. This allowed us to gain access to potential participants and establish trust with them. We shared a similar cultural and social background with the potential interviewees, who had undergone a similar transition from China to the U.S. Furthermore, we spoke the

same native language as the participants did, which created a sense of ease and comfort during the interviews.

However, we also recognized that we were outsiders in certain respects. Given that graduate students study in the U.S. after graduating from college in China, we had limited knowledge of the participants' experiences in preparing for study abroad as high school students in China. We acknowledge that graduate school choice and application processes differ from college preparation, choice, and application processes. These differences stemmed not only from the disparity in the education levels we were situated in but also from the age gap between us and how the mechanisms and norms of studying abroad had evolved over the years. Therefore, we remained mindful of this distinction and posed follow-up questions to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences.

FINDINGS

The study highlights that participants shared similar experiences in deciding to study abroad in the U.S. and faced challenges during the college choice process. These students, in the predisposition phase, had the privilege of choosing to study abroad, often because of factors such as a middle-class family background and a strong social network. However, despite their privilege, the participants encountered difficulties in the search and choice phases of the college choice process. Specifically, they faced challenges in accessing adequate and accurate information about U.S. colleges and establishing connections with these institutions.

Predisposition: “Plan B” Privilege

The study revealed that participants viewed studying abroad as a viable alternative to the Gaokao, the Chinese College Entrance Examination. This perception stemmed from a combination of factors, including the high pressure and uncertain outcomes associated with the Gaokao, the social and financial resources of parents, and beliefs about the positive outcomes of studying abroad. The participants recognized that their parents had the financial means to support their endeavors. They were aware of their parents' economic capabilities and encouraged by parents, relatives, or friends to seek higher education. This awareness likely influenced their decision-making process and willingness to consider studying abroad as a viable option.

Qingcheng, a senior in mechanical engineering, discussed the role of the Gaokao and how her parents were influenced by her friend's parents.

At that time [second semester of junior year in high school], I knew I had a good chance of getting to tier-one universities for sure, but not top-tier universities. It made me feel awkward, as who knows what would happen during the exams. Meanwhile, my parents were also feeling stressed. One day, while walking in the yard, they happened to meet my friend's father and engaged in a conversation with him. He shared with my parents how studying in the U.S. helped his daughter grow and

develop important qualities. According to him, she became more understanding of others, took responsibility for herself, and became independent. In addition, he also praised the quality of education in the U.S. This conversation made my parents realize that [studying abroad could be a viable option for me].

The participants in the study, such as Qingcheng, were academically prepared but uncertain about their performance on the Gaokao, China's only college admission criterion. They likened it to a situation where “ten thousand people cross the single-plank bridge.” In comparison, participants viewed the holistic admissions process in U.S. colleges as offering a greater chance of securing admission to a “good institution.” For instance, Runren, a freshman who had not yet decided on a major, was influenced by his friend who had been studying abroad since high school. His friend suggested that Runren could be admitted to a much better college than he would be through Gaokao in China. Additionally, given that his father, a senior administrator in a national bank, had the financial means to support him, Runren discussed the idea of studying abroad and received strong encouragement from his parents.

In addition to financial support, the study revealed that parental support extended to participants' social networks. Some participants noted that their parents became aware of the option of studying abroad through their colleagues and friends. For example, both Olivia, a junior in business, and Xinni, a senior in business, mentioned that their parents played a significant role in their decisions to study abroad. Olivia and Xinni's parents, who were businessmen, were influenced by their circle of friends, many of whom had children studying abroad. This influence from their parents' social network played a part in shaping their choices.

Two participants mentioned that negative schooling experiences played a role in their decision to study abroad. Qingcheng immediately agreed with her parents when they asked for her opinion about studying abroad at college. Qingcheng explained that she did not like her high school, and she knew that if she agreed to study abroad, she “did not have to go to high school²” because she needed to study in an all-day tutoring center to prepare for TOEFL and SAT. Qingcheng specifically mentioned, “Because my head teacher was awful. I didn't like my head teacher”.

Similarly, Xiaoyu, a junior in psychology, had discussions with her parents about studying abroad, but negative schooling experiences were the main reason for her consideration. Xiaoyu's reasons encompassed both social and academic

² Students can get high school diploma as long as they pass the graduation exams which usually happen in the second year of the three-year high school. In the last year of high school, students go to high school for preparing for the Gaokao. So some of the participants did not go to high school in the senior year but they were still able to get high school diploma.

issues, indicating a more comprehensive impact on her decision-making process. As she said,

... because my ex-boyfriend was in the same high school as me. We were unpleasant with each other. I felt very awkward. It was unnecessary to be like that. It was a waste of time. That was the motivation—the motivation to learn about studying abroad. I did not want to be in the same high school as him. Additionally, when I was in high school, I was weary of studying for different reasons. I did not want to study. Therefore, I thought that things might be better if I study in a different environment and learn different stuff.

Search: Lack of Information

During the preparation and application process for studying abroad, participants in the study faced a lack of information and guidance from various sources. Parents, peers, and private agents were not able to provide adequate support, leaving participants to rely primarily on unofficial websites for information.

While the participants' parents were supportive and financially involved in their studies, none of them had personal experience studying abroad or spoke English. This was problematic to the participants because of the different college selection criteria between the U.S. and China. In China, college admission is based on standardized exam scores, whereas U.S. colleges perform comprehensive admissions. As a result, participants received limited guidance on specific steps or strategies during the college search and application process. They had to take the initiative to figure things out on their own. One participant, Xiaoyu, mentioned that "My parents pushed me to study, but searching for colleges, I needed to figure it out myself". Similarly, Runren said, "I made the decision. My parents did not know about the application. They do not speak English."

Although most of them had friends either studying abroad or preparing to study abroad, they did not have many connections with friends during the search stage. Taking what Qingcheng said as an example,

I had some friends preparing to study abroad at that time, but we did not contact and discuss with each other [about application]. Interestingly, we only contacted each other after we finished the application process and when we were preparing to leave for the U.S., but during the application, no one contacted each other.

Like many of the other participants, Qingcheng attended all-day tutoring centers to prepare for the TOEFL and SAT exams. However, she did not engage in extensive discussions with her peers at the tutoring center, despite them all preparing to study abroad. She explained that this was because most of her peers from elite international schools had higher aspirations than her did.

Qingcheng: Those students in Huazhong City Super High School, or Huazhong City Foreign Language School, were clear and would say that their aims were the top 40, top 30 [colleges in the U.S.]. If they happened

to only get accepted into a top 50 college, they would cry to death in the restroom.

Interviewer: They are excellent.

Qingcheng: Yes, they are. [Laughter]

Interviewer: So they already knew...

Qingcheng: Yeah. Their aim was clear. They were clear about which university they wanted to go to. In addition, in the TOEFL tutoring center, the teacher... They offered a class to introduce the colleges in the U.S., the rankings, kind of thing. However, the colleges they introduced were only in the top 40. Like Cornell, type of thing. Colleges ranked beyond top 50 were not included.

Among the 10 participants, nine attended regular high schools and did not have the advantages of going through elite pipelines that prepared students to the most elite universities in the U.S. (Lee & Wright, 2016; Liu, 2020), such as elite international prep schools. Like Qingcheng did, they were not as high-achieving elite students and did not have the same level of connections with their peers in the tutoring centers.

In addition, the participants in this conversation expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of support they received from private study abroad agents and complained that they mainly relied on online searching by themselves. Runren lost trust in his agent when he was searching for colleges. He said, "They tend to some colleges they cooperate with... I found that my agent was very subjective [when she recommended colleges for me], so I relied on myself... to search online." Similarly, Amy, another participant, felt that her agent was pushing her toward lower-ranking colleges to ensure her admission, as stated in their contract. Amy said, "you know, they needed to make sure you were admitted as listed in the contract, or they need to refund."

However, notably, none of the participants searched for official websites of U.S. colleges and universities. Instead, they relied heavily on Baidu, a Chinese search engine. They acknowledged that Baidu's search results contained many advertisements, making it difficult to find reliable information. Like Xiaoyu said, "You know when you search on Baidu, there will be many advertisements."

Additionally, as they were physically located in a foreign country, none of the participants actually had direct contact with U.S. colleges and universities during their search process. None of them reached out to college admission offices or even considered doing so. Furthermore, none of them had the opportunity for actual college visits. Although some participants had previously participated in "overseas summer camps" at prestigious U.S. colleges during their middle school or high school years, these experiences were not focused on college visits or shadowing. Rather, they were more of a sightseeing nature, offering a commercialized view of elite institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, or Columbia.

Choice: The Role of Rankings and Reputation

Without a comprehensive understanding of American colleges, Chinese international students have relied primarily on media rankings, particularly the

U.S. News and World Report (USNWP). The participants were not familiar with how these rankings were determined or what criteria were considered in each ranking. However, the USNWR ranking lists, including the “Best Colleges” lists and major rankings, were considered the most important or even the sole criterion by both students and parents when their final decisions were made. The rankings were assumed to guarantee quality.

For example, when asked why she had chosen State University among the colleges she had been accepted to, Xiaoyu replied, “I simply chose the one with the highest ranking.” Similarly, Amy chose State University “because it ranked within the top 100 in USNWR. I just wanted to go to a top 100 university.” In addition to seeking high-quality higher education, participants relied on rankings because they lacked connections and opportunities to shadow colleges and universities in their choice sets. The rankings serve as a substitute for first-hand experiences and contacts in their decision-making process.

In addition to rankings, the presence of famous Chinese alumni also influenced the participants’ decision-making process. Qingcheng mentioned that State University had several notable Chinese alumni, which influenced her perception of the university. She said, “So they [alumni] graduated from State University, and that was important.”

As ranking and reputation were emphasized by most of the participants, few of them considered finance as a factor in their college decisions. The tuition of State University was relatively lower on their lists, but they chose State University not solely based on the lower tuition. Some of them received scholarships from other institutions, but they did not necessarily choose those institutions just because of financial support. Qingcheng, for instance, was offered a scholarship from an institution in Chicago, yet she declined the financial subsidy due to her mother’s concerns about safety in large cities. Runren also give more weight to reputation and quality when choosing a college. “At that time, I thought that colleges not giving me scholarships must be better than colleges giving me scholarships. State University did not give me any scholarship, so I chose State University.”

During the choice process, students rely on various sources of information, such as online published materials, insights from relatives residing in the U.S., and feedback from peers on social media. However, none of the participants mentioned being invited to or participating in any activities specifically designed to welcome or attract admitted students, not even virtually. As a result, they lacked meaningful connections with the institutions they ultimately chose and had limited opportunities to gain a comprehensive understanding of what their chosen colleges would be like before arriving on campus.

DISCUSSION

In light of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice, the data illustrate the decision-making process of Chinese international undergraduate students studying at a large public state university in the northeastern U.S. These students perceive studying abroad as a privileged

opportunity, offering an alternative to the Gaokao examination. They demonstrate various forms of privilege during the search and choice stages but also face challenges due to limited connections to U.S. colleges.

Chinese international students' preference for studying abroad as an alternative to the Gaokao was consistent with previous research framed by the push-pull model. The development of the Chinese economy and fierce competition for college admission are push factors that influence their decision to study overseas (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). The participants in this study also considered their family's stable financial background and the uncertainty surrounding their Gaokao results when deciding to study abroad. Negative experiences in Chinese high schools can also act as push factors, motivating students to seek education opportunities overseas. In addition, as the role of significant others was emphasized in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, parents' networks and peers' suggestions played significant roles in participants' decisions to study abroad. Their choice to study abroad indicated that these well-off students were privileged in possessing multiple choices of higher education to secure themselves better opportunities.

The search process of Chinese international students was more personal than the factors identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). According to the data, students primarily conduct research online themselves, whereas Hossler and Gallagher (1987) reported that during the search process, students connect directly with higher education institutions through activities such as college visits, meetings with college representatives, and participation in reach-out activities from higher education institutions. This lack of institutional connection during the search process can result in students having a vague choice set. In this study, most participants created long lists of institutions to apply to, but these lists did not reflect clear preferences for types of colleges.

Furthermore, unlike affluent and middle-class parents in the U.S., who often play a major role in students' college search (Weis et al., 2014), participants' parents in this study had limited involvement in their search process. Although these parents were economically and emotionally supportive, they lacked knowledge of U.S. college applications and admissions and were thus unable to provide guidance. In addition, this finding contradicts Alebeek and Wilson's (2019) study, which highlighted the role of parents in international students' college choice throughout the three phases identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Notably, Alebeek and Wilson (2019) included international students from different countries, where the conditions could differ from those in China. For example, parents of international students from European and American countries may be more familiar with U.S. higher education and may be more proficient in English (Alebeek & Wilson, 2019). In addition, compared with the literature focusing on domestic students, where school counsellors were studied as major actors in students' college search (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Gast, 2016; Reddick et al., 2011), this study revealed that Chinese international students recruited private agents, whose role could be equivalent to that of school counsellors, to help with their college application, but the agents were not always helpful.

During the choice phase, the data revealed both privileges and challenges faced by Chinese international students. They were financially privileged, which means that they did not need to consider tuition fees or scholarships when making their final decisions. However, the data did not indicate the influence of courtship activities by colleges, as identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Chinese students had limited opportunities to participate in activities organized by colleges, specifically for admitted students, which could have provided them with valuable insights into their potential choices.

Consistent with previous studies (Alfattal, 2017; Chen, 2007; Nicholls, 2018; Xue et al., 2024), the participants attached importance to the quality and reputation of the colleges. They assessed quality and reputation mainly through word-of-mouth information and media rankings. Additionally, the participants in this study considered the presence of famous Chinese alumni, indicating that they valued the reputation of the colleges in their home country.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlighted the privilege enjoyed by Chinese international undergraduate students in terms of financial resources and social networks, which significantly influence their decision-making process regarding studying abroad and the college choice process. However, these students faced challenges due to their limited connections with U.S. colleges and universities.

As an increasing number of U.S. colleges recognize the value of international student recruitment for enhancing campus diversity, it would be beneficial for both sides if U.S. colleges take the step of reaching out to prospective international students. For example, institutions could operate social media pages in multiple languages to increase their reputation and promote themselves among prospective students (Xue et al., 2024). This initiative could also provide an avenue for international students to connect with institutions from far away. In addition, through bridge programs such as summer camps and virtual open house events before students arrive in the U.S., colleges and universities can provide opportunities for prospective international students to gain first-hand experience with U.S. higher education before embarking on diploma programs.

Limitations of the Study

Importantly, this case study focused specifically on Chinese international students at a public research university categorized as “very competitive” in Barron’s selectivity categories. We involved a homogenous group of students at the specific case study site to add knowledge about the college choice experience of Chinese international students beyond the elite pipeline (Lee & Wright, 2016). As outlined in the methodology section, students’ experiences in other types of institutions, such as elite universities, small liberal arts colleges, and less selective colleges, may differ. In studies of the wealthiest and high-performance Chinese students who aim for elite universities in the U.S. (Lee & Wright, 2016; Liu, 2020), they have received exclusive resources and support from families and

schools since a young age. For example, in Lee and Wright's (2016) study, students benefit from arranged trips to elite institutions and visits by college representatives. Their experiences demonstrate the elite pipeline of Chinese international students' college preparation and choices, and most of them end up at elite universities in the U.S. or other Western developed countries instead of large public state universities that are not listed on the top tier. Therefore, caution should be exercised when these findings are applied to the broader population of Chinese international students.

Future research could explore the decision-making of studying abroad, college preparation, and choices among students who have gone through different pipelines, from elite international students who ended up at top universities to those who study abroad in less selective institutions. Their experiences and needs may vary.

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× None

Some sections, with minimal or no editing

Some sections, with extensive editing

Entire work, with minimal or no editing

Entire work, with extensive editing

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