

There or Back Again?
The Motivations and Future Plans of Chinese Students in the United States

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Abstract of Thesis

There or Back Again?: The Motivations and Future Plans of Chinese Students in the United States

China sends more students overseas than any country in the world. Already a nation with a long tradition of foreign-educated students playing a leading role in its development, it is in the midst of the largest study abroad movement in its history. This paper examines the current generation of Chinese students in the United States – their reasons for leaving China and their intentions for either returning or settling overseas after they have completed their education. It is based on extensive one-on-one interviews with Chinese students enrolled during the 2011-2012 academic year. Most of these students were studying on their own funds, and pursuing an American degree represented an elite alternative option to the educational opportunities that were available to them in China. As they contemplated their long-term plans, the majority of students expressed a strong intention or openness to moving back after graduation. A closer look at their motivations, however, throws into question the basis of China's current "reverse brain drain." Are more graduates returning home because they see a changed China with a booming economy? Or does the pursuit of overseas credentials suggest a coping strategy that allows certain individuals to skirt ongoing problems in China's educational and professional environment? The two trends hold vastly different implications for the future of China's overseas student phenomenon. This paper also contains recommendations for the United States about how to better retain and accommodate Chinese students.

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Section 1: Introduction

Foreign-educated students have played a historically transformative role in developing China's economy and shaping the country's politics and society. This has been true since China's first overseas students returned from the United States in the 1880s, throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century with the education of revolutionary leaders in Japan, Europe, and the Soviet Union, and during the modern reform era, when the number of students both going abroad and returning has grown dramatically.¹ Foreign-educated Chinese have included some of the most impactful figures in modern Chinese history, including heads of state, university presidents, top scientists, and industry leaders. They have also included some of the most notable Chinese that left and never returned, such as the generation that stayed abroad following the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Most foreign-educated Chinese may have achieved neither fame nor notoriety, but they have always been coveted by China and other countries for their skill and expertise. For a Chinese government that increasingly worries about the cultivation of advanced human capital, returned students are what can turn a brain drain into a brain gain. On the other hand, students who remain overseas represent not only a loss of talent, but they could also indicate a deeper dissatisfaction or concern about China's future.

The historical relevance of China's foreign-educated students makes understanding the motivations and goals of the current generation all the more important. Though it remains a minority of Chinese who go overseas for their education, their numbers have exploded in

¹ For concise historical overview of China's foreign-educated returnees see Cheng Li, "Coming Home to Teach: Status and Mobility of Returnees in China's Higher Education," in *Bridging Minds across the Pacific: U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978-2003*, ed. Cheng Li (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005), 69-110.

recent years. In 2011, China was the largest source of outbound students in the world, with more than 1.4 million studying abroad.² Most of these students have gone to countries with Western systems of education, such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, which have seen soaring enrollments.³ In 2011-2012, a record 194,029 Chinese students enrolled in the United States, meaning that more than one out of every four international students was from China.⁴ While the Chinese and overseas media have broadly reported on this phenomenon, however, there have been few scholarly studies of the most recent wave of students. Previous studies of Chinese educated abroad during the reform era tend to focus on those who have already returned and are far along in their careers, while also overlooking the reasons why they came abroad in the first place. (The last significant quantitative study of American-educated Chinese while they were still in the United States, which explored whether or not they would return to China, was conducted in 1993.)⁵ As a result, assumptions about the plans and motivations of foreign-educated Chinese students today, and what they signify, are often based on speculation and received wisdom.

This paper looks at Chinese citizens who have been recently enrolled American degree programs, during the 2011-2012 academic year, in an attempt to better understand the current

² “Students studying abroad increase 23%,” *China Daily*, August 21, 2012, accessed October 22, 2012, www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-08/15/content_15676282.htm.

³ The top three destinations of Chinese students in 2008-2009 were the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. “Chinese Students Overseas,” Project Atlas – China, accessed October 22, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/en/Services/Project-Atlas/China/Chinas-Students-Overseas/>.

⁴ Other statistics on the rapid rate of overseas Chinese student growth: Between 2006-2007 and 2011-2012, year-on-year growth in Chinese student enrollment in the United States averaged 23.5%. There were only 67,723 Chinese students in the United States in 2006-2007. India had the second largest number of students (100,270) in the United States in 2011-2012, but they were still only about half as many as from China. “Open Doors Fact Sheet: China,” Institute of International Education, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fact-Sheets-by-Country/~media/Files/Corporate/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-2012/Country/China-Open-Doors-2012.ashx>. “2012 Fast Facts,” Institute of International Education, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/~media/Files/Corporate/Open-Doors/Fast-Facts/Fast%20Facts%202012.ashx>.

⁵ David Zweig, Changgui Chen, and Stanley Rosen, *China's Brain Drain to the United States: Views of Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars in the 1990s* (Berkeley: University of California–Berkeley, 1995)

outbound flow of students. It examines the Chinese study abroad movement as a phenomenon – who is involved, and what enables it – and explains the individual prerogatives that motivate students to go overseas and eventually determine whether or not they will return. It also explores what individual decisions to study abroad and (potentially) return home suggest about the Chinese government’s ongoing efforts to encourage a “reverse brain drain.”

Section 2 provides a contextual framework for the rest of the paper by looking at recent international and domestic changes that have facilitated the current overseas student movement. The growing outflow of Chinese students has been enabled by four factors, which are the creation of an international marketplace in education, increasing private wealth in China, favorable Chinese government policy, and favorable foreign government policy.

Section 3 describes the methodology of the study, for which I interviewed sixty-eight Chinese students and recent graduates from universities in the Washington DC area on their reasons for leaving China and their intentions for either returning or settling overseas after they have completed their degrees. As a whole, respondents from among this group were young, unattached, and self-funded, and many had strong Chinese academic credentials and well-traveled backgrounds.

Sections 4 and 5, which comprise the body of the study, describe students’ individual calculations. Section 4 explains the specific factors that pushed and pulled students to the United States and challenges some common stereotypes about overseas students. For most students, the decision to leave was both individually-motivated and family-supported, and pursuing an American degree represented an elite alternative option to the educational system and sometimes limited opportunities that they found in China. Study abroad was also an open-ended project: they did not necessarily see themselves as immigrants when they left China, but nor were they visiting scholars who would return home immediately after graduation.

Section 5 explores the short- and long-term decision-making process about whether to return to China or settle down overseas. Perceptions of professional opportunity, family situation, and social and cultural belonging were the three most important factors that influenced their decision-making. The section also explores differences in political opinions between respondents, as well as secondary factors that influenced respondent plans for the future. Most respondents were undecided about where they would end up or hoped to eventually move back to China. Few were strongly committed to permanently living abroad.

The final section of the paper reexamines respondent preferences and motivations within the broader context of China's overseas student movement. On one hand, China's foreign-educated graduates are more open to returning to home than ever before, in part because of the professional opportunities that exist in the country's growing economy. On the other hand, the reasons that many students give for studying abroad and (potentially) returning suggest that China has yet to resolve many of the fundamental problems underlying its brain drain. For some students, the pursuit of overseas credentials may be coping strategy that allows certain individuals to skirt ongoing problems in China's educational and professional environment. This section also suggests policy for the United States about how to better retain and accommodate Chinese students by facilitating their integration into American society and campus life.

Section 2: The International and Domestic Context of Overseas Mobility

The rapid rise of Chinese student mobility over the past decade would not have been possible without significant developments both within China and internationally. The formation of an international marketplace in education was crucial for connecting larger numbers of Chinese citizens with foreign schools as an alternative to domestic education. Within China, increasing private wealth was necessary to support typically expensive foreign tuitions, fees, and costs of living. Both the Chinese and foreign governments have also come to value educational exchange, largely for economic reasons, and they have taken diverse measures to facilitate international student flows. Taken together, these factors have enabled increasing numbers of Chinese students to pursue the study abroad option.

An international marketplace in education

On the most fundamental level, large-scale international student mobility has arisen because of expanded standardized testing and global university rankings. They have created an international marketplace from which students can select schools. Internationally recognized standardized tests, including English proficiency tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS, have become increasingly accessible to Chinese students and offer an alternative to the national exams that determine domestic educational advancement. The number of IELTS test-takers in China alone exceeds 300,000 each year.¹ On the other hand, global university rankings have become reference points for students interested in studying abroad. Shanghai Jiaotong University has famously published its *Academic Ranking of World Universities* every year since

¹ Chinese IELTS Official Website, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.chinaielts.org/en/>.

2003, on which Western universities routinely dominate.² American universities have developed a reputation in China as the best in the world.

Individual schools also make deliberate efforts to increase their international student enrollments. International students may be valued because they increase diversity on campus but also because they bring economic benefit.³ The economics of international education have attracted media attention in both the United States and China, sometimes drawing attention to negative aspects such as malfeasance by intermediary agents and the problem of cash-strapped schools that over-enroll Chinese students.⁴ For good and bad, it has become commonplace for scholars to describe international student mobility as part of a competitive market for higher education, in which universities, colleges, and institutions fight for students not only within their own countries but with their counterparts abroad.⁵ The spread of joint and dual degree programs and branch campuses, the popularization of short-term study abroad tours, the growth of a cottage industry of agencies specializing in educational exchange, and the increase in university-to-university exchanges through Confucius Institutes are other factors that broaden marketplace awareness and create new opportunities for Chinese students to study abroad.

Increasing private wealth within China

² Academic Ranking of World Universities, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.arwu.org/>.

³ In the United States, international students enrolled at public universities are required to pay out-of-state tuitions. The practice of charging higher tuition fees for international students than domestic students is common in OECD countries and other G20 countries. OECD Publishing, *Education at a Glance 2011*, (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011), 324.

⁴ Bloomberg has published the most thorough article on the potential of U.S. schools to take advantage of Chinese students. Daniel Golden, "Chinese Students Lose as U.S. Schools Exploit Need," *Bloomberg*, October 19, 2011, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-10-19/chinese-lose-promise-for-52-000-as-u-s-schools-exploit-need.html>.

⁵ Caroline Macready and Clive Tucker, *Who Goes Where and Why?: An Overview and Analysis of Global Educational Mobility* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2011), 3.

The flip side of the expanding marketplace for international education is that increasing numbers of Chinese students and their families can afford to participate. Beginning in the 1990s, the percentage of students who self-financed their overseas education began to surge.⁶ These students differed from earlier generations who were more frequently sponsored by the government and local institutions. The capacity for students to fund their own education overseas was necessary for transforming student migration from a state project into the “societal phenomenon” that it is today.⁷ Almost all of the students I interviewed were, in fact, studying on personal or family funds. A strengthened Chinese currency has made it even more affordable for students to study abroad, and students who would have waited until graduate school may now begin their overseas education at the undergraduate level or earlier.⁸

The quality of needing to meet a particular income threshold in order to study abroad is significant for two other reasons. First, educational loans are virtually unheard of in China.⁹ Second, the cost of studying abroad in the most desirable countries is still prohibitively enormous for most Chinese. In 2010-2011, Chinese students in the United States each contributed an average of \$25,172 to the economy, with most of that money coming from

⁶ Self-financed students use either their own funds or funds from family, friends, and foreign institutions to pay for their study abroad.

⁷ Xiang Bao and Wei Shen, “International Student Migration and Social Stratification in China,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 29 (2009): 516.

⁸ Allan E. Goodman and Martin Davidson, “The International Dimensions of U.S. Higher Education: Trends and New Perspectives,” in *International Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National Trends and New Directions*, eds. Rajika Bhandari and Peggy Blumenthal, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 96.

⁹ Mark McDonald, “Chinese Students Paying U.S. Tuitions – How? And Why?” *International Herald Tribune*, February 7, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/07/how-chinese-students-pay-u-s-tuitions/>.

overseas.¹⁰ This is not to say that middle- and upper-class Chinese are the only students studying abroad, but cost has been an important limiting factor.¹¹

Favorable Chinese government policy

The Chinese government plays a major role in supporting study abroad, which it values both for its own sake and for the human capital that students bring back when they return. Potential returnees receive attention for their capacity to drive a Chinese brain gain, but the government also supports educational mobility in general in order to promote Chinese culture, foster people-to-people communication, enhance the competitiveness and internationalization of Chinese higher education, and cultivate international talent who, even if they do not permanently resettle in China, may still benefit China by collaborating with Chinese colleagues.¹² The history of China gradually liberalizing its borders for educational exchange has been well-documented, from once strictly obligating people to return to now allowing greater freedom to come and go.¹³ David Zweig has described it as a learning process for the central government, whereby it recognized that the best way to discourage a brain drain was to let people go abroad freely and then compete for them to return later.¹⁴ In addition to creating a more open environment for educational exchange, the Chinese central and local government financially sponsors students and mid-career professionals to travel abroad for

¹⁰ Calculated by dividing the total contribution of Chinese students to the economy (\$3,966,000,000) by the total number of students who studied in the U.S. during that period (157,558). “Open Doors Data,” Institute of International Education, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students>.

¹¹ In her ethnographic study of overseas Chinese students in Australia, Europe, Japan, New Zealand, North America, and Singapore, Vanessa Fong was surprised at how many socioeconomically average-to-below-average singletons ended up studying abroad. Her respondents, however, all came from the same public high school in Liaoning province. *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 94.

¹² David Zweig, Chung Siu Fung, and Donglin Han, “Redefining the Brain Drain: China’s ‘Diaspora Option,’” *Science, Technology & Society* 13:1 (2008): 1-33.

¹³ Cheng Li, “Coming Home to Teach,” 76-83.

study. Nationally, the Chinese Scholarship Council provides 12,000 scholarships each year for Chinese citizens to study overseas; though this is still a drop in the bucket compared to the hundreds of thousands who study abroad without institutional support.¹⁵

Favorable foreign government policy

Foreign governments facilitate international education by legislating visa policies that determine how easily international students can arrive, for what duration, and under what conditions (such as work-eligibility). Although the United States lacks a unified national strategy for international education, it has generally kept its doors open by streamlining regulations and providing support and advising programs.¹⁶ A significant pull factor for the United States is the widespread perception that it welcomes international students to its shores.¹⁷ The United States also has a particular history of accommodating Chinese students. Following the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, approximately 50,000 Chinese students and scholars obtained U.S. permanent residency under the Chinese Student Protection Act.¹⁸

Host countries such as the United States have diverse incentives for encouraging inbound student mobility. International students in the United States are considered highly-skilled human capital, especially for their contributions in science and engineering.¹⁹ They

¹⁴ David Zweig, "Learning How to Compete: China's Efforts to Encourage a 'Reverse Brain Drain,'" *International Labor Review* 145:1 (2006): 187.

¹⁵ Rajika Bhandari, Raisa Belyanvina, and Robert Gutierrez, *Student Mobility and the Internationalization of Higher Education: National Policies and Strategies from Six World Regions* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2011), 50.

¹⁶ Macready and Tucker have written a detailed case-study of U.S. government efforts in support of international education. *Who Goes Where and Why?*, 57.

¹⁷ Patricia Chow, *What International Students Think About U.S. Higher Education: Attitudes and Perceptions of Prospective Students in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America* (New York: Institute of International Education, 2011), 29.

¹⁸ Cheng Li, "Coming Home to Teach," 78.

¹⁹ U.S. reliance on foreign-born talent in the science and engineering workforce has escalated since the 1990s. Since 2006, foreign-born students have earned over 50 percent of doctoral degrees in mathematics, computer science, physics, engineering, and economics, with most coming from China, India, and South Korea. Rajika Bhandari and Peggy Blumenthal, "Global Student Mobility and the Twenty-First Century Silk Road: National Trends and New Directions," in *International*

comprise one of the largest export sectors in the U.S. economy, calculated at over \$20 billion in 2010-2011, for what they spend on cost-of-living, tuition, books, fees, and related expenses.²⁰ (Educational services are considered tradable commodities, and hence qualify as exports, under the General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS] of the World Trade Organization.) The United States also sees educational exchange as an opportunity for public diplomacy. Other host countries value international students for the same reasons, but priorities may vary, such as in Australia (where education is the top export sector and accepting international students eases public spending cuts in education), the European Union (where regional student mobility develops a pan-EU political and economic consciousness), and Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia (where transforming into education hubs is part of a directed strategy to promote research and innovation).

Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National Trends and New Directions, eds. Rajika Bhandari and Peggy Blumenthal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.

²⁰ On average, over 70 percent of international student funding comes from international sources. Chinese students contributed approximately \$4 billion of the \$20+ billion total. "Open Doors Data."

Section 3: Methodology and Characteristics of Respondents

The Chinese students interviewed for this study came abroad within the relatively hospitable environment for overseas study detailed in the previous section. Their relative affluence, the ways in which they valued their education and perceived their educational trajectory as distinctly international, and the facility with which they moved across borders were all part of their identities. These characteristics would inform their goals while studying abroad in the United States and their intentions for after graduation.

Altogether, I interviewed sixty-eight international students between November 2011 and May 2012. All respondents were Chinese citizens who were raised on the mainland prior to coming overseas. Interviews were open-ended, one-on-one, and conducted in Washington DC, Virginia, and Maryland. They ranged in length from thirty to ninety minutes, with most averaging forty minutes to an hour. Respondents were enrolled in full-time undergraduate or graduate degree programs at the time of their interview, except for two who had completed their degrees within the previous year. Most students were enrolled at George Washington University in Washington DC, with the rest attending nearby American University, Georgetown University, and the University of Maryland—College Park. Respondents were identified by peer referral, which means that the sample of students was not randomly selected.¹ Among particular challenges, PhD students were often too busy to be interviewed, and students unconfident in their English ability were reluctant to be interviewed in English. In order to achieve some diversity among interviewees, during my last two months of

¹ This ran the risk of excluding Chinese students who infrequently interact with other Chinese students. I attempted to overcome this difficulty by asking non-Chinese peers and colleagues for referrals.

interviewing I specifically reached out to males, doctoral candidates, and those with more uncommon fields of study. (The tables on Pages 15-16 show the demographic backgrounds of respondents.)

Almost all students were from single-child families, of Han ethnicity, on student visas, and studying abroad on their own funds, meaning individual or family savings, sometimes aided by a university scholarship. Most were in their early twenties, even the graduate students, whose average age was between twenty-three and twenty-four; and most had only been in the United States for one or two years. The group as a whole was academically high-achieving, well-traveled, and privileged. For reference, George Washington University places in the top “201-300” tier of the Shanghai Jiaotong University rankings for 2012, which is the same as the fifth, sixth, and seventh single best universities in mainland China.² Its standards of admission are commensurate to any other well-regarded, accredited institution of higher education in the United States. The respondents’ educational credentials from within China were also impressive. Of the forty-six who completed at least part of their university education in China, almost three-fifths attended Project 211 universities, which is a group of 106 universities designated by the government as key institutions of higher education.³ Another four attended universities outside of the Project 211 system but still considered to be top tier universities.⁴ Of the sixty-seven students who attended high school in China, sixty-one attended a key school, a foreign language school, or an international school, rather than a regular high school. This elite

² The University of Maryland–College Park ranks 38, Georgetown University ranks 301-400, and American University does not place in the top 500. Of course, these rankings are subjective – and in this case the indicators are more than a little funky (the sole criterion for evaluating alumni is Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals) – but they are taken seriously by students and families nevertheless. Academic Ranking of World Universities.

³ A complete list of Project 211 universities is available online. 211工程大學名單, accessed November 5, 2012, <http://www.eol.cn/html/g/gxmd/211.shtml>.

⁴ Two students attended the National University of Defense Technology, and two students attended the University of International Relations, both of which have a history of strong ties to the government.

academic background also reflects on their economic capacity. Annual tuition for undergraduate students enrolling at George Washington University in fall 2011 was \$44,103; and attending key secondary schools in China can be significantly more expensive than attending a normal school.

The relative youth of respondents, meanwhile, made it unsurprising that most of them lacked work experience in China. Only six respondents, all of them graduate students, had professional experience of more than eight months, and none had more than three years of experience. Most had short-term internship or volunteer experience in China, often from their time as undergraduate students in Chinese universities. Professional experience in the United States was similarly limited. The only two respondents with full-time overseas experience were the two who had recently graduated and started full time jobs. Fourteen respondents had on-campus jobs, such as assisting professors or working in university libraries, but thirty-three interviewees had zero overseas work or internship experience at the time of the interview. The lack of professional experience, especially prior to beginning graduate school, may be unusual for American students in the United States, but it appears to be more common among Chinese students. It also suggests that respondents, absent significant financial aid or sponsorship from an outside institution, were highly dependent on family support to finance their study abroad, fitting what has been observed about student mobility from East Asia in general.⁵

Lastly, the geographic origin of respondents from within China was fairly widespread, representing twenty-two of mainland China's thirty-one provincial regions. However, a disproportionate number came from the more prosperous coastal provinces,⁶ and thirty

⁵ Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, *Student Mobilities, Migration, and the Internationalization of Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 18-19.

⁶ In general, most Chinese study abroad students come from developed regions like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. Yang Xinyu, "Mobility Strategies and Trends: The Case of China," in *International Students and Global Mobility*

respondents came from one of the top five richest provincial regions in China.⁷ They also came from cosmopolitan backgrounds. About two-thirds of had previously studied, vacationed, interned, or lived abroad, not including those who had only been to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The mobility of the respondents stands out as exceptional, and expensive, and contributes to the image of overseas Chinese students as coming from middle- to upper-class backgrounds.

in Higher Education: National Trends and New Directions, eds. Rajika Bhandari and Peggy Blumenthal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33.

⁷ Zhang Junmian, "Top 10 richest provincial regions in China 2011," *China.org.cn*, March 16, 2012, accessed October 25, 2012, http://china.org.cn/top10/2012-03/16/content_24912437.htm.

Table 1: Biographical Background of Respondents (N=68)

Gender	
Male	26
Female	42

Ethnicity	
Han	65
Hui	2
Manzu	1

Age (All Respondents)*	
Average	22.4
Median	23
Range	17-28

Age (Graduate Students)*	
Average	23.4
Median	23
Range	21-28

Siblings	
None	60
1+	8

Visa Status	
F-1 Visa (Student Visa)	65
Permanent Resident	3

Hometown (Province)			
Beijing	12	Dalian	2
Zhejiang	8	Gansu	2
Shandong	5	Henan	2
Jiangsu	4	Hubei	2
Jiangxi	4	Tianjin	2
Shanghai	4	Fujian	1
Anhui	3	Hebei	1
Guangdong	3	Heilongjiang	1
Hunan	3	Inner Mongolia	1
Sha'anxi	3	Shanxi	1
Sichuan	3	Yunnan	1

Time Spent in the United States (Current Visit Only)	
1 year or less	38
2 years	14
3 years	6
4 years	3
5 years or more	7

International Travel Experience Prior to Current Overseas Study	
Yes	44
No	24

*One respondent declined to provide her age

Table 2: Educational Background of Respondents

Current Level of Study	
Bachelor's	18
Master's	46
Doctorate	4

Current Institution	
George Washington University	59
American University	5
Georgetown University	2
University of Maryland–College Park	2

Source of Funding	
Self-funded	67
Government-funded	1

Current Field of Study			
International Affairs	17	Computer Science	8
Political Science/Public Policy	4	Engineering	5
Law	1	Mathematics/Statistics	5
 		 	
Economics/Finance	9	Hospitality/Tourism	3
Accounting	5	Media/Communications	2
Business	3	Area Studies	2
Trade and Investment	1	Anthropology	1
International Development	1	French	1
		Undecided	1

Chinese University Experience	
None	22
Yes	46
Project 211 University	28

Chinese High School Experience	
None	1
Yes	67
“Key” School	61

Section 4: Reasons for Pursuing Education in the United States

Scholars of international student mobility describe how “push” and “pull” factors compel students to leave their home country and attract them to certain destinations over others.¹ For respondents, the most common push factors were dissatisfaction with the Chinese education system, family encouragement, and uncertain professional prospects at home. The most common pull factors were the high quality and reputation of the American education system, the opportunity to advance their long-term professional interests, and the possibility of broadening their horizons and living independently. Secondary factors included improving their English fluency, positive prior study abroad experiences and encounters with foreigners in China, fascination with American culture and society, belief in the United States as the world’s most developed nation, and the possibility of contributing to China in the future. The tables on Pages 28-29 include a complete list of respondent reasons for studying abroad.

This section explains the three most important areas that influenced respondent decision-making – education, family, and professional development – as well as some of the factors that were notably absent. In education, the decision to study abroad was largely a referendum between the American and Chinese systems. It was the most important reason for going overseas, and almost all respondents believed that American education was not only better resourced but also had a more accessible and pedagogically effective system. In family, parents frequently played a significant role in encouraging and financially enabling the study

¹ Push factors are inability to find what one wants at home, which may include limitations on the quantity, quality, or range of domestic educational opportunities. Pull factors are specific to host countries and include 1) high-quality or specialized study opportunities; 2) the local language of instruction and everyday life; 3) traditional links and diaspora; 4) affordable cost; 5) internationally recognized qualifications; 6) post-study career opportunities; 7) good prospects of successful graduation within a predictable timeframe; 8) effective marketing by the destination country or institution; 9) home country support for going there to study; and 10) helpful visa arrangements for studying and for work while studying. Macready and Tucker, *Who Goes Where and Why?*, 39, 45-46.

abroad venture. They believed in the value of American education and of broadening horizons through international experience. Few parents expected to either move overseas with their children or for their children to return home to the family business, as has sometimes been portrayed. In professional development, respondents usually came overseas with strong professional ambitions and paid close attention to their career prospects. They were not anxious, since they expected their overseas degree and experience to make them more competitive, but many were strategic because they anticipated entering an uncertain labor market after graduation and strongly desired to prove themselves. In the end, most respondents approached study abroad as an open-ended project during which they would explore and develop as individuals, with an indefinite timetable for potentially returning. For the most part, their immediate decision to leave China was not reflective of dissatisfaction or “voting with their feet” (*except* against the education system). Most did not see themselves as immigrants, but neither did they see themselves as visiting scholars who would return to China as soon as their student visas expired.

American education versus Chinese education

For almost all respondents, the perceived superiority of American education was the primary reason for studying abroad. It was the one area in which respondents described overwhelming satisfaction with the United States and dissatisfaction or ambivalence with China. Their explanations, in this regard, tended to follow three main themes: 1) American education had top-tier resources, 2) the American education had a superior system for learning, and 3) American education was more accessible, especially at the higher levels.

Respondents expressed the first of these points, that the United States offered the best educational resources, in a multitude of ways, often beginning with generalities about how American education was “the best in the world” because it provided access to advanced

concepts and technologies, accomplished professors, and academic programs that were unavailable in China. Graduate students described how the United States possessed the most innovative technologies within their fields, for instance, of computer science and engineering. Those in less cutting-edge fields also spoke about the value of learning from American models, such as the American way of practicing accounting. Others explained how studying in Washington DC provided unequalled access to top policymakers and intellectuals; whereas even if they had previously attended a prestigious university in Beijing, opportunities to engage with important names back home were often scarce. Respondents who could not provide specific examples tended to speak about the esteemed reputation of American scholars and scholarship, the belief of which was common knowledge in China. Some were partially inspired to study overseas because many of the textbooks used in Chinese universities were originally written or researched by American professors. Lastly, a small number of respondents said the academic specializations that they wanted to pursue were simply unavailable back home. This included one graduate student in international development, whose field was still nascent in China, and another graduate student in hospitality, whose field was usually only taught in China's vocational schools.

The second major distinction that respondents drew between American and Chinese education was more fundamental. Respondents believed strongly in what they saw as the American system of teaching and learning, and they contrasted it to their previous experiences within the Chinese system (or to what they had been told). Most echoed what have by now become common negative tropes about American versus Chinese education: American education provides students more opportunities to independently explore their interests and fosters creativity and critical thinking; Chinese education is comparatively rote, rigid, and exam-based; American high school education is less intensely pressurized than Chinese high

school education; and American higher education is more practical and rigorous than Chinese higher education. The actual strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese education system have been well-analyzed elsewhere² – but for the purposes of understanding respondent motivations it is enough to know that they believed the American system and style were best-suited to their personalities and provided the most optimal learning environment. If this was not necessarily true for all levels of study, then it was at least true for their current level. Undergraduate students frequently emphasized that their American university offered a more serious study environment and more committed professors. Their opinions reflected two common schools of thought about Chinese universities – first, that students face intense study pressure leading up to college, only to have all of that pressure removed once they are enrolled, which creates an overly-leisurely atmosphere; and second, that Chinese professors are often incentivized to devote more time to research and publication than to teaching.³ Graduate students, on the other hand, dwelt more often on the research environment and research requirements of Chinese advanced degree programs, which they respectively described as lacking integrity and burdensome and impractical.⁴ A small number of respondents also offered very specific reasons and personal narratives for leaving the Chinese system behind; such as one graduate student who was once enrolled in a premier undergraduate journalism

² For a well-written review of higher education in China see: Michael Gallagher et al., *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education: China* (Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009)

³ One graduate student who attended the highly regarded Renmin University in Beijing rebutted the notion that having well-known professors was a necessarily a marker of quality education. She described how some of her professors would only show up for the first day of class and then have PhD students take care of everything else. Other professors, she believed, talked arrogantly and incessantly about how busy they were with other projects and engagements.

⁴ The difference between merely having better educational resources (e.g., advanced technology and models, prestigious scholars, and a broad number of disciplines to choose from) and having a better educational system altogether can also be seen in how many graduate students were highly critical of their Chinese undergraduate programs. Those who had attended top-tier universities were frequently among the most disenchanting with their professors and study environment in China.

program in Wuhan, but was so disappointed by her experience (in how they practiced journalism) that she transferred to the University of Minnesota to study the same field.

The third major respondent motivation for studying abroad – the accessibility of the American education, especially at the undergraduate level and above – represented another fundamental critique of educational advancement back home. For students who stay in China, nationally-administered standardized exams are the most important criterion for moving up the educational ladder. The exams are notoriously challenging, time-consuming, and stressful to prepare for, but alternative options are scarce.⁵ Twelve respondents studied abroad in part because they underperformed on one of the entrance exams, feared that they would perform poorly, or felt that the odds of admission to a top program were against them, since certain provinces have fewer seats reserved at top tier universities. These respondents were not necessarily academic underachievers – one respondent would only have attended the top-ranked Beijing University – but they saw overseas study as a different and sometimes more sensible way of attending an elite school. Others pointed out that admission to a preferred university did not always mean admission to a preferred academic department. One respondent, for instance, was admitted to a highly regarded university in Beijing, but only if he majored in a foreign language in which he had limited interest. He ultimately transferred to an American university midway through his Chinese degree program.

In the end, very few respondents seriously considered pursuing their present degree at an equivalent institution in China. Most undergraduate students had not taken the national college entrance exam, and many of them started preparing to study abroad at an early age. Fifteen of the eighteen undergraduates had participated in an international educational

⁵ Gallagher et al., *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education*, 74.

exchange prior to beginning their degree program, ranging from short-term model UN trips to long-term homestays, or they were enrolled in study abroad tracking courses while they were in high school. Similarly, graduate students expressed almost no interest in staying in China for their advanced degree – it would have been a poor use of time, not as good as their options in the United States, or they would rather have looked for a job if they were going to stay in China. Chinese education was not necessarily so awful or beneath them, since some respondents recalled enjoying their time in high school or university, but for most there was little debate that the United States was the right place for them at the present time.

Family motivations for study abroad

Respondents' second major explanation for studying abroad was family influence. Most respondents put the final decision to leave China as their own, but thirty-eight of them still mentioned family encouragement as an important factor. The significant role of family fits what is already suggested by respondent biographies, that as a near uniformly young cohort with limited work experience, family support would be crucial to financially sustaining their study abroad project.⁶ In general, undergraduate respondents were more likely than graduate students to ascribe a large role to family. Among the more memorable respondents, one claimed that it was his parent's decision for him to begin high school in the United States, not his own, and the reasons he gave for studying abroad he framed as his parent's reasons, while also pointing out that he was not particularly clear about those either. Another undergraduate student could not remember any reasons why she studied abroad prior to beginning college, which had included stops as a full-time student in Beijing, Japan, and Australia before

⁶ A few students spoke about how they were fortunate their parents could afford study abroad, but most did not speak in detail about their finances. Some measure of family financial support ended up implicit to most interviews, except for the handful with extensive work experience or who were doctoral candidates. Reliance on family funding also came out later when respondents expressed wanting to repay their parents for all that they had invested in their education.

eventually settling at a high school in Virginia. If a respondent mentioned indecision within the family about study abroad, it usually involved whether to go abroad sooner or later or described one parent's reluctance falling short of another parent's preference.

Although parents supported their children going overseas, any specific goals and intentions for their children were less explicit. Popular media interpretations of Chinese studying abroad identify the contrasting ways in which sending children overseas can respectively be part of a larger family exit strategy (if not to immediately immigrate, then to hedge bets against domestic uncertainty)⁷ or a way to bolster the family when graduates eventually return home (such as by running the family business).⁸ Immediately earning money for savings and remittances could be another goal. Yet apart from a few exceptions, the respondents who I interviewed did not evince any of these ulterior motives.⁹ More spoke about the privilege of being able to study abroad and how their parents wanted them to benefit from the rare experience, which would allow them to explore, open new opportunities, and develop as individuals. A family history of study abroad in the United States, or dreams of study abroad, may have contributed to this perspective. Sixteen respondents had family members, including parents, grandparents, uncles, or cousins, who encouraged them to study abroad in their footsteps or in pursuit of their unfulfilled dreams. For this group in particular, the experience of studying abroad was more important than any longer-term project. Parents also believed in the same virtues of American education as their children. They thought that

⁷ "Moving the family abroad: hedging their bets," *The Economist*, May 26, 2012, accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21555961>.

⁸ Yu Ran, "Preparing next generation's inheritance," *China Daily*, October 29, 2012, accessed November 12, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-10/29/content_15852524.htm.

⁹ Only one respondent said that a concern about political stability in China was an important reason why her father wanted her to study abroad. Only one respondent said that a goal of studying abroad was to help expand his family's business. (He also later revealed that neither he nor his parents intended for him to ever move back to China, and any such expansion would have to take place overseas.)

pursuing a degree in the United States would allow them to develop creatively and independently in a more flexible environment. In addition, the United States had the simple reputation as the best place in the world for education, at least for higher education, and parents wanted to provide only the best for their children. For parents to their children, education was a means (of ensuring as many opportunities as possible), but not necessarily a means to an end (of achieving particular family goals).

Study abroad as a way to advance professional interests

When respondents talked about long-term strategizing prior to studying abroad, it usually pertained to their future careers and fields of study. About one-third of respondents¹⁰ directly linked study abroad to the goal of improving their job prospects, pointing out that pursuing an American degree would make them more competitive and distinguished than pursuing the Chinese equivalent. This was often a blanket observation that American degrees in general are more valuable, not only in China but internationally. Some respondents provided reasons specific to their fields of study, noting, for example, that Washington DC was the best place to study international relations because it was the capital of the global hegemon, or that the United States was the best place to study engineering because it possessed the most advanced models. It is presumably for these kinds of reasons why Chinese students in the United States gravitate towards some fields of study over others, favoring degrees in business and the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.¹¹

¹⁰ It is difficult to put an exact number on this group, since, aside from those respondents who specifically talked about jobs, improving professional prospects unspokenly goes hand-in-hand with so many degree programs.

¹¹ According to the Institute of International Education, in 2011-2012, the most popular fields of study for Chinese students in the United States were business/management (28.7%), engineering (19.6%), math/computer science (11.2%), physical and life sciences (9.9%), social sciences (7.7%), fine/applied arts (3.8%), intensive English (2.8%), undeclared (2.2%), education (1.7%), health professions (1.5%), humanities (1.3%), and other (9.6%). “Fields of Study of Students from Selected Places of Origin, 2011/12,” Institute of International Education, accessed November 13, 2012, <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

Graduate students were especially concerned about professional outlook, since they were more likely to be pursuing their terminal degree and felt more immediate pressure to succeed. Two graduate students admitted that they never would have studied abroad to begin with except they had been unable to find suitable jobs in China. (On the other hand, none of the undergraduate respondents specifically said that improving their job prospects was a reason for coming overseas. They tended to speak more abstractly in terms of “opportunities.”) Some parents had their own opinions about the most optimal courses of study. One graduate student described the back and forth between her and her father over her career path: she preferring Chinese medicine, he preferring Western medicine; she enjoying languages, he dismissing its practicality; she finally deciding on mathematics over economics or business administration. Other parents encouraged their children to study abroad at a younger age so they could get an early start and be better positioned for applying to undergraduate and graduate school programs down the line. Such strategic thinking was not uncommon, and it underlined the particular circumstances of the self-funded student. Respondents were not expected or guaranteed by family, organization, or government to proceed to a specific job (in China or elsewhere), which, while liberating, also made for an uncertain professional future. Respondents’ choices in studying abroad were shaped by the need to be pragmatic about their careers, even as they bet on the uniqueness of their American degrees.

Other reasons and non-reasons for studying abroad

Almost all respondents explained their decision to study abroad as a combination of alternative-cum-elite education, family encouragement, and professional strategizing. Open-ended interviewing also yielded diverse and occasionally idiosyncratic responses that touched upon other broad issues. In particular, respondents expressed a variation of wanting to see the world and expand their horizons. This was a secondary consideration but still personally

important, and it included meeting new people, gaining an international perspective, living independently, and experiencing different lifestyles and cultures. A smaller number of respondents described a particular interest in American culture or how it was their childhood dream to study in the United States. Others had undergraduate degrees in English or had been studying the language for years and wanted the opportunity to apply and improve their skills in an immersive environment. Interestingly, nine respondents chose the U.S. because it was, in their words, the premier superpower and the most developed country in the world. However, five of those respondents were pursuing degrees in international relations or area studies, and they tended to obliquely link America's international predominance to their field of study.

Respondents did not cite dissatisfaction with the political, religious, or media environment in China as reasons for studying abroad. The one respondent who left because of concern about political instability also specified that this was her father's concern. If study abroad represented an exit option and respondents were voting with their feet, then they were mostly voting against the educational opportunities available to them back home. This may partially be explained by the youth and inexperience of respondents. Most were intimately familiar with the pros and cons of domestic education, but perhaps less focused on the politically-, economically-, and environmentally-charged reasons for Chinese exodus occasionally highlighted in the international media. Perhaps for this same reason, except when discussing the American education system, most respondents spoke only in generalities about the aspects of American society that had originally attracted them to the United States. A few respondents raised the issue of corruption and inequity as an immediate reason for leaving, but usually in reference to educational advancement rather than professional advancement. For example, one respondent originally intended to stay in China after a university exempted her from taking the standard entrance examination, except a classmate with better family

connections somehow usurped the spot that had been promised to her. Only a handful of respondents had significant professional experience in China, and there were only two for whom a negative employment experience directly motivated their decision to study abroad (although perceptions of the professional environment in China would become more important as they sketched out their post-graduation plans).

Looking at these various reasons and non-reasons for studying abroad suggests the open mindset that respondents bring with them to the United States: respondents approached study abroad with ambition, curiosity, and excitement to gain new experiences and develop themselves, more so than they were uniquely enamored with the United States. They were exploring their options more so than they had already decided upon them. This went hand-in-hand with their youth, their relationship status (almost all of them unmarried), their limited work experience, and their lack of immediate financial obligations. The prospect of education in China might have been beneath or beyond them, but then one's education was only one stage in one's life. Their ambivalence implied a level of indecision and flexibility about whether they would eventually return to China or remain overseas.

Table 3: Complete List of Reasons for Study Abroad

<p><u>General American Education:</u> More opportunities to explore and develop creatively or independently; More rigorous study environment and better classmates (at certain levels); Committed professors and the best resources; Better and more practical research environment; More academic integrity and academic freedom; Better student services; Positive reputation among Chinese people as the best in the world</p>
<p><u>General Chinese Education:</u> Did not thrive in Chinese educational system; Education too rote, or not enough academic flexibility; Poor study and research environment; Less practical; “Waste of time” (at certain levels); Only top universities meet standard; Unequal access to best schools</p>
<p><u>U.S. Best Place to Learn Respondent’s Specialization:</u> Access to advanced models, resources, and technology; Specialization is absent, underdeveloped, or poorly practiced in China; Local environment well-suited to field of study</p>
<p><u>Entrance Exams:</u> Underperformance or anticipated underperformance on university or graduate school entrance exam; Preparation too time-consuming or arduous</p>
<p><u>Academically Tracked to Go Abroad:</u> Attended international school; Enrolled in study abroad preparatory curriculum; Previously studied abroad</p>
<p><u>Head Start Up Educational Ladder:</u> Leg-up on U.S. admissions and local acclimation; Intended to study abroad anyway</p>
<p><u>Symbol of Personal Achievement:</u> Prove abilities to others, since study abroad is highly regarded; Make up for past failures, such as disappointing university placement</p>
<p><u>Family Encouragement:</u> Family member previously studied abroad or dreamed of studying abroad; Family member believes in superiority of American education, American society, or in the value of the overseas experience; Friends of family have studied abroad to notable success; Family member is already living or studying in the United States; Family member fears political instability in China; Plan to study abroad with family members at same time, perhaps including husband or wife; No choice, but study abroad was parent’s decision</p>
<p><u>Career Development:</u> Improve job prospects; American degree more valuable than Chinese degree; Unable to find a suitable job after graduation with Chinese degree; Failed Chinese civil service entrance exam; Intend to expand family business; The U.S. is a good place for entrepreneurs; Difficult to succeed without right background in China</p>
<p><u>Broaden Horizons:</u> Can travel the world; Desire to experience or learn a different lifestyle, culture, and education system; Live independently or find one’s personal direction; Supplement formal education; Become an international citizen</p>

<u>Peer Encouragement:</u> Classmates plan to study abroad; Plan to study abroad with boyfriend or girlfriend; Peers have already studied abroad to notable success	
<u>Societal Encouragement:</u> Well known that many successful people study abroad; Has encountered study abroad success stories	
<u>The United States is a Superpower:</u> The U.S. is the most developed country in the world; U.S. is still rising; U.S. is the global hegemon	
<u>American Culture and Society:</u> An object of interest, fascination, or adoration; Something to learn and experience; Better food safety standards; Better people and environment	
<u>Chinese Culture and Society:</u> Seek freedom from social networks; Chinese people too competitive or selfish	
<u>Benefit China:</u> Return advanced models or technology; Improve U.S.-China relations	
Positive Prior Overseas Travel or Educational Exchange Experience	
Positive Prior Foreign Teacher or Foreign Roommate Experience in China	
Improve or Apply English Skills	Saw Advertisement in China
Received Chinese Government Scholarship	Received American University Scholarship
Ease of Acquiring U.S. Visa	Childhood Dream or Expectation
Spur of Moment Decision	“Don’t Know”

Section 5: Reasons for Returning to China or Staying Overseas

The choice of whether to return to China or continue living overseas after graduation was more important to some respondents than to others, but it was a choice they all had to make. Almost everyone accepted that they had a measure of personal say in the matter. Only the one respondent on Chinese government scholarship felt she had no choice but to immediately return home. A few others expressed an overriding personal obligation to care for family by being in China, but their time horizons were years-long. Similarly, no one felt that they could not return home if wanted, such as for legal reasons or fears of personal safety. Open-endedness was the most salient shared characteristic of respondents as they reflected upon their future intentions. Most of them had general goals but not specific plans. Two respondents had jobs lined up and another two had spouses to consider (one in China, one in the U.S.), but the vast majority were unburdened by established careers or families of their own. Respondents' goals for the future were constrained more by social and individual expectations than by formal obligations. The absence of formal obligations suggests that the individual priorities put forward in their interviews should be especially significant in determining where respondents end up.

Altogether, about one-half of respondents (49%) intended to eventually return to China on a permanent basis, about one-third (35%) were undecided about their long-term plans, and the remaining sixteen percent were committed to settling overseas, invariably in the United States. Those are interesting numbers in themselves, considering the typically lower rate

of return for foreign-educated students. In recent years, the number of returnees has increased dramatically, but the ratio of outbound to returning students is still about three-to-one.¹

The tables on Pages 32-33 break down respondent preferences and intentions across various dimensions. For the most part, the gender and professional fields of respondents did not impact their intentions. One might have hypothesized that more opportunities for women abroad would attract female respondents, when in fact men were slightly more likely to stay overseas. Or that certain professions would be more attractive to pursue in one country over another, such as practicing journalism overseas, when actually the six respondents interested in journalism intended to return to China or were undecided. On the other hand, undergraduate students and those who had been in the United States for at least two years were somewhat more likely to settle overseas. Incidentally, the eight respondents who were not from one-child households, and hence might feel less pressure to be with parents in China, were more likely to return to China.

¹ Hou Ruili and Zhang Hua, "China Beckoning to International Experts," *China Today*, November 2011, 17.

Table 4: Long-term Residence Plans

	N	Return to China		Stay Overseas		Undecided	
All Respondents	68	33	48.5%	11	16.2%	24	35.3%
Graduate Students	50	26	52%	7	14%	17	34%
Undergraduate Students	18	7	39%	4	22%	7	39%
Males	26	12	46%	5	19%	9	35%
Females	42	21	50%	6	14%	15	36%
First Year in U.S.	38	22	58%	3	8%	13	34%
Second Year in U.S.	14	5	36%	4	29%	4	29%
Third Year in U.S. or Higher	16	6	38%	4	25%	6	38%
Respondents with Siblings	8	5		0		3	
U.S. Permanent Residents	3	0		2		1	

Short-term Post-graduation Plans (N = 68)		
Return to China	1	1.5%
Stay Overseas (2+ years)	54	79.4%
Stay Overseas (1 -2 years)	5	7.4%
Undecided	12	17.6%

Table 5: Intended Professional Focuses

	All Respondents (N=94)*		Returning to China	Staying Overseas	Undecided
Undecided	13%	12	4	2	6
Business	12%	11	3	2	6
Economics/Finance	11%	10	5	3	2
Computer Science	9%	8	4	1	3
Journalism/Media	6%	6	3	0	3
Nonprofit	6%	6	3	1	2
Political Science	6%	6	3	2	1
Accounting	5%	5	2	1	2
Law	5%	5	3	1	1
International Development	4%	4	2	0	2
Mathematics/Statistics	4%	4	2	0	2
International Organization	3%	3	2	1	0
International Affairs (Gen.)	3%	3	0	0	3
U.S.-China Relations (Gen.)	3%	3	2	1	0
Engineering	2%	2	2	0	0
Chinese Government	2%	2	1	0	1
Hospitality	2%	2	1	1	0
Social Justice	1%	1	0	0	1
Social Science	1%	1	1	0	0

* Some respondents counted for multiple selections if they indicated more than one field of interest.

In their interviews, respondents frequently had similar priorities when they described their post-graduation plans. One reason may be because the majority came from similar demographic backgrounds and arrived overseas under similar circumstances. This does not necessarily make them anomalous, since most self-funded Chinese students in the United States would have to be well-heeled and possess a certain amount of personal ambition in order to study at these kinds of universities. The differences between respondents became somewhat more pronounced when separating those who intended to return to China and those who intended to stay overseas.

This section explains the three most important areas that influenced respondent intentions for the future – professional advancement, family, and culture and society – as well as their thoughts on politics and contributing to China, which was significantly less important for most respondents but often distinguished between those who were likely to return and stay overseas. This section also reviews secondary factors and non-factors to their decision-making process. In terms of professional advancement, finding an overseas job was central to the short-term post-graduation plans of almost all respondents, who craved experience in the American workplace. Pursuing the best professional opportunities was important to their long-term plans, but the country where they would work was up for debate and other factors started to become more important. In terms of family, being with one's family was an important reason for most respondents to return to China. Those who intended to stay overseas also worried about family, but they often paid more attention to beginning and raising a family of their own, rather than to older generations back in China. In terms of culture and society, respondents cared deeply about cultural and social belonging. Their sense of belonging, however, often had more to do with making friends than particularly preferring one society to another. In terms of politics, most respondents did not express concern or interest in political

issues. Among those who were interested in Chinese politics, the more moderate voices were more likely to return to China, while those hoping for dramatic political changes were more likely to stay overseas. Lastly, differences in the environment, material standards of living, government policies, and visa status tended to be secondary factors or non-factors in individual calculations.

Short-term professional priorities and perspectives

Preparing for their future careers was the overriding concern of respondents as they looked forward to graduation. Their desire for overseas work experience, almost always in the United States, explains the large discrepancy between short-term post-graduation plans and long-term plans for staying abroad or returning to China. About eighty percent of respondents hoped to stay overseas for two or more years after completing their current degree program, and another seven percent wanted to stay for at least one to two years.² Respondents who intended to return to China in the long run explained that Chinese employers prized overseas work experience and that overseas degrees alone had eroded in value. Respondents also felt that working in the United States would supplement their formal education and allow them to better understand American workplace models and relationships, described by one electrical engineering student as the opportunity to “access the core of the field.” Their goals for working overseas for a few years were similar to their goals for studying overseas, since they hoped to learn and benefit from the American system over the Chinese system. It demonstrates another way in which respondents did not necessarily view themselves as visiting scholars who would immediately return to China once they had completed their degree.

² Staying for more than one year after graduation has some significance because F-1 student visas (held by all but three respondents) can usually only be extended for twelve months after graduation, assuming one is granted an optional practical training (OPT) extension. After that point, respondents would have to seek a different visa eligibility to remain in the United States.

Pressure to build one's resume is hardly unique to Chinese people, but it carries some significance in the Chinese context. Twenty years ago, the job market in China for academic returnees was both more limited and more stable, since they were still required to work in the units and cities from whence they originally departed.³ Even as China gradually liberalized its policies towards returnees to allow greater freedom of movement, the number of foreign-degree holders in China did not begin to swell until about the turn of the century.⁴ The current generation of overseas Chinese students faces a broader but more competitive market for employment, which several years ago even gave rise to the term “seaweed” to describe those who have failed to find success after going overseas.⁵ The respondents I interviewed did not express a particular fear of failure, but those contemplating a return to China still felt an acute need to burnish their academic credentials with real world experience. Immediately earning a high salary was secondary to finding a good opportunity to develop their professional skills and interests.

Undergraduate students shared this sentiment, even though many of them intended to return to school shortly after graduation. Thirteen of eighteen undergraduates planned to directly proceed into a graduate degree program or work a few years in the United States before enrolling. All of them dismissed the possibility of acquiring their advanced degree in China. American graduate programs were better than Chinese graduate programs, but that was beside the point because respondents could never see themselves returning to the Chinese education system. One respondent, currently in law school, replied that it would have been embarrassing to pursue her J.D. in China after already graduating from an American university.

³ Zweig, “Learning to Compete,” 191.

⁴ Cheng Li has referred to this as “the tidal wave of returnees.” “Returning Home to Teach,” 76.

It would indicate a failure to adjust to life abroad, and it would be a demotion in academic prestige. Coming to the United States was therefore a temporary one-way street, until students could prove themselves. Overseas students were expected to remain abroad until they completed their education, and then afterwards until they had gained enough work experience to demonstrate their facility with the overseas work environment. Some respondents expressed that these social expectations were overstated (and of course respondents also had their own personal reasons for wanting to stay overseas), but that did not change that almost everyone saw practical value to working in the United States for awhile.

Long-term professional priorities and perspectives

Most respondents had strong ideas about the kinds of careers they wanted to pursue (undergraduates somewhat less so). While their short-term goals were to accumulate work experience in the United States, however, their long-term goals were divided as to which country could better accommodate their professional ambitions.⁶ The most basic refrain was that respondents would go where they could find a job. This was especially common among those who were undecided about where they would eventually settle down. Respondents who intended to return to China often expressed that professional opportunities were more available in their home country. Many pointed to China's growing market and how its status as a still-developing nation meant there was more space to succeed and contribute.

Respondents explained their long-term professional preferences differently from how they explained the educational preferences that had brought them overseas. In their eyes,

⁵ David Zweig and Donglin Han, "Sea Turtles' or 'Seaweed'? The Employment of Overseas Returnees in China" (paper presented at the France/ILO Symposium 2008, May 15, 2008).

⁶ My question to respondents was framed as "returning to China" or "living overseas," not necessarily only in the United States. Except for one development studies student whose career might take her around the world, two boys who fashioned themselves as "international citizens," and one girl who had family in Canada, respondents almost always used China-versus-America as their frame of reference.

American education, at their level of study, was decisively better than the Chinese equivalent. Not only did American education have the best resources, but the system and the environment were qualitatively better for meeting their academic and personal interests. On the other hand, opinions on the American workplace were at least open for debate, and some respondents raised points in support of working in China. Seven respondents were skeptical about the availability of professional opportunities for foreigners in the United States, especially if they aspired to advance beyond a certain level, and five others argued that extensive professional networking was not uncommon in the United States and therefore not terribly different from China, where it is often considered a problem. One graduate student in economics, who had been abroad for two years and had accumulated some work experience, suggested that Chinese students are sometimes naïve and idealize the American lives to which they have been insufficiently exposed. All of these respondents either intended to return to China or were undecided about where they would settle.

On the other hand, there was a large segment of respondents who believed that professional advancement in the United States was fairer than in China. Their descriptions of the American workplace were often unspecific, perhaps because so many of them lacked on-the-job experience, but respondents described a better environment for entrepreneurs, with better intellectual property rights, and recounted success stories about peer predecessors who were thriving in their overseas careers. China was different because the practice of cultivating personal connections for professional advancement might make for an unbalanced playing field, described by one undergraduate student as the “dark side” of Chinese companies. Social obligations added to the complexity of professional advancement, if employees were pressured to regularly go eating and drinking with their co-workers, whereas American workers were expected to return to their private lives after hours.

Altogether, about one-third of respondents expressed some form of negative opinion or personal experience involving the Chinese workplace, which was more than those who had expressed negative opinions about the American workplace.⁷ Interestingly, however, many of them were still convinced that their best professional opportunities lay in China. This was not necessarily because they anticipated relying on preexisting personal networks to get a job (even though several mentioned that it would be quite easy for them to work for family or make use of their parents' connections). Rather, respondents were confident in their own abilities and credentials, and sometimes in the advanced ideas and technology that they would be able to bring back to China. That was the purpose of wanting to accumulate short-term overseas experience in the first place, as a way of distinguishing themselves so employers would have to pay attention. A few respondents acknowledged that pursuing an American degree was a way of overcoming their lack of appropriate professional connections back home. One graduate student in computer science, for example, described that an individual with expertise in technology might not get a good job in China if he lacked the appropriate connections (it had happened to a friend of his); so he decided to study and work abroad for a few years to improve his situation and learn American tech savvy. One undergraduate student offered an interesting perspective on why working abroad after graduation was so critical to further distinguishing themselves from peers at home – since just being in the United States meant that overseas students were not developing professional connections that their domestically-enrolled counterparts were already cultivating. (He had a Chinese classmate who “studied abroad” in China in part because of that reason.) Lastly, there were surprisingly many

⁷ Specific examples: One graduate student recounted how, in order to obtain an entry-level nursing position, her sister in China bribed the administrators of her hospital with thousands of *yuan* in gold. Another graduate student disappointingly described an internship she once held in Beijing, where she was given nothing to do and it was clear the boss only took her on because of her mother's connections.

respondents who remained skeptical about how their personalities suited the Chinese workplace, but they also explained that they could always work for an international company within China. It was possible, they believed, to live in China without working in China. At the very least, respondents were undecided and willing to explore their options in China to see what was there, rather than peremptorily limiting themselves to overseas careers.

Different ways of prioritizing family

Professional opportunities were an important factor in respondents' individual calculations, but they alone were not decisive. Family considerations became increasingly important as respondents looked farther ahead into the future. Family variably referred to parents, extended family, spouses, and children, who potentially served as reasons to return to China or as reasons to continue living overseas. Some respondents missed their parents or felt an obligation to care for their parents by being in China, especially if they came from one-child households. Parents and extended family in China also provided a personal safety net. On the other hand, a few parents would have liked for their children to settle in the United States because they preferred it to China. Respondents also thought they could better serve their families by working outside of China, or they might have had other family members already living or preparing to live overseas. As for spouses, they could be a reason to return to China, if the couple had been living in separation, or they could be a reason to stay abroad with an American partner. Lastly, respondents might want to raise their children in China, as Chinese, or they may want to raise them in an overseas environment, with the benefit of a Western education.

Respondents expressed all of these different positions – but in the end, family was usually a reason for them to go back to China. The majority of respondents were more concerned about the families to which they already belonged, meaning the older generations

living in China, rather than to the families that they might begin and raise themselves, either in China or elsewhere. This may largely be because they were too young and unattached to seriously contemplate issues like marriage and child-raising, with only two respondents already married and none with children of their own. Altogether, twenty-three out of the thirty-three committed returnees described being with family or caring for family as a reason for going back to China. Seventeen undecided respondents described family as a pull factor for returning.⁸

Family drew respondents back home because most of them did not seriously consider the possibility of their relatives joining them overseas. If anything, they expressed reluctance about older people uprooting from China for a country that was socially, culturally, and linguistically unfamiliar. Their motivations were emotional and filial, informed by affection and devotion for their parents, even if it meant disagreeing with those who expected or preferred for their children to make their lives overseas. Only a handful of respondents gave “pragmatic” reasons for returning to family, such as making use of family networks or for the benefit of family as a safety net. Respondents wanted to pay back their parents for supporting their education, but in the sense of justifying their faith and investment, rather than in terms of literal remuneration. Caring for older generations did not necessarily mean caring for them financially.

The minority of respondents who planned to settle overseas had different priorities from their peers who intended to return. They tended to be more future-oriented when they discussed family matters, such as wanting to provide their children an American education. The two respondents who were already married to Chinese citizens expected to raise their

⁸ Some respondents had family already in the United States, but they were typically not given as a reason for staying overseas long-term.

families in China, but others who were at more formative stages of their personal lives talked about how a current or future dating partner might influence them into staying overseas. There seemed to be potential for respondents to change their minds and priorities in the future, supposing that as they grow older, graduate, and pursue jobs in the United States they may develop new relationships and become open to the idea of raising their own family overseas. The possibility, and even likelihood, of these kinds of changes is worth considering as they integrate into society.

American society versus Chinese society

Concerns about culture and society were significant to the long-term, if not to the short-term, plans of respondents. Feelings of comfort and belonging were very important. Those who intended to return to China enjoyed the familiarity of their home country, and many of them were disappointed at feeling outside of the American mainstream, even after some of them had already been overseas for a few years. Twenty-three likely returnees described cultural and social factors as reasons to return. Their reasons were usually not because of a particular distaste for American society. Rather, respondents gave prosaic reasons for being more comfortable in China, such as finding it easier to make friends, easier to interact with people in Chinese, and preferring the local food. A common observation was that American people were always friendly but that it was difficult to become close with them, which led many respondents to spend most of their time with other international students. Respondents also spoke in generalities about how China was home, how the United States was not home, how they were happier in China, and how they did not want to lose their Chinese culture.

Similarly, respondents who intended to settle overseas were more likely to describe themselves as accustomed to American life than they were to point out particular

disappointments with Chinese people or society. Four respondents described reverse culture shock as a reason to be apprehensive about returning. They got along well with American people (nobody described a fear or experience of racism or xenophobia in everyday life), and several felt that staying overseas was the best way to continue seeing the world. Only a few respondents who intended to stay overseas took a severely anti-China position that the country was socially sick or aversive, such as from excessive materialism or poor manners among people.

Although most respondents had strong opinions about how they fit into Chinese and American culture and society, it is reasonable to suggest that their ideas were somewhat pliable and superficial. Few saw fundamental societal differences that made one country definitively preferable to another. Respondents would presumably grow more accustomed to American life as they progressed towards graduation and started looking for local jobs, and they would be more likely to develop better rapports with Americans. Evidence for this might be that first year respondents were noticeably more likely than second year respondents to prefer a long-term return to China (58% to 36%). Many respondents, especially those who were undecided, spoke in abstract terms about settling down wherever they were most happy.⁹ None, for example, suggested that a better environment for religious practice, gender opportunity, sexual diversity, or ethnic minorities was a good reason for either returning to China or settling overseas.¹⁰ Respondents were more likely to frame societal differences as a matter of

⁹ Five of twenty-four undecided respondents said they would go wherever they were happiest. Two other undecided respondents would go wherever the best opportunities were. One intended returnee claimed to simply be happier in China, and one hopeful immigrant described how she felt “inner peace” in the United States and struggled to elaborate further.

¹⁰ Two graduate student respondents preferred the opportunity in the United States for practicing and exploring their Christian faith, but one of them intended to return to China and the other was a self-styled international citizen who did not know where he would eventually end up. One female graduate student said that she hoped to transition from computer science into a profession more appropriate for girls, but she was also undecided about where she would live in the future. The three non-Han Chinese respondents did not suggest that their minority status had anything to do with their decision to study abroad or their decision about where to live.

psychological adjustment and personal suitability, rather than focusing on specific issue areas. As young people, they were most concerned with making friends and with their own social lives.

Thoughts on politics

Not many respondents paid attention to political issues, usually except those whose fields of study were political science, public policy, and international affairs. Neither did they express that political instability nor frustration with the political system in China were significant reasons for either returning or staying abroad. This in itself is a significant change in attitudes from twenty years ago, when overseas students had strong reservations about political instability and feared for their right to leave China should they ever return.¹¹ When asked, most respondents described themselves as not personally interested in or affected by politics, both in general and insofar as it involved their future decision-making. (One respondent went as far as being strategically apolitical, since she very much wanted to spend a semester in Taiwan but believed doing so might damage her professional journalism prospects in China.) Respondents occasionally expressed cynicism about political education in China, disappointment with certain aspects of the Chinese political system, and admiration for certain aspects of American politics, but these beliefs were usually mentioned tangentially. Since most respondents did not originally leave China for negative political reasons, it seems reasonable that politics seldom influenced their plans for returning to China. Most respondents had also only been in the United States for less than one year, and even those who had been abroad for several years did not indicate that their political beliefs or priorities had particularly changed during that time.

¹¹ Zweig and Chen, *China's Brain Drain*.

The minority of respondents who were interested in politics, however, differed significantly between those who intended to return to China and those who did not. The four respondents who saw their professional goals tied to systemic or grand-scale changes in Chinese politics were inclined either to take a wait-and-see approach or to pursue their objectives while working overseas. One respondent, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science from an American university and was pursuing a master's degree in U.S. foreign policy, declared that he would only return if China underwent "peaceful evolution" into democracy. One senior undergraduate student definitely planned to return to China, but first he planned to begin an overseas career with an international development organization, believing that in ten to twenty years the political situation will have liberalized enough and his resume will have become elite enough that he could start working in the areas he most wanted. Another respondent, recently graduated and currently working in Washington DC, was undecided about her long-term plans because she was most interested in social justice issues and hoped that more opportunities within the politically sensitive field would open up in China. These respondents were a small group from the total sample, but they were among the more memorable interviews because of the distinct asymmetry they perceived in their professional opportunities between countries. As far as they were concerned, either they would have to change or China would have to change before they went back.

The other subset of politically-interested respondents was those who wanted to contribute to China's ongoing development and believed they could do so from within China. Rhetorically, they occupied a middle ground between those uninterested in political issues and those hoping for grand-scale systemic reforms. They included students studying political science and related social sciences, but also those studying more technical fields such as math and science. One respondent, who was pursuing his doctorate in political science, wanted to

work for a Chinese university, think tank, or non-governmental organization that would allow him to become involved in the policy-making process. He wanted to help build a better political system but was relatively moderate in his tenor. In total, nine respondents who planned to return to China and said that helping their country to develop was one of their motivations. Their goals were often vague and not necessarily political: such as the statistics student who strongly desired to “change something” in his small-city hometown, though he was not sure what or how; or the engineering student who came to the United States in part to understand its political differences from China, but who also felt the best way for him to individually contribute to China was by enhancing its systems engineering capabilities. One student of public policy at Georgetown University said that people go on about democracy, human rights, and universal values, but that there were more subtle ways of encouraging change in China. She described the status of scholars in the United States as an example: because scholars are well-respected, with better platforms for discussion, and capable of rapidly organizing in times of need, they give strength and adaptability to the American system in a way unavailable to China (as well as to the Arab Spring countries). Respondents such as these suggest some space, or at least perceived and hoped for space, in the restrictive political opportunity structure for self-funded overseas students returning to China.¹² Earning a degree in political science from a Western nation, therefore, does not peremptorily kill one’s career prospects at home, since intentions may matter more than the content of one’s degree. This also explains why professional fields alone (Page 36) were not a great predictor of whether or

¹² Studies of returned students and scholars describe political opportunities for self-funded students as much more limited than for state- and institution-sponsored students. Within the Chinese government, self-funded returnees are very unlikely to be recruited to high-level political posts. Cheng Li, “The Status and Characteristics of Foreign Educated Returnees in the Chinese Leadership,” *China Leadership Monitor* 16 (2005).

not one stays overseas. Most respondents believed in the geographic versatility of their credentials.

Other factors and non-factors influencing future plans

Differences in natural environment and general living standards were secondary reasons for respondents to prefer living overseas. Among those who raised the issue of the environment (about one-third of respondents), almost everyone agreed that the United States was less polluted than China and had much better air quality.¹³ Still, only five respondents considered environmental factors to be personally important reasons for not returning to China. Those respondents were part of the small minority that was uniquely enamored with American society in general, since they spoke very positively about the quality of the people, values, and opportunities that were more abundant overseas. Six respondents also discussed the ways in which the United States was materially more developed than China, with better housing, transportation, and food safety standards, as well as fewer crowds; but those again were less specific points than part of their broader referendum on how the United States was so great. They were usually hopeful of settling overseas long-term. On the other hand, respondents who intended to return to China were more likely to talk about how their home country was rising or developing very fast, as opposed to already being well-developed. A few respondents flipped the script and saw China's lower level of development as a reason to return, since the country needed them more.

Another potential motivating factor, which ended up being a complete non-factor, was Chinese government policies for attracting returnees. Scholars of Chinese politics have documented the proactive ways by which the central and local governments appeal to well-

educated and highly-skilled overseas Chinese to return. These efforts have included financially supporting returnees, improving access to information, promoting overseas associations, sponsoring short-term return visits, creating professional parks for returnees in highly-valued sectors, and easing the return process through various services and subsidies.¹⁴ Respondents were too thin in their resumes to qualify for recruitment via a talent program, but neither did they express the possibility of being recruited in the future nor did they mention government efforts to make China generally more hospitable for returnees. Official policies towards returnees were not on the minds of respondents, and when a few did talk about the government vis-à-vis their own situation, they speculated that self-funded degree-holders were probably more suitable to the private or non-profit sectors.

Lastly, respondents seldom considered U.S. government policies for international students, international workers, and prospective permanent residents. This was surprising since most respondents preferred to spend several years in the United States before possibly returning to China. Only three respondents had green cards that would abrogate the need to update their visa status. Most respondents presumably assumed that their future employer would be able to sponsor their work visa. Some respondents who preferred to stay in the United States for a long time believed their visas could become an issue in the future, but they presented it as largely outside of their control. A small minority spoke cavalierly about obtaining permanent residency status for the added flexibility, but only one respondent appeared to be well-informed about the actual application process, which he had already begun

¹³ One respondent believed that pollution in China was purposefully overplayed by the media as a way of encouraging people to be clean. Respondents may have been particularly sensitive to air quality because most of them came from urban backgrounds.

¹⁴ Zweig, "Learning to Compete," 194-199. See also Zhao Litao and Zhu Jinjing, "China Attracting Global Talent: Central and Local Initiatives," *China: An International Journal* 6, 2 (Sept 2009): 223-335.

with the help of his parents. For the majority, the legal basis of how to remain overseas was the white elephant in their individual calculations.

Summary and analysis: Similarities and differences between those intending to return and those intending to stay overseas

Ultimately, the priorities of the Chinese students I interviewed ended up being more alike than unlike. Those who definitely intended to settle overseas were a distinct minority. Respondents' similar biographical backgrounds and pathways to the United States undoubtedly contributed to many of their overlapping values. The possibility of earning and supporting one's way to an overseas degree is still usually available to only an economically well-off minority in China, especially considering the universities that respondents attended. Most arrived overseas at a relatively young age, particularly for graduate school, with similar levels of inexperience and similar ideas about how pursuing an American education would challenge and distinguish them. They usually received financial support and encouragement from their families in China, and they were optimistic but uncertain regarding their professional prospects and future life plans. One imagines that a sample of predominantly state-sponsored students, students studying abroad through a Chinese university but not pursuing a degree, or visiting scholars, all of whom would qualify as foreign-educated returnees if they returned to China, might have different backgrounds and priorities from the students interviewed.¹⁵

Respondents saw study abroad as away to broaden their horizons and live independently, but as they anticipated the future, most of them paid especial attention to their own opportunities for professional development, for which gaining post-graduation overseas

¹⁵ For example, as of November 2009, the Chinese Scholarship Council had granted 58,419 students scholarships to study abroad. Those students returned to China at an extremely high rate of 97%. Bhandari, Belyanvina, and Gutierrez, *Student Mobility*, 50.

work experience was crucial. How to best pursue their long-term professional goals was a decisive factor for many undecided about where they would settle down. Most respondents were less concerned about working in one particular country over another, even though many of them acknowledged significant differences in the professional work environment between China and the United States. They believed their foreign degrees and experience would give them credibility and expand their options, in some cases allowing them to avoid certain difficult or negative aspects of trying to pursue a career in China. In addition, cultural and societal differences between China and abroad might appear to be important factors for staying or returning, but respondent preferences could often be explained by how successfully they had made friends and adjusted to mainstream society. It was less a case of certain groups, one might suppose, of females, homosexuals, religious practitioners, ethnic minorities, or the disenfranchised, believing they were more welcome in one country over another. Many respondents portrayed China and overseas as functionally equivalent: professional opportunity (general) trumped professional locale (specific), and socio-cultural belonging (general) trumped socio-cultural locale (specific). This helps explain why a high-proportion of respondents were undecided about their long-term residence plans and why respondents with different residence intentions often focused on similar issues, only arguing opposite sides of the coin. Regardless of the ways in which China and the United States were actually different, many of those differences did not matter to respondents or could be mitigated by their American credentials. The differences in education system that had originally drawn and kept them overseas mattered less as they prepared for graduation.

Intended returnees and intended immigrants more substantially differed in how they approached family and political issues. In some cases, family influence simply meant that a respondent's parents wanted him to return to China or wanted him to continue living

overseas, even though they rarely forced the issue. On a more basic level, those intending to return to China were more likely to emphasize being with and caring for the older generations of their family, whereas those intending to live abroad were more likely to emphasize the benefits of beginning their own family in the United States. This distinction helps explain why respondents were more likely to stay overseas as they spent more time abroad, not only because they had simply acclimated to American society, but because most of them had come over as young and unattached and were likely to start developing stronger local relationships. In terms of politics, although most respondents considered themselves uninterested in and unaffected by political issues, there was a clear difference between those hoping for significant systemic changes in China and those who spoke moderately about helping China to develop. The former group was likely to stay overseas until the political environment in China changed, while the latter group saw an opportunity to return to China and make their own contributions.

Understanding these differences and similarities in student priorities is ultimately useful for explaining why overseas Chinese students settle and disaggregate as they do. Respondents often perceived the situation between countries as equivalent, with manageable differences, but in a few areas they still saw concrete asymmetries in what they could hope to accomplish, which also influenced their decision-making. The following, and concluding, section of this paper takes a closer look at respondent preferences and motivations within the broader context of China's overseas student phenomenon. The section also describes what action can be taken by China and the United States to make themselves more attractive to Chinese foreign-degree holders.

Table 6: Possible Reasons for Returning to China

Family and Personal Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Be with family</u>: Includes parents, extended family, or spouses; Care for family, even if not an only child; Filial obligation; Grateful for family sacrifices; Misses family • <u>Family provides a safety net</u>: Useful as a “back-up” in case of emergency; May work for family; Use family connections to find job • Parents, spouse, or boyfriend may prefer a return to China • More friends in China • Want to raise family in China • Family will not move overseas, or prefers that family does not move overseas
Professional Opportunity and Advancement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>More opportunities in China</u>: China is rising and developing quickly; Professional field of specialization is booming; Can return with advanced expertise or technology; “Virgin land” • <u>Fewer opportunities overseas</u>: American companies prefer to hire U.S. citizens; Glass ceiling for foreigners; Tight job market in U.S. • <u>Prefers Chinese work environment</u>: More laid back and social; U.S. workplace is too detached • Option of working for international company • Will return if finds good job or earning potential
Culture and Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Social and cultural belonging</u>: China is more comfortable and familiar; China is “home” and will always be Chinese; Still feeling culture shock in U.S.; U.S. is lonely • <u>Feel outside of U.S. mainstream</u>: Difficult to integrate and hard to make friends • Prefers Chinese patterns of social relations • Fears losing Chinese culture • Language comfort
Contributing to China’s Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Contribute to China within one’s professional field</u>: Potential of returning with useful expertise • China has more needs than the United States • China is rising and wants to be a part of it • “Change something” in China
Other Reasons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential visa issues • God-given passion for country • “Happier” in China • Preference for Chinese food

Table 7: Possible Reasons for Staying Overseas

Family and Personal Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Raise family in the U.S.:</u> Includes benefits of American education • More friends in the U.S. • Has already begun or may begin a romantic relationship with an American • Some members of family are already overseas or may come overseas • Parent(s) in China prefers or expects respondent to stay in U.S. • Parents will feel less burdened if stays overseas
Professional Opportunity and Advancement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Gain overseas work experience:</u> Opportunity to supplement formal education; Necessary to access core professional field; Achieve facility in U.S. system and models • <u>Fewer opportunities in China:</u> Unable to practice professional interests; Ceiling for self-funded students; Unhealthy or unfair professional advancement; Resume not yet strong enough • <u>Dislike of Chinese work environment:</u> Burden of social obligations; Does not drink • <u>Prefers American work environment:</u> More flexible, simple • Will stay overseas if finds good job and earning potential; Salaries often higher in the U.S.
Culture and Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Reverse culture shock:</u> Has been in U.S. too long; Feelings of detachment from China during earlier visit • <u>Affinity to American values and lifestyle:</u> More flexible, stable; Allows for more independence • U.S. is a more competitive society, in a healthy way • American people are “better” or nicer; Everything about the U.S. is better
Political Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China is unstable • China is politically more restrictive • More freedom of expression in U.S. • Will not return until political environment changes
Material Living Conditions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cleaner natural environment, fewer crowds • Higher overall standard of living, better infrastructure, better food safety regulations
Other Reasons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May stay in U.S. to pursue another academic degree • More opportunities to continue seeing the world • “Happier”/ “Inner peace” in U.S.

Section 6: Conclusion

China's overseas students are up for grabs

On one level, this study demonstrates how China has significantly closed the perception gap between itself and countries like the United States – as far as being a desirable place for high-skilled overseas graduates to settle down and build their futures. In the end, only a small percentage of my respondents expressed a strong intention of staying overseas for the long-term, and the rest were either undecided or committed to returning to China. Their intentions were certainly capable of changing, since few of them had fixed plans or obligations, but the majority went abroad with a very open mind to returning. Students today are open because they see fewer qualitative distinctions between pursuing a life in China and pursuing a life overseas, *at least as far as they were concerned*. Their ambivalence challenges a basic premise of asking them where they prefer to settle (as in, “What does one country offer that the other does not?”). From a career standpoint, they are confident that an American degree and American work experience can open many doors back home.

The list of factors that do not influence China's overseas students is ultimately as illuminating as the list of actually important factors. Differences in political stability, political freedom, the natural environment, the media environment, acceptance and equality for certain groups, popular values among the citizenry, material infrastructure, public safety, health care, social security, food safety, and favorable government policies were rarely mentioned as substantive reasons for settling in one country over another. It is possible but not a given that some of those issues will become more important as they grow older, spend additional time overseas, and contemplate starting families. Nevertheless, the environment for returnees has

changed in meaningful ways from earlier in the reform period when concerns about political stability and freedom of movement encouraged many to stay overseas, and from when returnees from the United States were sometimes regarded as socially and politically suspect. Most of the current generation of students believes in the potential of either country to meet their personal needs. Furthermore, many students do have patriotic aspirations to return home and contribute to China's growth and development, even if these tend to be secondary motivations.

Why China still may not have solved its brain drain problem

If China's foreign-educated students are more open to returning than ever before, then it begs asking what that means for China, the United States, and other host countries. On the surface, the natural course for China almost seems to be easy enough – which is to keep developing its economy, keep its borders open, and people will come back of their own accord. Both the domestic Chinese and international media are replete with reports that record numbers of highly-skilled professionals are returning home to a dynamic new China.¹⁶ Conventional wisdom points to the country's robust economic growth as the primary magnet for returnees, who see fresh opportunities to develop their professional careers (without having to live in a foreign society, separated from family and friends). Many of my respondents echoed that broad truism when they bespoke their often eager willingness to work in China, provided the right situation. The most optimistic of them described China, variably, as a virgin land, a nation on the rise, and a place tumultuous transition, where opportunities can be seized.

¹⁶ Optimistic reports on graduates returning to China can be easily searched online. For a typical article, which cites Ministry of Education statistics on increasing returnees, recounts a few personal success stories, and describes Chinese government initiatives to attract high-qualified overseas talent, see: <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/china-native-talent-economy-globalization-engineers-incentives-brain-gain>.

While expanded economic opportunity does attract many overseas students home, however, my interviews also revealed more complex and sobering opinions about study abroad and pursuing careers in China, which called into question the basis of China's "reverse brain drain." Specifically, openness to returning does not necessarily mean that China has resolved some of the underlying domestic issues that have dissuaded returnees in the past (and perhaps pushed too many good students overseas). Respondent interviews pointed to a second trend: that many overseas students view their American credentials as a means of coping with flaws and inequities in the educational and professional environment back home. Under such circumstances, it is not China that has changed and developed to attract more returnees, but it is overseas students who have adapted and emerged as a distinctive status group.

To elaborate on one particular subset: a distinguishing characteristic of the more cynical respondents was that even though they perceived opportunities for themselves in China, they did not view China itself as particularly fair. Graduate students were fond of using the phrase "improving competitiveness" to describe their goals while living abroad, but a flipped and more appropriate expression might be "compensating for disadvantages." That is, some respondents were hopeful about working in China because they believed study abroad would make up for their lack of relevant professional connections, or allow them to transcend prevailing limitations within their field. The idea of needing to compensate was exemplified by the respondent (mentioned on Page 45) who intended to work abroad for at least one or two decades, since it would take at least that long to acquire sufficiently elite credentials to work in China within his chosen field of international development. Perhaps he could return to China earlier, but he might not be able to work on his own terms on the issues that he cared about most. This line of thinking was different from wanting to work and study abroad just because

it looked good to Chinese employers. Rather, a foreign diploma and overseas experience was a way for some individuals to rise above existing constraints or problems.

The existence of this particular trend is problematic to a Chinese government that worries about cultivating and retaining advanced human capital. First, to the extent that many of China's best students feel compelled to go overseas because they cannot otherwise prove themselves at home, some will always choose to remain abroad rather than return. The problem also becomes less about convincing students to return than about convincing students to not leave in the first place. Second, the forces driving record numbers of students overseas are just as much systemic as they are resource-related. Reviewing respondent motivations for study abroad and their post-graduation goals reveals multiple fundamental critiques about how business and education are conducted in China. For example, many respondents were very open to pursuing careers on the mainland, but specified that they strongly (and sometimes exclusively) preferred to work for an international company or organization, believing that the local workplace was ill-suited to their personalities. Essentially, their goal was to live in China without having to work in China, and they hoped their overseas credentials would qualify them to do so. Undergraduate students dwelled less on the professional advantages of study abroad, especially those who came over during high school, but their observations were no less critical. They were among the strongest believers that they *had to* come to the United States in order to reach their full personal potential, such as by escaping a rigid Chinese education system that had held them back; even if some of them fully intended to return to China after completing their education.

Some prominent scholars of China's foreign-educated students have speculated that the phenomenon of going overseas and debating whether or not to return will fade away in the

coming years. David Zweig has described overseas returnees as a special group that belongs to a temporally specific period of a nation's economic development, during which the need for skilled workers has increased but the education system is unable to supply them. Yang Zhuang has stated that “The term ‘overseas returnees’ [in China] will disappear after twenty years.”¹⁷ Such rosy prognostications seem to overlook the circumstances under which many Chinese students are departing and selectively returning. If going abroad was a question of resources alone – for instance, of putting more seats in classrooms, acquiring the best textbooks, and employing more good professors – then more students might stay at home as China develops its education infrastructure. On the other hand, if the decision to study abroad is increasingly a coping strategy, in response to a corrupt or noxious professional environment or a flawed education system, then the outbound flow of students may continue unabated. (In terms of success in educational reform, trend lines may be moving in the wrong direction, as Chinese students are departing for the United States at increasingly young ages, even as they also tend to come from wealthier cities with more established and diverse education infrastructure.) Students may continue to return after graduation, but mostly because they are taking advantage of a privileged situation, not because they see themselves coming home to a changed China. The large number of returnees in recent years may indicate that China has answered its returnee problem without actually solving it.

Ultimately, in terms of policy recommendations for China, a more meaningful solution to the returnee problem is bound up in its broader reform agenda. Pressure for improving the education system in China is widespread, and studies have documented how returnee academics have already begun to transform Chinese higher education; but the eventual extent

¹⁷ Zhang Ming'ai, “Success and confusion: The lives of overseas returnees,” CHINA.ORG.CN, November 19, 2007, accessed January 16, 2013, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/China/232355.htm>.

and duration of the reform process remains uncertain. Anti-corruption measures are also high on the agenda of the Chinese government, even though there still lies a long road ahead. To date, the most publicized government initiatives that target highly-skilled overseas professionals appear to have been better at soliciting individuals with premium positions and privileges (reaching only a narrow slice of people), rather than addressing the more fundamental reasons that drive individuals to travel overseas in the first place.¹⁸ Until more meaningful systemic change takes place in China, a circular flow of bright students traveling to foreign countries (with some inevitably hemorrhaging off) may continue to grow as a fixture in Chinese society.

Policy suggestions for the United States

While professional opportunity is a decisive factor that sways the post-graduation plans of many overseas students, interviews also demonstrated the importance of the mundane and the personal. Family and social and cultural belonging were two of the most common reasons that respondents gave for returning to China. Those reasons mattered far more than differences in infrastructure, politics, environment, and other broad societal areas that are often considered intrinsic to the “soft power” attractiveness of the United States. Chinese students today tend to go abroad at a formative age, coming from relatively comfortable backgrounds, and are more likely to be preoccupied with fitting in and finding themselves as teenagers and young adults.

From an American policymaking perspective, an optimal way to encourage qualified Chinese graduates to stay in the United States is to more proactively facilitate their integration

¹⁸ The 1,000 Talents Plan, launched in 2008, offered top scientists and high-tech entrepreneurs \$150,000 in cash, free office or lab space, housing allowances, and fast tracks into good schools for their children. Peter Ford, “Reverse Brain Drain: China Engineers Incentives for ‘Brain Gain,’” Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, October 21, 2012, accessed October 16, 2013, <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/china-native-talent-economy-globalization-engineers-incentives-brain-gain>.

into American society and campus life. Arguably, this burden falls to schools and universities more than the U.S. government. My respondents often spoke of getting on well with Americans, who they described as friendly and polite, but they regretted not being close with American classmates and feeling outside of the cultural mainstream. Study abroad can be educationally rewarding while also being socially isolating or confined to the international student community.¹⁹ As far as actionable policy that schools can take, an effective practice may be to simply restrict the enrollment of overseas students, either across the board or in particular departments. George Washington University, for instance, is not especially flush with Chinese students (568 out of 2,400 total international students in 2011-2012), but departments such as graduate-level computer science and statistics are known to be heavily international.²⁰ Anyone can understand that what starts out as a safety net, by relying on one's home-country peers, can eventually turn into a crutch. Of course, cutting back on foreign-student enrollment can be a difficult habit for cash-strapped universities to kick. One respondent described a classmate who recently enrolled in an accounting program at a public Illinois university (the only place she was accepted), who was regretful because she knew by reputation that almost all of her classmates would be Chinese. Still, international students do want to place themselves in situations that will challenge their comfort zones, but they need universities to help them on their mission.

Apart, however, from over-enrollment contributing to social segregation among international students, it is difficult not to argue that the United States is doing perfectly fine in

¹⁹ The Office of International Services at George Washington University seems to do a better job of engaging international students with each other rather than engaging them with their American classmates. For example, international students are assigned to a separate freshman orientation, and many of the official social events arranged for international students are not advertised or restricted for American students.

²⁰ Joseph Miranda, "China leads foreign enrollment bump," *The GW Hatchet*, September 1, 2011, accessed January 16, 2013, <http://www.gwhatchet.com/2011/09/01/china-leads-foreign-enrollment-bump/>.

continuing to attract and retain Chinese degree-seekers. First, even though record numbers of Chinese students are going home, record numbers are still entering the country every year, and it would be unrealistic for the vast majority of them to stay. Second, Chinese students are attracted to the United States not only because it has top educational resources but also because the education system itself is different and desirable. Third, demographic trends suggest that the issue of social and cultural belonging may be somewhat self-solving. Students are arriving younger than ever, as early as high school, and many face strong expectations to not return until after they have completed the entirety of their education and acquired several years of work experience. As students spend more of their formative years abroad, many will become closer with American peers, better integrated into American society, and more open to raising families in the United States. Ironically, the practical logic that motivates students to maximize their time overseas, so they will be better qualified to eventually pursue careers in China, may also cause them to develop deeper personal ties within the United States and hesitate to return home.

Final note on the potential for today's students to change China

How foreign-educated returnees have shaped China during the reform era has been broadly covered by scholars of different disciplines.²¹ In a sense, the respondents in my study belong outside of that discussion – not only because they have yet to return but because, at this early point in their careers, it is difficult to see what they have the power to change. Respondents saw themselves as price-takers rather than price-makers; or, more concerned with improving their competitiveness and adapting to the educational and professional opportunities that lay before them. Their perspectives on politics underline their short-term

²¹ Two of the most notable scholars to cover this topic are Cheng Li and David Zweig. See the Works Cited section for some of their principle works on the subject.

pragmatism: those most interested in controversial issues and large-scale systemic reform were more likely to wait or settle overseas, while those with more modest, incremental, and oblique goals about contributing to China's development were more likely to return. Most respondents expressed little personal interest in political or socially contentious issues, even if they were sometimes cynical about topics like censorship, corruption, or the environment in China (and in America). China's current generation of overseas students will undoubtedly play a role in shaping the country's future, aside from just contributing to the economy, but that impact lies somewhat far ahead. For the time being, one may only speculate that by having chosen a foreign degree in lieu of the Chinese equivalent, they may have contributed to the increasing pressure for educational reform in China. Over the short-term, if they can leverage their foreign degrees and experience into fairer opportunities, they may yet be a force for encouraging a more equitable professional environment in China, working to improve what they had previously found distasteful and inadequate. Then, China's overseas students can be part of the solution to some of the domestic problems that pushed them abroad in the first place.

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