Empirical Article

A close up of a logo



Description automatically generated

Volume 17, Issue 1 (2025), pp. 142-155

Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education

Online | https://ojed.org/jcihe

It Was Mainly My Own Choice: Examining the Decision-Making Process of Chinese Undergraduates and Their Parents on Study in the United States

Shizhu Liua\*, Desiree Baolian Qina, Adam Grimmb, Mingjun Xiec, Yemo Duana, Chi-Fang Tsenga, and Mikiko Satoa

a Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, U.S.

b College of Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, U.S.

c Institute of Developmental Psychology, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

\*Corresponding author: Shizhu Liu: Email: liushizh@msu.edu

Address: Michigan State University, 552 West Circle Drive, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States

**Abstract**

*Background: Previous studies probing parent–child dynamics in decision-making situations are limited by their survey-based approach, and thus cannot identify factors beyond the choices available in the survey instrument or more deeply interrogate the process inherent in parent–child interactions. Methods: Using interview data from 50 Chinese international undergraduates at a large public U.S. university, this study investigated the family communication processes underlying the decision of studying abroad. Results: The results showed that decision-making processes were guided by (1) who initialized the idea and (2) whether the other party (either the child or their parents) supported the idea initially. Different processes induced six profiles and five different levels of students’ autonomy during the decision-making process. This study contributes to our understanding of Chinese international students’ interpersonal processes within their families before embarking on their journey to study aboard and aims to enhance the intercultural understanding of Chinese international students to inform institutional policies that better support student adjustment.*

Keywords: Chinese international students, decision-making autonomy, family communication process, higher education, studying outside of China

**Introduction**

One out of every three international students studying at U.S. universities holds a Chinese passport (Institute of International Education, 2018). Social media reports and the existing literature on Chinese international students have

focused predominantly on challenges in their adaptation, which induces an incomplete understanding of their experiences

and a stereotypical image of them as struggling, dependent, and passive (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Also, largely resulting from the collectivist cultural orientation and emphasis on the Confucian concept of “filial piety” (a virtue of respect and obedience to parents and elders) in Chinese families (Ho, 1986), Chinese youth are commonly characterized as compliant and obedient (Ho, 1994). These stereotypes were often based on traditional notions of Chinese society and culture (Clark & Gieve, 2006). China has undergone significant economic and social changes in the last few decades, inducing changes in family relations and child developmental outcomes (Way et al., 2013).

To fully understand the realities of international students, we need to examine how socioeconomic and cultural contexts, alongside experiences before enrollment, shape their adjustment and subsequent success—a topic seldom examined in existing studies (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). This study examines the notion of autonomy among Chinese international students by exploring their decision-making processes with parents regarding abroad study. This decision-making process can also reveal their prior experiences and motivation for studying abroad, which is shown to be associated with students’ adaptation after arrival in U.S. universities (Yang et al., 2018).

**Literature Review**

Social Changes in Contemporary Chinese Society

The transition toward a market economy, increased economic prosperity, and cultural changes have influenced Chinese family dynamics and children’s development (Way et al., 2013). The theory of social change and human development posits that changing socioeconomic-cultural contexts influence cultural values and social environments and thereby shape human development and adjustment (Greenfield, 2009). The Chinese economic reform, which started in the late 1970s, has induced rapid economic growth and new social and economic structures. From 1990 to 2017, the GDP per capita grew from under $1,000 USD (in purchasing power parity) to $17,000 (World Bank, 2018). Given that socioecological contexts change over time, new demands that necessitate developing persons to acquire corresponding social and cognitive skills may appear (Silbereisen, 2000). Traditional child-rearing values and practices described as more controlling and authoritarian disagree with the goal of raising a well-functioning child in contemporary Chinese society (Chen & Li, 2012). The theory of social change and human development suggests that both parents and the younger generation construct dynamic responses to the sociocultural changes, which makes individual developmental trajectories more adapted to the environment (Greenfield, 2009). As socioeconomic contexts change toward a more industrialized direction, cultural values likely shift in a more individualistic direction, and trajectories of child development will likely move toward more independence in social behavior (Greenfield, 2009). Chen and Chen (2010) highlighted a notable shift in parenting attitudes and values in China. For example, Shanghai parents scored elevated levels of warmth and support for their child’s autonomy and lower levels of power assertion from 1998 to 2002. Studies on contemporary Chinese families have suggested that instead of stressing relatedness, dependence, and obedience in child socialization, Chinese parents greatly emphasize independence and autonomy (Liu et al., 2005; Way et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the rapidly shifting economic and social context has also created parental struggles and ambivalences over how to best raise children. Societal values following Confucian ideals continue to influence the parent–child relationship, as characterized by “filial piety.” Chinese parents report anxiety and difficulties choosing successful child-rearing strategies between coexisting yet contradictory parenting ideologies, such as wishing children to be obedient but self-reliant (Fong, 2007). This provides an important new context for understanding the autonomy development of the new generation of children growing up in China today.

Shifting parenting goals and practices around parental control and the fostering of children’s autonomy in the rapidly changing Chinese society provide an important context for understanding the experiences of Chinese international students. With rapid economic transformation, a new middle class has emerged with an appetite and ability for consumption, including pursuing higher education opportunities abroad (Zhang, 2010). It is usually from these affluent, upper-middle class households that many Chinese international undergraduates emerge (Louie & Qin, 2019; Yan, 2017). Hence, this study explores autonomy development among students from these new middle-class Chinese families by examining students’ decision-making processes for studying abroad.

Decision-Making Process About Studying Abroad

Decision-making about studying abroad is a dynamic process over time. In the international student college choice literature, the push–pull model has been most commonly used. Based on this model, factors influencing college choice for international students include socioeconomic forces in the home country that “push” them out (e.g., lack of educational opportunities) and factors in the host country that “pull” them abroad (e.g., academic quality) (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, scholars have posited that the model fails to consider college choice as a process (Kim et al., 2018). In comparison, the three-stage framework developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) describes the college choice process proceeding through predisposition, search, and choice stages that occur over an extended period of time. In deciding which college to attend, different decisions are made by international students, which begin with whether they want to continue their education abroad (*predisposition*)(Kim et al., 2018). Once students decide to study abroad, they need to gather information about where they want to continue their education, possibly including the destination country and choices of schools (*search*). Finally, they determine which specific school(s) they will go to (*choice*). Informed by this three-stage framework, this study considers decision-making about studying abroad as a dynamic process over time, rather than the static results from a limited number of contributing factors proposed by the push–pull model. Specifically, we focused on predisposition and search for destination countries because Chinese students often hire agents to help them with the application process, including choosing schools (Bodycott, 2009).

From the methodology perspective, studies exploring parental relations in decision-making situations have predominantly adopted a survey-based approach. Studies usually assessed family decision-making with a questionnaire developed by Dornbusch et al. (1990), which asks participants to indicate who was the primary decision-maker in various types of decisions (Bell, et al., 2014). However, the survey-based approach cannot identify factors beyond the choices available in the survey instrument or more deeply interrogate the communication *process* inherent in parent–child interactions. Also, in studies of Chinese international students, more specifically, we have a limited understanding of the interpersonal parent–child processes through which Chinese international students made the decision to study abroad. Decision making is a dynamic process whereby parents and children co-construct meaning and decisions in their interactions (Bell et al., 2014). A closer examination of family processes, such as roles played by individual family members during the processes, is also informed by changes in family dynamics caused by socioeconomic changes in contemporary Chinese society (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). To address this methodological gap, this study used qualitative interviews to investigate the decision-making processes about studying abroad among first-year Chinese international students attending a large public university in the United States.

In Chinese society,parents are essentially involved in decision-making in the family. In Chinese families, education is highly imperative and is considered a family matter and decision (Huang & Gove, 2012). Educational attainment has historically been the main vehicle for upward mobility through high-stake examinations, such as the modern-day *gaokao* (College Entrance Examination)*,* with their roots in the imperial examination *keju* system. With so much on the line, families deeply value education and seek extra opportunities for their children to get ahead (Zhao, 2014). Children’s high academic achievement is a matter of pride for the whole family (Lui & Rollock, 2013). Not surprisingly, parents are intimately involved in education-related decision-making processes, such as studying abroad. In the current study, followed by the three-stage framework (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), we used qualitative interviews to investigate the decision-making about studying abroad as a dynamic process over time for Chinese international students and their parents.

Autonomy in Decision-Making Process

While *autonomy*, from the individualistic cultural perspective, entails independence in decision-making without external influence, it is operationalized more as the extent to which one’s motives for acting are self-endorsed following the collectivistic culture aspect (Chen et al., 2013). We consider both *independence* and *self-endorsement* as components of autonomy in this study.Autonomy as independence allows us to examine Chinese adolescents’ pursuit of independence and expression of individualistic attributes. However, the orientation of autonomy as independence is of limited value in collectivistic cultures because it conflicts with the cultural norms of interdependence and connectedness (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Chinese youth perceive autonomy more as a relating form whereby they voluntarily take their parents’ advice and expectations into account (Chen et al., 2013). Autonomy as self-endorsement facilitates our investigation of how Chinese adolescents handle difficult situations in interacting with important others possessing divergent values and goals and maintain motivation to act within collectivistic cultures, where harmony in relationships and interdependence are emphasized (Yeh & Yang, 2006). Specifically, for the decision to study abroad in the United States, transnational education cannot happen without parental financial support for many Chinese international students (Chao et al., 2017), which necessitates gaining parental approval. Considering that its implementation requires parental agreement, support, and commitment, synergizing these two perspectives of autonomy is imperative for examining decision about studying abroad.

How much autonomy Chinese international students are granted by their parents and to what degree they personally embrace the choice during the decision-making process about studying abroad is important to investigate, since thenotion of autonomy in the decision has been found to have ongoing influences on their life satisfaction and adaptation. Some scholars (Bodycott & Lai, 2012), for example, found that dissatisfaction among mainland Chinese students with their family decision-making about cross-border study contributed to high levels of anxiety after their arrival at universities in Hong Kong. Self-determined international students are less likely to experience culture shock and more likely to be satisfied with their lives and have successful adaptation in the United States (Yang et al., 2018). In this study, we investigated how students felt and exercised autonomy in decision making about studying abroad among Chinese international students by examining parent–child interpersonal processes inducing this decision. This study examines the notion of autonomy among Chinese international students by exploring how they make decisions namely their decision-making processes with parents regarding abroad study.

**Methods**

**Research Questions** This study used in-depth interview data collected from first-year Chinese international students studying at a large public U.S. university to investigate two primary research questions. First, what was the decision-making process about studying abroad like for Chinese international students and their parents? Second, how much autonomy did students exercise in this process?

**Participants** This study’s data were drawn from the first wave of a large mixed-method, longitudinal study on the academic and psychological adaptation of Chinese international undergraduates studying at a large public Midwestern university. The university was ranked as one of the top ten U.S. universities regarding international student enrollment in the school year when the data were collected. For this academic year, the university admitted over 1,000 first-year Chinese students, comprising 80% of all international first-year students enrolled. This study explored the experiences of 51 first-year Chinese students through semi-structured, in-depth interviews focusing on their family and educational backgrounds before arrival and their adaptation after coming to the United States. We excluded one student who immigrated to the United States during high school, which resulted in 50 students in our current interview sample, of which 28 (56%) were female students. Table 1 (see Appendix A) shows the demographic information of the participants (*n* = 50; see the last row). Over two third of our participants identified themselves as single children in the family. Most participants came from small cities (compared to major metropolises, e.g., Beijing, Shanghai). In our study, studying abroad included both studying abroad during high school years and for college. Over a third reported that they graduated from a U.S. high school and had experiences studying in the United States before college. Most of the students’ parents worked in middle or high SES positions such as company owners, government officials, or accountants. Therefore, our participants tended to come from upper middle-class families in China.

**Procedure** The interview data was collected from fall 2014 to spring 2015. Using snowball sampling, participants were recruited through emails, personal networks, and WeChat (a Chinese social media app) groups. To reduce the bias of the snowball sampling, we diversified the participant recruitment in terms of gender, majors, and academic adjustment. Students were required to be from Mainland China, at least 18 years old, and enrolled full time to be eligible for the interviews. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by a team of Chinese-English bilingual researchers trained in qualitative interviews. Before the interviews began, the participants were first informed of the research project’s purpose and then asked to read through and sign a consent form (see the Informed Consent in the Appendix). Each interview lasted from one to two hours. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese to remove language barrier concerns and allow students to express themselves fully in their native language. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in Chinese verbatim. In this study, all the names used were pseudonyms.

**Interview Data Analysis** We primarily focused on participants’ responses to interview questions relevant to when and how they decided to study abroad and their reasons and perceptions of parents’ rational/attitudes for studying abroad. The Interview Protocol is included in the Appendix and the interview questions informing this study are bolded. Multiple Chinese-English bilingual researchers coded the interview data independently, and discussions were held regularly to ensure consistency among the coders. Qualitative data analysis was conducted based on a grounded theory approach. First, we conducted open coding on three interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), exploring an integration of inductive data-driven alongside a deductive theory-driven approaches based on a preliminary scanning of the interviews. Based on the coding team’s discussion, an initial coding scheme was developed. The remaining 47 interviews were then independently coded, and new codes were added to the initial coding scheme. Next, after initial coding, “axial coding” was conducted during which similar codes were grouped into conceptual categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, we conducted “selective coding” in which one concept was chosen to be the core concept, and a story line was developed around it (LaRossa, 2005). After coding, all the representative interview quotes were translated separately by two Chinese–English bilingual researchers, and translations were checked by another two researchers who are native English speakers to ensure accuracy.

**Findings**

Figure 1 (see Appendix B) reveals six profiles of decision-making processes about studying abroad and five different levels of students’ autonomy. Based on our interviews, family processes behind the decision to study abroad were guided by two key factors: (1) who initiated the idea of studying abroad and (2) whether the other party (either the child or the parents) supported the idea (Figure 1). More specifically, the family decision-making process usually includes three stages: first, initiation of the idea, either by the student, parents, or by both; second, agreement or disagreement from the other party on the initial idea in the predisposition phase and relevant details and ensuing discussions in the search phase; and finally, some consensus reached by both sides on studying abroad and the important details (e.g., where and when to study). Since this study focused on parent–child interactions, we addressed parents as a unit (i.e., not each parent individually). If at least one parent initialized the idea, we identified parents as the initiator. For students as initiators, if one parent was supportive but the other one was not (*n* = 3, 6%), we characterized it as discouraging parents since parents as a unit create resistance for the decision-making. Of note, one-third of students in our sample (*n* = 17) went to U.S. high schools, and the decision was made regarding going abroad for high school. Table 1 (see Appendix A) shows the participants’ demographic information in each of the six profiles (see the Groups 1 – 6 rows).

Autonomy was defined from the combined perspectives (i.e., independence and self-endorsement) as the extent to which the students solely decide and the degree to which the students internalize their decisions’ motives. We characterized students with the highest level of autonomy when they initiated the idea and persisted regardless of whether parents initially disapproved (Group 1) or not (Group 2). Students who did not initiate the idea and left important decisions all to their parents were placed in the lowest level of autonomy group (Group 6). In the following section, the five profiles are presented in the order of decreasing autonomy.

**Students as Initiators (Groups 1 and 2)**

In profiles 1 and 2 (*n* = 21, 42%), the student was the initiators of the idea for studying abroad. After the student initiated the idea, the family communication process diverged in two directions depending on the parents’ initial attitudes, including not supportive (Group 1) or supportive (Group 2), about the student’s idea of studying abroad. The two profiles revealed the Chinese students’ highest level of autonomy in the decision-making process of studying abroad.

Group 1: Student initiators with discouraging parents

For the first group of students (*n* = 5, 10%), they initiated the idea of studying abroad with parental disapproval. Students’ initiation of the idea was often inspired by their surrounding environments, including being in a class where many classmates planned to go abroad (e.g., Mei, female). The idea of studying abroad was also inspired by their exposure to foreign cultures. Ting (female, who went to U.S. high school) commented that she had been thinking about studying abroad since her study tour to England in middle school. Students’ interest in studying abroad was also indirectly influenced by other experiences, such as exposure to different cultures in English classes and interactions with foreign teachers (Ting).

Despite the students’ initiation of the idea of going abroad, the responses from the parents in these cases were either hesitation or disagreement. Students reported that parental hesitation or disagreement could be attributed to one or more of the following reasons: their parents’ unwillingness to send their only child far away, parental concern about potential negative stereotypes of students who chose to study abroad (i.e., they were not good students in China), or about their children’s future after graduating from a university outside China. Some parents expressed unwillingness that they dreaded sending their only child abroad (Ting). Some parents may hold negative stereotypes of studying abroad, “thinking that sending children abroad is an option for those rich families whose children underperformed in school” (Mei). Besides, parents’ perception that “it is hard to find a good job after studying abroad” is another reason why some parents dissuaded students from going abroad (Yi, female).

Despite parental hesitation or disagreement, students in this profile persisted and convinced their parents through different strategies, including patience, assertiveness, and persuading parents with information that changed their minds about studying abroad. Yi (female) talked about the process in her family:

In the first year of high school, I really wanted to study abroad and should have started preparation in the second year, but my parents refused. So, I did not take any action until the College Entrance Examination. … I took it (the College Entrance Examination). However, after the exam, I just left it alone, not choosing any (Chinese) universities to apply for. I pushed myself very hard. … The only thing I wanted was to study abroad, and I believed that I could get accepted by a good (U.S.) university.

Compared to Yi, Mei was more aggressive by leaving her parents with little choice but supporting her: “Once I made up my mind to go abroad, I started to prepare for it on my own. But my parents refused, and we argued sometimes. … Then I refused to study hard at school. … Maybe after I dropped out of school, my parents would realize that they could not change my mind. … So (they) began to support me at that time, though we still argued frequently.” Students in this profile held diverse intrinsic or identified motivations to study abroad, including showing interest in the culture, broadening their horizons, attending a university of higher ranking, envisaging a better education, and having a more colorful college life.

Group 2: Student initiators with supportive parents

In the second profile, students initiated the idea of studying abroad, and parents supported them at the predisposition stage, although there might be disagreements in the search stage about specific details that were eventually resolved (*n* = 16, 32%). In this profile, parents supported the student’s general ideas about studying abroad. For Tuan (female), “Concerning studying abroad, I made the decision, while they (my parents) just said that they supported me.” However, for some of the families, they disagreed on specific details, including the time or the host country for studying abroad. For example, Xiao (female) wanted to go abroad and attend the international department (at high school) after junior high, while her father disapproved of it. “He thought I should take the College Entrance Examination, attend college in China, and then go abroad for graduate school” (Xiao). The controversy on details can be also about the host country. Jun (male, who went to a U.S. high school) did not initially reach an agreement on the host country with his parents:

The question was which particular country I should go to. At first, I considered Japan since I learned Japanese. Later, my mother worried that it was dangerous to be in Japan due to the frequent earthquakes. Then, my dad mentioned that he would like me to go to the United Kingdom. However, given the difficulty international students face in finding internships and jobs to stay in the United Kingdom, we decided (for me) to come to the United States, where I could have more opportunities.

Choosing a study abroad destination from different options involves considering with parents the current risks (e.g., earthquakes) and future opportunities (e.g., internships).

Parental support may be motivated by different factors in different families. For some families in this profile, parental support for students’ idea of studying abroad may be a continuation of a common pattern of the lack of parental involvement in their children’s education and important life decisions. For example, Han (male) shared that his parents did not intervene in anything related to his study, including any of his decisions about studying abroad. When asked whether this was out of respect for him, he gave a positive response. Similarly, Yan (female), who since middle school had lived and studied away from her parents and self-cared herself since childhood, shared her parents’ response to her decision about studying abroad: “(Their response) was not so different from the time when I went to another city for middle school. The only difference was that I was younger (at that time). Although now I am further (away from home), I am older.”

This second profile had the highest proportion of Chinese international students among all the six profiles. For these students, they found that their parents were readily supportive, though sometimes mixed with some indifference—of their general idea to study outside of China, yet had some questions or disagreement around time, country, or institution, but their questions or disagreement was eventually resolved through communication. The two profiles (i.e., Groups 1 and 2) revealed the Chinese students’ highest level of autonomy in the decision-making process because they initiated the idea of studying abroad and acted upon their personal willingness and motivation, possibly integrated with parents’ different opinions.

**Students and Parents Together as Initiators (Group 3)**

Group 3: Mutual agreement

In the third profile, students reported that they and their parents initiated the idea of studying abroad together (*n* = 5, 10%). Cases were categorized into this profile based on participants’ *reports,* rather than observations of the initiation. For example, Kun (male) said, “I attended an information session organized by an agent with my parents, and we suddenly had the idea of going abroad. Afterwards, we discussed for some time and then made up our mind to have me study abroad.” In this exchange, it seems as though students and their parent’s ideas about studying abroad were articulated around the same time, indicating co-initiation and mutual agreement.

**Parents as Initiators (Groups 4–6)**

Following these examples of student initiation, in profiles 4 through 6, parents or one of the parents was the initiators of the idea for studying abroad, comprising nearly half of our participants (*n* = 24, 48%)—slightly exceeding the proportion of students as initiators above. After the parent initiated the idea, the family communication process diverged in three directions depending on the student’s initial attitudes, including supportive (Group 4), not supportive (Group 5), or indifferent (Group 6), about the parents’ idea of studying abroad.

Group 4: Parent initiators with supportive students

In the fourth profile, at least one of the parents initiated the idea of studying abroad, and the student agreed at the predisposition stage, though they disagreed on relevant details in the search stage, but ultimately, they reached an agreement (*n* = 12, 24%). “My parents gave me the suggestion to go abroad. After some consideration, I thought this plan was feasible.” (Bo, male). Although parents were the idea initiators, they usually presented the idea (sometimes with their reasons), consulted with the student for their opinions, or left the student to decide finally. Huan (male) talked about his decision-making process about studying abroad:

One day, my parents asked me whether I wanted to study abroad. He (my dad) said that if I take the College Entrance Examination, I can get a grade good enough to get into a key university, but it is still a question whether I can get into one. He gave me three days to consider, and he told me that I should take it seriously because I had prepared for it (the College Entrance Examination) for so many years.

As Huan’s parents proposed their suggestion about studying abroad and left the final decision for him to make, they not only provided explanations for it but also presented the importance of careful consideration for him.

For some of the families, after the students agreed with the idea initiated by parents at the predisposition stage, there were some disagreements in the search stage around the timing for studying abroad and the destination country. Jia (female, who went to a U.S. high school) agreed with her parents on their suggestions about studying abroad but had her own thoughts about the timing: “Personally speaking, I was originally planning to go abroad for graduate school after undergraduate or go abroad in my junior or senior year. However, it is also good to do it (studying abroad) early.” This experience was echoed by Jie (female, who went to a U.S. high school). When asked why the United States was chosen, Jie answered, “To be honest, I wanted to go to the United Kingdom back then. However, maybe it was because many of my dad’s friends’ kids were in the United States, and the atmosphere in the United States was more open. I heard that the United Kingdom is restrictive in contrast, so the United States should be a better choice.” In all these cases, although the parents were the idea initiators, they usually presented the idea but left the student to make the final decision. Students in this group exhibited a relatively lower level (compared to Groups 1, 2, and 3) but still a high level of autonomy in the decision-making since they internalized the motives for the idea of studying abroad initiated by their parents.

Group 5: Parent initiators with opposing students

In the fifth profile, parents initiated the idea of studying abroad, while the student refused at first, but finally changed his/her mind after more extensive consideration (*n* = 6, 12%). In this profile, students were not *forced* by their parents, but they *voluntarily* changed their minds. Their experiences of being exposed to foreign cultures and people were one of the top incentives that motivated the students to give their parents’ idea deeper consideration. “My mother first got the idea of letting me go abroad, but it was not yet on my radar then. … I traveled to the United States on a tour organized by New Oriental [a leading Chinese for-profit international education agency]. I had a good impression of the United States since then and thought I would like to have a try living there, so I decided to go” (Ying, female).

Another top incentive that motivated the students to internalize parents’ idea of studying abroad is competitive situations and stress encountered at schools in China. Ying shared:

I wanted to get into a Chinese university, but later, the pressure was too high. There is only one chance to take the College Entrance Examination, and if you fail, then that is not good. In addition, afterwards, I went to the main campus (of my high school), where every student has much higher grades than me. … Then I think, “Why not study abroad?”, because any U.S. university I can get in will outperform any Chinese university (I can get in).

Unlike Ying, Jing (female, who went to a U.S. high school) was making decisions about enrolling in international curricula in Chinese high schools (perceived as a transition to college abroad) when in middle school and about high school abroad when in high school. However, similarly, Jing initially refused her mom’s idea of studying abroad in middle school: “I had excellent academic achievement in middle school, so studying abroad [during high school] may not be so useful for me to get accepted into a key university in China.” However, Jing changed her mind afterwards. She attended a high school which was the top in her city. Since “it was difficult to catch up (with the class),” she changed her mind and decided to go abroad. Here, we can see that the decision process to go abroad for students seemed to be inclusive of opportunities to get to know other choices beyond universities in China and tension with experiences related to their high school learning. Eventually, they did come around and embrace the idea to study abroad. This group of students changed their minds and internalized the motivations for studying abroad so that it became congruent with other personal values, which indicates lower levels of autonomy in decision-making than previous groups.

Group 6: Parent initiators with indifferent students

Within the sixth profile, the decision about studying abroad was made by one or both of the parents (*n* = 6, 12%). In these cases, the students’ parents raised the idea, whereas the students just took in the suggestion without much consideration. We found that in these examples in which children followed the suggestions of their parents, students did not want to let their parents down or were obedient to their parents. “He (my dad) made the final decision about sending me abroad. To be frank, I do not even know if I really wanted to go abroad. … To be honest, my life plan was just to follow whatever my father designed for me” (Xuan, female). For some students, the idea of going abroad sparked anxiety about their adjustment abroad. Shen (male, who went to a U.S. high school) commented: “I was afraid at the beginning. Because I was aware of the limitations in my English ability, I knew that I was sure to experience difficulties in communication if I were to go abroad. … Personally, because I had a strong tendency to follow my parents’ suggestions, I decided to go abroad. I am pretty laid back without high expectations for myself.” Finally, he conceded and agreed to travel abroad for his studies because he was used to following his parents’ suggestions.

Interestingly, in this category, some parents allowed their children to choose what they wanted, but most students lacked their own ideas and simply left the decision to their parents. For instance, Xi (female) mentioned:

My parents always say that it is alright for you to just be yourself and do whatever you like whenever you like. I once seriously considered dropping out of school here (in the United States) and returning to China to resume high school and get into college (in China). However, it was an option (studying abroad) that my parents provided, and I was not really against it. Thus, I figured I would follow this path (that my parents paved for me) until I discovered what I wanted to do, and then I would go for it.

Even as Xi recounted this decision, it seemed like she was still grappling with whether the decision was right for her. Like Xi, some students in this case were not apprehensive about their own thoughts and plans when parents initiated the idea and simply followed parents’ arrangement for their own life. In this category, students presented the lowest level of autonomy in family interpersonal processes underlying their studying abroad decisions. Their behavior reflected partial internalization or no internalization at all of the parents’ decisions.

**Discussion**

In social media and scholarly literature, most depictions of Chinese international students center on the struggles they face, often depicting them as dependent and passive (Abelmann & Kang, 2014; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Our findings suggest that we need a better understanding of this population of young migrants emerging from the growing Chinese middle class. In this study, we focused on Chinese international students’ autonomy in their decision-making processes about studying abroad. Autonomy in studying abroad decision-making predicts students’ psychosocial adjustment at U.S. universities (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Yang et al., 2018). Most of our participants demonstrated clear agency and autonomy in their decision-making processes about studying abroad, and various levels of autonomy among our participants were highlighted. Furthermore, the qualitative findings elaborated on various family interpersonal processes underlying the decision, which enhances our understanding of how socioeconomic-cultural contexts and previous experiences may contribute to their decision-making.

**Decision-Making Process About Studying Abroad**

Our study extends the existing literature by highlighting family interpersonal processes behind the decision-making about studying abroad. Existing research about study abroad decision-making has predominantly used quantitative methods to illustrate the types of decision-making without considering decision-making as a process that involves lengthy consideration, discussions, and arguments in the predisposition and search stages. In this study, we found six profiles of family interpersonal processes and correspondingly five levels of students’ autonomy, depending on who initialized the idea of studying abroad and whether the other party (either the child or the parents) supported the idea initially. The first two profiles comprise Chinese students who were the initiator of the idea of studying abroad, the third profile refers to students who initiated the idea jointly with parents, and in the last three profiles, parents were the idea initiator. While previous studies have found two types of students—those who are the initiators and those whose parents are the initiators of the study-abroad idea (Bodycott & Lai, 2012)—our study demonstrates that decision-making about studying abroad for Chinese students is more nuanced than who initiated the plan. Instead, it continues with how the other party (either the child or the parents) perceives the idea, which makes the processes more complicated and difficult to describe using only static categories. Participants’ experiences demonstrated that decision-making about studying abroad is a dynamic family process during which discussions and arguments occur, and ideas may change over time between students and parents. This study proposes a flowchart (see Figure 1, Appendix B) to represent the dynamic decision-making process.

**Autonomy in Decision-Making Process**

In this study, most of the students fell into the second, third, and fourth profiles (in Figure 1, Appendix B), which indicates that while for most of our participants the decision about studying abroad was jointly made with parents, they, on average, displayed a high level of autonomy in the processes. The finding disagrees with that of Bodycott and Lai (2012) that most of the students felt obligated or reluctant to accept the decision about cross-border study and were not satisfied with the procedure or the results of decision-making. The different finding is probably due to the different samples of the two studies: Bodycott and Lai’s study participants are students who went to study in Hong Kong back in early 2010. This interview finding is confirmed by our survey results generated from the larger sample. The decision about studying abroad for most of the students in the larger sample was mainly their own choices, though parents were involved in the decision-making process (125 out of 195, 64%). Chinese adolescents still feel autonomous despite the direct involvement of their parents in the decision-making process (Rudy et al., 2007). The collectivistic culture orientation emphasizes harmony in relationships and interdependence, and it differs from the Western culture, where independence is highly valued. Autonomy that facilitates adolescent adjustment in Chinese society needs to be understood from a combined perspective: as the extent to which one’s motives for engaging in the action are self-endorsed, and the degree to which the decision is made independently from parental influence (Chen et al., 2013). The combined orientation of autonomy facilitates our investigation of Chinese students regulating difficult situations in interacting with parents while establishing a separate sense of self from their parents (Yeh & Yang, 2006).

Further, our study illustrates different levels of autonomy displayed by our participants, ranging from actively pursuing studying abroad to being quite indifferent toward parental suggestions of studying abroad. In the first profile, participants used various strategies to persuade their parents, who initially refused their idea of studying abroad. Relatedly, 21.4% of all the participants in the larger survey reported that it was their own choice to study abroad. Although the majority of our participants demonstrated high levels of autonomy in family interpersonal processes related to studying abroad, some Chinese international students reported low levels of autonomy in this process. These students did not see the importance of studying abroad and followed the direction suggested by their parents. Research on Chinese adolescents shows that when there is little endorsement of parental decisions, compliance can become a psychological burden, and can induce negative psychological wellbeing (Chen et al., 2013). For international students, a lack of personal motivation for studying abroad may persist and induce maladaptation in the new environment. Compared to peers who demonstrated agency and autonomy in their decision-making processes, students who simply followed the path their parents specified for them tended to be less motivated and do worse in U.S. colleges (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Yang et al., 2018). In future research, it will be helpful to have longitudinal data to investigate how lack of motivation may affect adaptation and development.

This study also contributed to our limited understanding of Chinese middle-class child-rearing attitudes in contemporary China. For most students in our sample, parents granted students a high level of autonomy and respected their opinions in the family decision-making processes about studying abroad, which probably differs from traditional Chinese child-rearing attitudes. In the process, most of the parents cared about students’ opinions and left the final decision-making to their children, even in cases when parents were the idea initiators, indicating that Chinese parents in these families took their children’s opinions seriously and encouraged their children to think independently. Moreover, even in the sixth profile, where students totally depend on parents’ decisions, some parents allowed their children to choose what they wanted. In contemporary Chinese families, to thrive in educational and vocational opportunities in competitive, market-oriented modern China, children are encouraged and socialized by their parents to freely express their opinions or decisions and engage in initiative-taking behaviors, especially in urban families (Chen & Li, 2012; Lin et al., 2015).

Beyond the scope of this study, our findings indicate the importance of gender dynamics. Male students are more likely to be the idea initiator than female students. As seen in Table 1 (see Appendix A), proportionally, there are more male students (10 out of 22, 45%) than females (11 out of 28, 39%) in Group 1 and 2 (student as initiator) and more female students (15 out of 28, 54%) than males (9 out of 22, 41%) in Group 4 to 6 (parents as initiator). The gender role expectation that Chinese boys are socialized to play a more active role in making family decisions than Chinese girls (Ho, 1981) may explain this gender difference. In addition, Fuligni’s (1998) study found that Chinese American adolescent girls had an expectation for autonomy at a later age than boys. It may explain why female students in the current study were more dependent on their parents for the decision making on studying abroad compared to male students of the same age. Future study should explore more deeply the role of gender in these processes.

**Conclusion and Implications**

We acknowledge that our study is not without limitations. First, this study was based on students’ retrospective descriptions, and we did not have data from their parents. The incorporation of parents’ narratives into future studies may be instrumental for understanding the decision-making processes and parents’ child-rearing attitudes toward Chinese international students. Second, we are constrained by the small sample size of students from rural places, possibly due to the population of interest. The majority of Chinese international students come from urban areas. Research has shown that Chinese children from urban/urbanized places display more willingness to challenge parents’ authority and more sociable-assertive behaviors than their rural counterparts (Chen & Li, 2012; Zhang & Fuligni, 2006). Future research can benefit from including students from rural places to cross-validate the current findings. Third, our findings did not distinguish decision-making processes of studying abroad for high school versus college due to limited sample size for students who went to U.S. high schools and failure to design relevant interview questions. Autonomy in studying-abroad decision-making and family interpersonal processes can be differentiated from the experiences of Chinese international students at a younger age who chose to study in U.S. high schools. A further recommendation would be to examine the differences between students who study abroad for high school and for college in the United States.

Despite the limitations, this study contributed to our understanding of this most recent wave of Chinese international students and revealed their autonomy in decision-making about studying abroad in the family context. Our findings revealed that most of our participants demonstrated clear agency and autonomy in their decision-making processes about studying abroad. Also, surprisingly, many of our participants reflected on the independence dimension within autonomy through behaviors such as making individual decisions and self-caring regarding study and life. Stereotypes about Chinese students being passive and dependent can be detrimental to both Chinese international students and U.S. universities. For Chinese students, these stereotypes and perceptions can induce invisible biases against them from faculty, staff, and other students (Huang & Cowden, 2009). The stereotypes may also deprive U.S. universities of the opportunity to discover Chinese students’ voices and promote cultural diversity on campus. It would be helpful for institutions, including faculty, staff, and domestic students, to provide an inclusive environment for international students by dispelling stereotypes about them and adopting a less ethnocentric viewpoint (Heng, 2018).

Our findings on different levels of autonomy also highlight the necessity of considering Chinese international students’ current adaptation concerning interpersonal processes within their family before migration. We recommend more programs and interventions aimed at drawing on students’ sense of autonomy by encouraging them to build agency in changing themselves and the environment. It is helpful for the U.S. institutions to support Chinese international students’ autonomy development based on their various needs, rather than assuming they are a homogeneous group with identical challenges. School counselors or advisors can also get to know students’ autonomy in decision-making about studying abroad to understand their perspectives and identify challenges and vulnerabilities to help build a healthier sense of purpose during their studying abroad journey.

**References**

Abelmann, N., & Kang, J. (2014). A fraught exchange?: U.S. media on Chinese international undergraduates and the American university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *18*(4), 382-397. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313479852.

Bell, N. J., Baron, E., Corson, K., Kostina-Ritchey, E., & Frederick, H. (2014). Parent–adolescent decision making: Embracing dialogical complexity.*Journal of Family Issues, 35*(13), 1780-1799. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13480339.

Bodycott, P. (2009). Choosing a higher education study abroad destination: What mainland Chinese parents and students rate as important. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *8*(3), 349–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240909345818.

Bodycott, P., & Lai, A. (2012). The influence and implications of Chinese culture in the decision to undertake cross-border higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *16*(3), 252–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311418517.

Chao, C., Hegarty, N., Angelidis, J., & Lu, V. F. (2017). Chinese students’ motivations for studying in the United States. *Journal of International Students, 7*(2), 257-269. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i2.380.

Chen, X., & Chen, H. (2010). Children’s socioemotional functioning and adjustment in the changing Chinese society. In *Social change and human development: Concepts and results*. Edited by R. K. Silbereisen & X. Chen, (pp. 209 –226). Sage.

Chen, J. A., Liu, L., Zhao, X., & Yeung, A. S. (2015). Chinese international students: An emerging mental health crisis. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 54*(11), 879-880. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2015.06.022.

Chen, X., & Li, D. (2012). Parental encouragement of initiative-taking and adjustment in Chinese children from rural, urban, and urbanized families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*(6), 927–936. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030708.

Chen, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Beyers, W., Soenens, B., & Van Petegem, S. (2013). Autonomy in family decision making for Chinese adolescents: Disentangling the dual meaning of autonomy. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *44*(7), 1184–1209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022113480038.

Clark, R., & Gieve, S. N. (2006). On the discursive construction of “the Chinese learner”. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 19*(1), 54-73. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310608668754.

Dornbusch, S. M., Ritter, P. L., Mont-Reynaud, R., & Chen, Z. (1990). Family decision making and academic performance in a diverse high school population. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 5*(2), 143-160. https://doi.org/10.1177/074355489052003.

Fong, V. L. (2007). Parent-child communication problems and the perceived inadequacies of Chinese only children. *Ethos, 35*(1), 85-127. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2007.35.1.85.

Fuligni, A. J. (1998). Authority, autonomy, and parent-adolescent conflict and cohesion: A study of adolescents from Mexican, Chinese, Filipino, and European backgrounds. *Developmental Psychology, 34*(4), 782-792. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.34.4.782

Greenfield, P. M. (2009). Linking social change and developmental change: Shifting pathways of human development. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(2), 401-418. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014726.

Heng, T. T. (2018). Exploring the complex and non-linear evolution of Chinese international students' experiences in US colleges. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(6), 1141-1155. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1474184.

Ho, D. Y. (1981). Traditional patterns of socialization in Chinese society. *Acta Psychologica Taiwanica, 23*(2), 81–95.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1986). Chinese pattern of socialization: A critical review. In *The psychology of the Chinese people.* Edited by M. H. Bond, (pp. 1–37). Oxford University Press.

Ho, D. Y. F. (1994). Cognitive socialization in Confucian heritage cultures. In *Cross-cultural roots of minority child development*. Edited by P.M. Greenfield & R.R. Cocking, (pp. 285-314). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College and University,* *62*, 207-221.

Huang, J. & Cowden, P. A. (2009). Are Chinese students really quiet, passive and surface learners? – A cultural studies perspective. *Canadian and International Education / Education Canadienne et international. 38*(2), 75-88. https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v38i2.9137.

Huang, G. H., & Gove, M. (2012). Confucianism and Chinese families: Values and practices in education. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* *2*(3), 10-14.

Institute of International Education. (2018). Top 25 places of origin of international students, 2012/13-2017/18. Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange. Retrieved from https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Places-of-Origin

Kim, D., Bankart, C. A. S., Jiang, X., Brazil, A. M. (2018). Understanding the college choice process of Asian international students. In *Understanding international students from Asia in American universities.* Edited by Y. Ma & M. Garcia-Murillo, (pp. 15-41). Springer, Cham.

LaRossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods and qualitative research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *67*, 837-857. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00179.x.

Lin, L., Huang, C., & Wang, Q. (2015). Parenting in contemporary China: The dynamics of interdependence and independence. In *Contemporary parenting: A global perspective.* Edited by G. Nicolas, A. Bejarano, & D. L. Lee, (pp. 59-80). Routledge.

Lin, L., & Wang, Q. (2012). *Perceived parental socialization of self-reliance and individuality among Chinese early adolescents.* The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Liu, M., Chen, X., Rubin, K., Zheng, S., Cui, L., Li, D., . . . Wang, L. (2005). Autonomy- vs. connectedness-oriented parenting behaviors in Chinese and Canadian mothers. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 29*(6), 489-495. https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250500147063.

Louie, A., & Qin, D. B. (2019). 'Car talk': Automobility and Chinese international students in Michigan. *Identities, 26*(2), 146-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2017.1380941.

Lui, P. P., & Rollock, D. D. (2013). Tiger mother: Popular and psychological scientific perspectives on Asian culture and parenting. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *83*(4), 450-456. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajop.12043.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Models of agency: Sociocultural diversity in the construction of action. In *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation: Vol. 49. Cross-cultural differences in perspectives on self*. Edited by V. Murphy-Berman, & J. Berman, (pp. 1-57). University of Nebraska Press.

Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. (2002), “Push‐pull” factors influencing international student destination choice, *International Journal of Educational Management*, *16*, pp. 82-90. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403.

Rudy, D., Sheldon, K. M., Awong, T., & Tan, H. H. (2007). Autonomy, culture, and well-being: The benefits of inclusive autonomy. *Journal of Research in Personality, 41*(5), 983-1007. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2006.11.004.

Ryan, J., & Louie, K. (2007). False dichotomy? "Western" and "Confucian" concepts of scholarship and learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 39*(4), 404-417. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2007.00347.x.

Silbereisen, R. K. (2000). German unification and adolescents’ developmental timetables: Continuities and discontinuities. In *Negotiating adolescence in times of social change.* Edited by L. A. Crockett & R. K. Silbereisen (pp. 104–122). Cambridge University Press.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Way, N., Okazaki, S., Zhao, J., Kim, J. J., Chen, X., Yoshikawa, H., . . . Deng, H. (2013). Social and emotional parenting: Mothering in a changing Chinese society. *Asian American Journal of Psychology, 4*(1), 61-70. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031204.

World Bank. (2018). [Graph illustration the line chart]. International Comparison Program database. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=CN

Yan, K. (2017). *Chinese international students’ stressors and coping strategies in the United States*. Springer.

Yang, Y., Zhang, Y., & Sheldon, K. M. (2018). Self-determined motivation for studying abroad predicts lower culture shock and greater well-being among international students: The mediating role of basic psychological needs satisfaction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *63*, 95–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.10.005.

Yeh, K. H., & Yang, Y. J. (2006). Construct validation of individuating and relating autonomy orientations in culturally Chinese adolescents. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 9*, 148-160. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-839X.2006.00192.x.

Yoshikawa, H., Mistry, R., & Wang, Y. (2016). Advancing methods in research on Asian American children and youth. *Child Development, 87*(4), 1033–1050. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12576.

Zhang, L. (2010). *In search of paradise: Middle-class living in a Chinese metropolis.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Zhang, W., & Fuligni, A. J. (2006). Authority, autonomy, and family relationships among adolescents in urban and rural China. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 16*(4), 527-537. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2006.00506.x.

Zhao, Y. (2014). *Who's afraid of the big bad dragon?: Why China has the best (and worst) education system in the world*. Jossey-Bass

**Shizhu Liu**, PhD. Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, United States. Research interests include racial/ethnic minority adolescents’ interpersonal relationships, especially with parents and peers, and their psychosocial adjustment. She has developed two lines of research. The first line of her research concerns the role of racial/ethnic factors in peer setting as well as school context in adolescents’ academic and psychosocial adjustment. Another line of her research examines interpersonal relationships of Chinese international students at the U.S. higher educational institutes, in terms of decision-making processes with their parents and social interactions with their Chinese international peers and domestic students. Email: [liushizh@msu.edu](mailto:liushizh@msu.edu)

**Desiree Baolian Qin**, Ed.D. Associate Professor in Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, United States. Research centers on adolescents and emerging adults from immigrant. One main question underlying her work is: How do immigration, culture, gender, SES, and important ecological contexts like family, peers, and school impact adolescent and emerging adult development? Email: [dqin@msu.edu](mailto:dqin@msu.edu)

**Adam Grimm**, PhD. Postdoc in the College of Education Michigan State University, United States. Adam is a scholar-practitioner interested in the globalization of higher education. Specifically, his research explores how the cross-border mobilities of students, scholars, and faculty influence and are influenced by relevant policies at the institutional and national level. Utilizing critical qualitative methods, Adam seeks to understand the stories and experiences of mobile persons as related to their transnational positionalities to learn how their worlds, spanning borders, are socially constructed in undefined and often contested spaces. Email: [grimmada@msu.edu](mailto:grimmada@msu.edu)

**Mingjun Xie**, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Developmental Psychology at Beijing Normal University, China. Her major research interests include sociocultural influences on biopsychosocial development among adolescents and young adults of diverse backgrounds. Email: [mxie@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:mxie@bnu.edu.cn)

**Yemo Duan**, PhD. Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, United States. Research interests include the grandparent-grandchild relationship and its effects on adolescents. Email: [duanyemo@msu.edu](mailto:duanyemo@msu.edu)

**Chi-Fang Tseng**, PhD. Postdoctoral Research Associate, Human Development and Family Studies, Michigan State University, United States. Research interests include representation of diverse populations in couple and family therapy interventions, intersectionality, diversity, and mental health among marginalized populations, relationship satisfaction and depression among couples with marginalized identities, and Asian and immigrant couples and families. Email: tsengch5@msu.edu

**Mikiko Sato**, Ed.M. Doctoral Candidate at Michigan State University, United States. Mikiko’s research applies a decolonial strength-based approach to better understand the experiences of ethnically and racially diverse families in the United States and abroad.  Her current project explores the meaning-making and lived experiences of Maya mothers in rural Guatemala and how they define motherhood and womanhood. Additionally, she is involved in projects that focus on parent-child relationships among Asian/Asian-American families and psychosocial adaptation among Latino families. Email: [satomik1@msu.edu](mailto:satomik1@msu.edu)

Appendix A

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants (N = 50)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group |  | Gender | | | |  | Single child in family1 | | | |  | Hometown2 | | | |  | Attended U.S. high school | | | |  |
|  |  | Male | | Female | |  | Yes | | No | |  | Major metropolises | | Small cities | |  | Yes | | No | |  |
|  |  | *n* | % | *n* | % |  | *n* | % | *n* | % |  | *n* | % | *n* | % |  | *n* | % | *n* | % |  |
| Group 1 |  | 1 | 20.0 | 4 | 80.0 |  | 4 | 100.0 | 0 | 0.0 |  | 1 | 20.0 | 4 | 80.0 |  | 1 | 20.0 | 4 | 80.0 |  |
| Group 2 |  | 9 | 56.2 | 7 | 43.8 |  | 10 | 66.7 | 5 | 33.3 |  | 2 | 13.3 | 13 | 86.7 |  | 6 | 37.5 | 10 | 62.5 |  |
| Group 3 |  | 3 | 33.3 | 2 | 66.7 |  | 3 | 75.0 | 1 | 25.0 |  | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 100.0 |  | 1 | 20.0 | 4 | 80.0 |  |
| Group 4 |  | 5 | 41.7 | 7 | 58.3 |  | 7 | 63.6 | 4 | 36.4 |  | 3 | 30.0 | 7 | 70.0 |  | 4 | 33.3 | 8 | 66.7 |  |
| Group 5 |  | 2 | 33.3 | 4 | 66.7 |  | 2 | 40.0 | 3 | 60.0 |  | 0 | 0.0 | 5 | 100.0 |  | 3 | 50.0 | 3 | 50.0 |  |
| Group 6 |  | 2 | 33.3 | 4 | 66.7 |  | 5 | 83.3 | 1 | 16.7 |  | 2 | 33.3 | 4 | 66.7 |  | 2 | 33.3 | 4 | 66.7 |  |
| Total |  | 22 | 44.0 | 28 | 56.0 |  | 31 | 68.9 | 14 | 31.1 |  | 8 | 17.8 | 37 | 82.2 |  | 17 | 34.0 | 33 | 66.0 |  |

*Note*. *N*s vary due to missing data. 1 Five participants had missing information on a single child in family. 2 Five participants had missing information on hometown.

Appendix B

Figure 1

Flowchart About Studying Abroad Decision-Making Processes (with six profiles and five autonomy levels from high to low)

**

*Note.* CIS = Chinese international students. Diamonds represent options. Rectangles represent activities.

**Appendix C**

**Interview Protocol**

1. Educational Background in China and Coming to this University
2. Can you tell me something about your experiences in China before coming to this university? Where did you grow up in China?
3. Can you tell me something about your schooling experiences in China? Did you attend a lot of Buxiban?
4. Where did you attend high school? Did you participate in the National Exam in China? Did you attend the International Seciton of your High school to focus on TOEFL and SAT preparation?
5. Why did you come to the US for schooling? Was it your idea or your parents’ idea?
6. When did you first know that you would be going to universities abroad? How did it change your schooling experiences in China?
7. How many universities did you apply to? Did you use an agent? Why did you choose to come to this university?
8. Was it hard to get into this university? What did you need to do?
9. Was this your first time studying in the U.S.? [if no, where were you? And for how long?]
10. Family Background and Parents
11. Can you tell me something about your family background? What do your parents do?
12. Tell me something about your parents. What kinds of parents are they?
13. What do you like most about your mom? What do you wish you could change, if you could, about your mom?
14. What do you like most about your dad? What do you wish you could change, if you could, about your dad?
15. Did you grow up with your parents or were other relatives involved in your upbringing? If so who?
16. Do you feel a lot of pressure from parents or family to be a certain way as an only child?
17. How involved were your parents in your school? What are ways they are involved in your school? Did you have a nanny or bao mu?
18. How was your relationship with your parents? Were they very busy at work? If you had any trouble, would you talk to your parents?
19. What were your parents’ expectations for your schooling in China? After you graduate from college, what are your parents’ expectations for you?
20. Are you an only child? How does that influence your experiences growing up?
21. Do you have contact with your parents now? How often do you contact your parents? Through QQ or Wechat video? What do you talk about with your parents?
22. Do you find it easy to talk to your parents about problems you may have? Do you talk to them about problems you experience here?
23. Do you miss your parents? Have your relationship change with your parents now that you are here?
24. Adjusting to life at this University
25. I’m very interested in the experiences of Chinese international students at this university. Can you tell me something about your own experiences attending school here? How did the last semester go? How is this semester going?
26. Are things different from your expectations here at this university? How?
27. What helped you adjust to life here? What were the hardest things in the first semester? How did you overcome these challenges?
28. What do you like most? What do you like least about your life here?
29. What’s the major you chose when you first came to this university? What was your major last semester? Are you changing majors this semester? Why?
30. How did you do academically and socially in the first semester?
31. What are the biggest differences between going to school in the US and China?
32. At this university, there are Chinese students whose family is very wealthy and students whose family is not very wealthy. Which group do you belong to?
33. Do money and family financial situation influence your experiences at the university? If so, how? [Academic? Social?]
34. What is it like to live in this community in East Lansing? Do you like it? Is it different from your expectations?
35. Are Chinese students treated well here in the community? Can you give some examples?
36. What have you learned about working with American professors? Are they different from Chinese professors or teachers? What are similarities and what are differences?
37. Do you attend activities organized by the university? Why [not]?
38. Are you a member of any student groups (either Chinese or non-Chinese)?
39. Are grades important for you? Why?
40. What are some things you learned in you’re here that will be benefit your future?
41. Peers, Parents and Social Support
42. What are some main areas of support you have had? What’s the most important support you have in your life here?
43. Are most of your friends from the U.S., China or other regions?
44. What do you do with your friends?
45. How are things going in your residence hall? What are things you really like and what are things that you don’t like as much about your dorm?
46. How are things between you and your roommate? Do you know each other before? How has it been sharing a dorm together with him/her?
47. How is the dining hall? What do you think of American food? Do you eat outside a lot?
48. What are your American classmates like? Do you interact with them a lot?
49. Is it important for you to interact with American students? Why (not)?
50. Some students mention that it’s hard to become friends with American students. What are your experiences? Why do think is it this way?
51. How do you think most Chinese students perceive American students?
52. How do you think most American students perceive Chinese students?
53. Did you date in high school? Are you dating now? If so, has dating changed your social life in terms of interactions with your friends?
54. What advise you have for someone who is coming to study here?
55. Mental health
56. Sometimes students feel depressed or anxious in their first year. Have you had any o these feelings in your first year? Why? How do you deal with these feelings?
57. Have you experienced discrimination in any way? How do you make sense of these experiences if any?
58. When you have problems, who do you talk to?
59. Future Goals
60. What goals do you have for the future?
61. Who is your model? Anyone you would like to be like?
62. What are your passions or things you are really interested in these days?
63. Institutional Support
64. What do you think of this university’s support of international students?
65. Are you aware of resources or offices that can support international students at this university?
66. Do you use these resources? Why (not)?
67. What other ways of support do you think school should have?

**Informed Consent**

Hello! You have been invited to take part in a longitudinal research study on Chinese international students at this university.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview every spring during your study at this university. The purpose of the interview will be to gather general information about your experiences being a Chinese international student at this university and your thoughts on how well the university supports international students. This information will help us understand the experiences of Chinese international students and tailor institutional support to better meet their needs so that they can thrive here at this university.

The interview will last about one hour. It will be audio-recorded upon your consent. There are no known risks associated with your participation in the interview beyond those of everyday life where you express your thoughts and feelings about your experiences adapting to life here at this university. You will receive $20 for your time and participation in the interview each time.

Your confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. Data will be kept in files on computers that are password-protected in the lead researcher’s office. All identifiable information will be removed and stored in a separate file. The data will be kept for five years after the project closes. Participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. You also have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Your participation or withdraw will not affect the services you may receive at the university or any other affiliate organizations.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Human Research Protection Program.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury (i.e., physical, psychological, social, financial, or otherwise), please contact the researcher.

By signing below, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old and that you have made a decision to participate in the study and understand the information above.

Agreement to Participate

I voluntarily agree to participate by completing the interview

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Participant’s Signature Date

Participant’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to allow audiotaping of the interview. Yes \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_No\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Initials \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_