

## Why Chinese People Want to Study Abroad

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### Abstract

China is a country that has over 5,000 years of rich and diverse history. Many people could live a lifetime in China and never learn or see all that it has to offer. However, even with all the rich history and deep cultural traditions, thousands of students leave China each year to study abroad. This leaves us to ask the question, why do Chinese students want to study abroad? Through literary analysis and interviews with Chinese students who are currently studying abroad, we will compare the education system of China and the United States. Specifically, we will discuss the dead knowledge and live knowledge systems being used and their implications for Chinese students. Further, we will discuss the major social and cultural differences that Chinese students must overcome to be successful in the United States. In addition, we explore the process of becoming an international student from China, the challenges and obstacles Chinese students face, and the opportunities Chinese students gain from studying abroad in the United States. Finally, we will examine the current trade war with China in relation to students who are currently studying in the United States and students who plan to study in the United States in the future.

**Keywords:** Chinese, China, Study Abroad

### 1. Introduction

In 2016 and 2017, there were 332,727 students studying abroad, according to Inside Higher ED.<sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Education reported that, in 2017, 608,400 Chinese students pursued education overseas<sup>1</sup>, so why do Chinese students want to study abroad? Hinako Kishino and Takahashi Tomoko interviewed many students who were studying abroad in their article, "Global Citizenship Development: Effects of Study Abroad and Other Factors." One Chinese student said, "Being in Spain was an eye-opening experience. It made me much more aware of how much cultures differ and gave me a new perspective on the world."<sup>4</sup> It is apparent that studying abroad opens a student's mind and exposes them to new cultures. It is also undeniable that the courage of Chinese students to step out of the country is admirable because after venturing out of the country, they will face a new journey by themselves. The reasons why Chinese students study abroad are various; for example, some consider the education system in China to be subpar compared to that of foreign education systems. The primary reason for this is China's emphasis on examination, while others believe they can learn new skills they could not accomplish by attending a domestic institution. However, the overarching reason why many Chinese students are choosing to study abroad, especially in the United States, is a less rigid form of education that focuses on collaboration over examinations and community service over intense study sessions. While many students are flocking to other countries to obtain a degree, the idea of students studying abroad is centuries old.

## 2. Methodology

The idea of Chinese students studying abroad is not new. In fact, there is historical evidence that, in 1847, a student named Rong Hong first came to the United States, and, in 1850, he became the first Chinese graduate in the history of Yale University. Another Chinese student, Huang Kuan, went to the University of Edinburgh to study medicine, becoming the first Chinese student to graduate from a British university. Later, he obtained a medical degree and was an excellent surgeon when he returned to China. He was one of the earliest teachers of western medicine in China and trained the first generation of western medicine talents for China.<sup>12</sup> The experiences of Hong and Kuan went on to benefit the people of China for generations. The knowledge that students can learn abroad and integrate into their communities is one reason why students make the decision to study abroad.

Gaining knowledge overseas can indeed provide a better platform when students enter society, but the influence from the host country can also influence the career path of the student. Elizabeth Redden, author of “Study Abroad Numbers Grow” says, “Study abroad students come home with new interests, experiences, and friends from around the world. With these new experiences, students may be exposed to new careers they had not previously considered.”<sup>6</sup> Being in a new country provides an opportunity to explore these new career options without the oversight from family members who may be pressuring students to follow a traditional, technological, or medical career. Having the ability to explore different career options is one of the many reasons why the United States is becoming a key destination for students wanting to study abroad.

The article, “Personal and Professional Challenges and Benefits of Studying Abroad” by Madeline Milian et al says, “Completing studies abroad is a global trend that has placed the United States in the enviable position of being the most desirable destination for those considering post-secondary education. Students who plan to earn a post-secondary degree outside of their homeland perceive the United States to be welcoming, to have a quality higher education system, and offer a wide range of schools that can accommodate and prepare a variety of different students.”<sup>5</sup> While these factors come into play when choosing an institution, Milian et al note that the educational system [in China] relies heavily on lecture and students are required to produce memorized information. In the United States, students are exposed to cooperative classroom activities, discussions, and other social activities.<sup>5</sup> This type of learning environment is appealing to young Chinese students who are often overwhelmed by the rigorous lecture and memorization form of learning and who appear to be chose the United States and their study abroad destination.

According to a report published by Chiang-nan Chao et al entitled, “Chinese Students’ Motivations for Studying in the United States,” in 2017, the United States showed a 344% increase in Chinese students from 61,765 to 274,439 in 2013-2014. The U.S. attracted over 20% of the total international students, and they represent 4.2% of the total number of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> Chiang-nan Chao et al accredits this influx of Chinese students to the U.S. to the large number of established students. New students are able to join existing communities of established Chinese students.<sup>3</sup> Another draw to American institutions is the better living conditions, eating, and environment.<sup>3</sup> Chen, a student studying abroad in Jackson, Michigan, said, “I like the study environment and the free time in the USA because students spend less time in class than in a college in China. I have free time to play basketball, swim, and play video games. On weekends [in China] I have to spend my time on homework.”<sup>10</sup> Lin, another student studying in Jackson, Michigan, said, “Like most Chinese children, most of my time every day is occupied by schoolwork. In the last semester of high school, students do not have weekends and rarely have holidays.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, Yang, a student from Guangdong Province, China said, “In Chinese schools, there are only two semesters a year, and July to August is summer vacation. Luckily, every summer my parents took me to travel instead of making me cram for school.”<sup>10</sup> While the established communities and conditions in the U.S. are just two of the many draws, the biggest deciding factor seems to be the and education system that focuses on collaboration and the ability to have free time. However, it is not only the students who benefit from this arrangement. According to Chao et al, international students and their families spent \$27 billion dollars in 2014, and they continue to make a significant contribution to the United States economy.<sup>3</sup> However, despite established communities of Chinese students studying abroad, moving to a new country takes hard work and resilience.

Studying abroad means managing many tasks such as: living arrangements, grocery shopping, cooking meals, psychological factors, and culture shock. Therefore, studying abroad is a great opportunity for overseas students to cultivate their independence and autonomy in life and learn financial skills and communication. A student with overseas study experience is more confident, independent, and can easily work with a diverse group compared to domestic college graduates. In the research conducted by Kishino and Tomoko one of the students they interviewed said, “Living in a different country and learning a language that I previously had no experience with taught me about compassionate communication and open-mindedness towards immigrants.”<sup>4</sup> By studying abroad, students

can blend Chinese culture with foreign cultures, and become proficient speaking in foreign languages, which makes them stand out among domestic job-seekers. The experience of studying abroad forces students to think further and uniquely concerning issues that arise, which is undoubtedly a bright spot for employment and job hunting. The unique thinking students develop is due to the difference in the education system between the two countries.

The education concept is different between China and America. Students are filled with knowledge in China based on exam-oriented education. Chinese students usually have a strong memory and are good at solving mathematics and physics problems. Chao et al states, "In the past decade, Chinese parents are tired of an education system that focuses mainly on academic scores at the expense of [the] pupil's overall development and many other drawbacks in China's educational system."<sup>3</sup> The current education system makes the student become a study machine, only knowing how to obtain a standard answer and how to gain high grades. This is called "dead" knowledge, which means students cannot draw inferences about other cases from one instance and flexibly use what they learned. Chao et al continues, "[Students] desire to learn more about critical thinking, and very importantly, they want to be exposed to things aside from just test taking."<sup>3</sup> They are taught to believe that there is only one correct answer. By contrast, the core of American education is centered on students. U.S. schools provide a flexible learning environment and pay more attention to students' abilities, such as decision-making, leadership, teamwork, and sociability. Studying abroad not only teaches knowledge but also the ability to absorb knowledge, apply it, and continue learning. In contrast to dead knowledge, this type of knowledge allows students to freely use the what they have learned to create new connections. This ability can help students find more opportunities as they apply for jobs. These positive outcomes of studying abroad are what the Chinese education system lacks, but it is what overseas schools emphasize. With this new way of thinking, Chinese students are better-equipped to land their dream job.

According to statistics in China, in comparison to domestic students, overseas students more easily pass an interview for the job they desire and have better prospects when they return to China after graduation. According to Steve Toew's "Advantages of Studying Abroad," 97% of their study abroad alumni find a job within one year of graduation, while only 49% of other graduates find a job in that time. That means their study abroad alumni are about twice as likely to find a job within a year of graduation as other students.<sup>12</sup> From this case, it is easier for international students to obtain a job after graduation and an abundance of job opportunities would be offered. In addition to career benefits, studying abroad also has personal benefits.

Compared to staying in China, Chinese students who study abroad have more of an opportunity to meet new friends, and these friends become a community of help in the future. Milian et al discuss this further saying, "Undeniably, completing a degree in another country is a significant accomplishment that allows international students to develop new skills and facilitate the establishment of new friendships that could result in future professional and personal benefits."<sup>5</sup> Since going abroad is costly, parents need to provide a large amount of money for their children's expensive. However, with China's economic reforms and shrinking family size (only one child per family), China has seen an increase in wealth. Sending a child to study at an international university has become less burdensome.<sup>3</sup> With a growing number of Chinese students studying in the U.S., these students are able to develop friendships across social classes, increasing their market resources. There are also academic benefits to making friends in the host country.

Milian et al also note, "Establishing friendships and building a sense of belongingness in the host university has been shown to have a positive relationship to academic success, especially if cross-cultural interaction is encouraged in coursework."<sup>5</sup> By studying abroad, students learn much from others when they have conversations. This not only enables students to acquire more knowledge, but it also makes them feel that they are not isolated. As Milian et al reports, "Meeting friends from all around the world, visiting new places, having a valuable experience, learning practically, [and]being independent"<sup>5</sup> will have an unimagined positive effect.

Studying another country is a great opportunity to broaden people's horizons. In her article "Tithe," Rebekah Skeens explains, "To spend a semester abroad will surround you in a new world of knowledge. You'll have a chance to immerse in a different style of learning. By doing so, this will help with understanding the culture and the people who reside there."<sup>7</sup> It is undeniable that studying abroad is a rare opportunity to expand one's horizons. Foreign and domestic values are different. Studying a new environment can allow a student to experience a new local custom or experience the non-ventilated folk culture. Skeens continues, "Surrounding yourself with the same people all the time doesn't leave room for large amounts of social growth, as you've known them for a majority of your life. An abroad semester gives you the chance to surround yourself with individuals which you normally wouldn't have encountered."<sup>7</sup> To prepare for this social growth, students conduct research on what life is like in their host country, but only when they experience the culture will they truly be able to know the difference between them. Given the unique history of the United States, and the relationship they have with China, there are many topics and issues for students to research that will be of interest to them. In addition, the ability to interact with many diverse cultures, social constructs, and religions adds to the transformative impact of studying abroad.

While student do face obstacles when studying abroad, the benefits far outweigh the challenges. According to Steve

Bain, author of “Study Abroad: Striving for Transformative Impact,” “Study abroad trips offer both physical and mental challenges as well as opportunities to students.”<sup>2</sup> Study abroad trips are meant to be a transformative or a life-changing experience, but a student’s study abroad intentions can determine whether the trip is successful in producing these outcomes.<sup>2</sup> If a student always stays in a comfort zone, such as their own country, without challenge, they cannot clearly recognize the problems around them. They do not question what they believe or any different behaviors from their own. Thus, studying abroad has a significant effect on the whole life of overseas students. By contrast, compared with domestic students, overseas students more easily accept new cultures and knowledge. They prefer introspection about the information they receive instead of blindly following. Bain and Yaklin believe that, “Obviously, study abroad experiences take students out of their comfort zones and expose them to situations and cultural engagements, which are beyond their typical life experiences.”<sup>2</sup> Leaving one’s comfort zone and venturing into the unknown can improve the individual’s awareness of one’s own existence, including behavior and psychological state.<sup>2</sup> While Chinese students are growing from their study abroad experience, they are also developing independent thinking and imagination.

Chinese students need to train independent thinking, which includes creativity and imagination. Milian et al state that there are “Other academic skills that may present challenges for international students including use of critical thinking skills, writing ability, efficient note-taking, oral presentations and comprehension of readings assigned in class.”<sup>5</sup> Chinese students do not realize the importance of innovation because they were taught that everything in the world has one standard answer. This also leads to their lack of innovation ability. However, studying abroad can enhance what they lack, i.e., “source of transformative learning through concrete, real-world experiences and critical reflection.”<sup>2</sup> The education in America pays more attention to students’ participation, practice, and creation. Many courses include arranging detailed case studies that require significant preparation and discussion in class. Teachers spend only 30% of their time in class, while the rest of the time relies on students’ self-study to gain knowledge. In the process of participation and practice, it improves students’ ability to solve problems. Also, the classroom atmosphere in the United States is active. The teacher prefers students with different ideas and always encourages them. Lin, a Chinese student from Jackson College said, “The teacher gave us a lot of time to discuss with classmates...I was not used to this way of learning. I [had to] come up with my own opinion during the class discussion.”<sup>10</sup> This strengthens students’ confidence and enhances their creativity and imagination.

When talking with Milina et al, one student said the professor is more creative, people ask questions, say opinions and there are more group discussions.<sup>5</sup> Michael Tarrant, author of “The Effects of Studying Abroad and Studying Sustainability on Students’ Global Perspectives,” points out, “Similarly, experiential learning in general (whether offered domestically or overseas) can transform students’ perspectives through active engagement in critical learning and reflection.”<sup>9</sup> Studying abroad not only results in an academic degree but, more importantly, the ability to survive and adapt in a variety of circumstances. In addition, being bilingual makes it easier for people to learn a third language and being exposed to people from different cultures makes it easier for a person to accept differing viewpoints. These advantages push or impel students to study abroad and make the U.S. the primary destination. With the many benefits for students and the U.S. economy, it seems to be a mutually advantageous relationship. Yet, hostility between the U.S. and China could threaten the future of the study abroad program.

Tensions between the U.S. and China have led to a trade war between the two countries. With little end in sight, Chinese students are caught in the middle. According to *SI News*, “Chinese students comprise the largest portion of international students at American universities. With a potentially ongoing conflict, Chinese students in the U.S. have encountered visa restrictions, prolonged review times, and a rise in visa rejections.”<sup>8</sup> The decline in Chinese students in the U.S. could have far-reaching implications. With enrollment down domestically, colleges and universities are actively seeking the revenue received from international students. Chao et al reported, “China has become the largest single source of international students studying in the United States...The Chinese students... have accounted for about two-thirds of the increase in total international student enrollment in the U.S. since 2003.”<sup>3</sup> Considering the benefits for all parties involved, Chinese students will continue to study abroad and continue to choose the U.S. as their destination.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the education system in the U.S. pays more attention to students’ comprehensive development, emphasizes the ability of communication, and enables students to have a team consciousness. In contrast, the teacher value in China is improving students’ grades through tests. Therefore, the team consciousness for Chinese students is poor. In addition, U.S. institutions emphasize collecting information through various methods. This emphasis ensures

that students actively learn and focus on training students' responsibility, sociability, and self-management ability. Chinese students are particularly drawn to the education system in the United States because it focuses on character development, social skills, and gives them the flexibility to pursue other interests. Studying abroad can expand one's horizon and understanding of different cultures and customs and allows students to learn different ways of critical thinking and creativity. Meanwhile, due to the different environment, students must improve their living habits and become more independent compared with domestic students. Studying abroad benefits the U.S. economy through the income generated by students' tuition and the money their families spend in the U.S. economy. While the current trade war with China might put a damper on the influx of students, the benefits for both parties should sustain the program. Although the purpose and meaning of studying abroad is certainly different for everyone, it brings unlimited possibilities and space for development. It is a catalyst for growth. Nevertheless, no matter what, studying is a precious life experience.

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