

China's Superstructure Today and How It Influences Chinese International Students' Desires to Return Home Post Abroad

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Abstract

The pursuit of international higher education has been remarkably sought by Chinese International Students (CIS) over the past four decades. The 1978 reform not only provided opportunities for China to re-develop its long-stalled foreign relations and rebuild its damaged economic state but also re-opened doors for Chinese nationals to seek international higher education (IHE). The world watched China evolve from an economically and academically mediocre nation in the late 20th century into the second largest economic body and the leading academic research nation in the world over recent years. During the late 1900s when China remained poor in terms of technology advancements, CIS who pursued Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) degrees overseas played a crucial role in the effort of rebuilding China's infrastructure. Over the past dozen years, the number of CIS has reached a record high, and while STEM education continued to be favored, other pursuits of studies such as business, liberal arts, and social sciences have increased as well. On top of exploring whether the aspirations for today's CIS' pursuit of IHE have shifted compared to preceding CIS post the 1978 reform, this paper specifically aims to find out whether CIS today hold different reasons for returning to its homeland China post abroad, compared to the preceding CIS. Based on in-depth interviews conducted with 31 CIS who are studying/have studied at 19 universities across the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and France, the results indicate that current CIS hold different academic aspirations for pursuing IHE and altered reasoning for returning to China post abroad, compared to the preceding CIS.

Keywords: China, Chinese International Students (CIS), Chinese International students in STEM Fields, International Higher Education (IHE)

1. Introduction

1.1 *Opening the Door*

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Mao Zedong ushered the suspension of diplomatic ties from the western world. Over the next three decades, the isolation from the rest of the world largely impeded Chinese nationals' pursuit of foreign studies. More so, domestic education also halted during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1976, the decade-long revolution ended as the previous isolationist policies shifted. The post-Mao government, led by Deng Xiaoping, abandoned the previous methods, and transitioned to an "opening-up policy" that aimed to promote modernization and national economic growth. At the same time, China gradually recovered from the cessation of education, domestically and internationally. 1978 marked the start of a new era and a new hope for the government of the PRC to increase the nation's academic and scientific knowledge. 1978 also marked the time when China's economic and academic power stood at the bottom of the world. Despite the government's will to promote modernization, the long period of foreign isolation and an unmatched domestic education system from the anti-intellectual Cultural Revolution have left deep scars to the nation's education in general and were unable to suffice any means of knowledge training for the Chinese people. While the government rigorously carried out domestic

education system reforms which aimed to increase the quality of the whole nation and train more skillful and knowledgeable personnel, the promotion of international higher education (IHE) was also brought onto the table as a means of developing elites to rebuild China.

1.2 Ideation of Economic Advancements Through Sending Students Abroad

Beginning in 1978, the CCP leader Deng Xiaoping decided to send students and scholars abroad for higher education through government funding and newly established foreign relations via the opening-up policy. The purpose was simple—the PRC expected the government-funded Chinese international students (CIS) to return upon completion of their foreign degrees and support the rebuilding of the then “everything-lacking” China. The government hoped these CIS would come back to support China’s much-lacked scientific community and technological arena. This ideation was torn by the western allure as the majority of these selected Chinese elite students and scholars remained in the foreign nations post their education. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018), between 1978 and 2000, except for 1990, over two-thirds of CIS did not return upon completion of their foreign education (Table 1). More so, between 2001 and 2003, the amount of returned CIS dropped again to a mere ~15% (Table 1). Over the span of the 25-year period (1978-2003), only 17.3% of the total CIS population have returned to the PRC ($n = b/a$; $a = \text{total CIS population between 1978-2003} = 396,651$; $b = \text{total returned CIS population} = 68,638$). China, which has already suffered from a lack of academic and scientific knowledge over the past three decades, has struggled to retain its valuable academic elites leading up to the early 2000s.

Table 1. Chinese International Students (CIS) by the numbers

YEAR	Number of CIS Studying Abroad (a)	Number of Returned CIS (b)	Percentage (%) of returned CIS $n = b/a$
1978	860	248	28.84%
1980	2124	162	7.63%
1985	4888	1424	29.13%
1990	2950	1593	54.00%
1995	20381	5750	28.21%
2000	38989	9121	23.39%
2001	83973	12243	14.58%
2002	125179	17945	14.34%
2003	117307	20152	17.18%
2004	114682	24726	21.56%
2005	118515	34987	29.52%
2006	134000	42000	31.34%
2007	144000	44000	30.56%
2008	179800	69300	38.54%
2009	229300	108300	47.23%
2010	284700	134800	47.35%
2011	339700	186200	54.81%
2012	399600	272900	68.29%
2013	413900	353500	85.41%
2014	459800	364800	79.34%
2015	523700	409100	78.12%
2016	544500	432500	79.43%
2017	608400	480900	79.04%
2018	662100	519400	78.45%

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2018) Available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english>

1.3 The Lesson—to Let Go Freely

The massive exodus of the CIS population raised concerns from the Ministry of Education, but the government was more to be blamed for this heat of migration. While the Deng-led government invested heavily in the first group of CIS in 1978 by funding these students to pursue IHE, the government’s efforts in funding CIS diminished

in a matter of a decade. While 54% of the academic cost were covered for the first group of CIS, this funding decreased to 17% by 1985. Such underfunding forced the CIS to look for financial support elsewhere, which led to the encouragement of these scholars to remain abroad as the IHE host nations were willing to pay to retain these intellectual minds. For example, funding from U.S. universities increased from an initial 18% to 57% over the same period of time. Second, foreign host nations such as the U.S. and U.K. posed advantages which China was unable to outcompete at the time. The western democratic nations offered higher salaries, more suitable research conditions, and more advanced research quality which researchers and scholars dreamed about. At the same time, many CIS scholars who have been in cross-cultural environments were concerned about political instability and working/researching conditions in economically poor China. Then, the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, a student-led demonstration in protest for greater national accountability, due process, and political freedom, which resulted in the death of hundreds to thousands of students, only brought upon further unwillingness for overseas talents to return.

By the 1990s, the CCP leaders examined the massive exodus of the CIS population and came to the consensus of keeping a far sight and an open mindset to the low return rate of CIS. The idea to “store brain power overseas” came about when the CCP hoped that the CIS who have established their reputation overseas will in turn increase China’s influence in Chinese communities across the globe as well as China’s political influence. The government shifted its methods and set forth to offer great benefits for returning CIS, which can be broken down into three categories.

- (1) Guaranteeing more freedom for its overseas talents—a promise for a returned CIS to go abroad again at any time, and the freedom to move to any cities or work locations they desire. Such liberalization shone a light on the then greatly restricting Chinese traditions and encouraged the CIS to think twice about their home nation.
- (2) High salary, priority housing, faster promotion tracks, respected social statuses, tax cuts, and greater purchasing benefits. Chinese cities also began to compete with one another in providing greater benefits to attract CIS, which is one phenomenon that is still occurring today.
- (3) New university and government-level programs that attract high-level CIS scholars and scientists. Examples include the Changjiang Scholars Program, the Hundred Talents Program, and the government’s funding of over one billion yuan to top Chinese universities in which at least 20% must be used to levy CIS talents.

1.4 A New Shift

The PRC saw disheartening rates of returning CIS for the first 25 years since the reform (1978-2003), but this trend has refashioned over the next 15 years (2003-2018). Since 2004, the return percentage for CIS plunged significantly. Between 2004 and 2008, more than one-third of the overseas talents have returned (Table 1). Between 2009 and 2012, the number increased again to around 50% of the total CIS population returning (Table 1). Between 2013 and 2018, the return percentage of CIS burgeoned to a stunning 80% (Table 1). While this data does not refer to an equal return rate of CIS from all foreign host nations of study (for example, CIS who pursued their higher education in the U.S. still has a lower return rate compared to other foreign nations), China has managed to attract a major threshold of its CIS to return upon completion of their foreign studies up until recent years. It is noteworthy to mention that the majority of the CIS post-2003 were self-funded or family-funded. They were not government-funded, and neither did such funding plays a factor in their desire to return.

Since 2009, China has elevated into becoming the leading nation in sending students overseas, contributing to over one-third of the total international student population every year. The new generation of CIS held different reasons for pursuing an IHE compared to the preceding CIS in the late 1900s. The top three reasons which CIS find most attractive in pursuing an IHE are as follows (Figure 1).

- (1) Experience foreign culture and lifestyles—indicated by 81% of CIS. A majority of CCIS are separated into two categories: CIS with high financial resources and low academic backgrounds and CIS with high financial resources and high academic backgrounds. These two types of students contribute to over 70% of all CIS globally. CIS do not bear the same academic and scientific national demands compared to CIS in the past (those with government funding and aimed to gain knowledge to advance China’s infrastructure) and has strong mentalities to “see the world” and experience cross-cultural differences.
- (2) Better educational quality in foreign institutions—indicated by 47% of CIS. While China’s top universities have growingly established themselves internationally (mostly through world ranking charts such as Quacquarelli Symonds “QS” and Times Higher Education “THE”), domestic Chinese universities still hold overall disadvantages compared to foreign institutions (mainly the U.S. and U.K.) in terms of research capabilities, faculty resources, and international reputation. More so, many CIS indicated that foreign institutions not only offered more advanced academic features but also provided an overall better studying experience.
- (3) Develop independence—indicated by 45% of CIS. Traditionally, Confucian values have been deeply rooted in CIS ideals—the culture many of them grew up learning and practicing every day. Confucian values played “a

predominant role in molding Chinese character and behavior” (King & Bond, 2013, p. 30). Because these values are closely associated with characterization, CIS has grown up learning how to respect and obey their elderly (parents, teachers, and any relatives elder to them). While Confucian traditions set the foundation for a harmonious society, many CIS today look to become more independent—physically, mentally, and in terms of decision-making abilities (King & Bond, 2013). Many CIS strategized to find self-value and gain independence through going on an IHE experience where they can leverage their own choice-making, academically and socially.

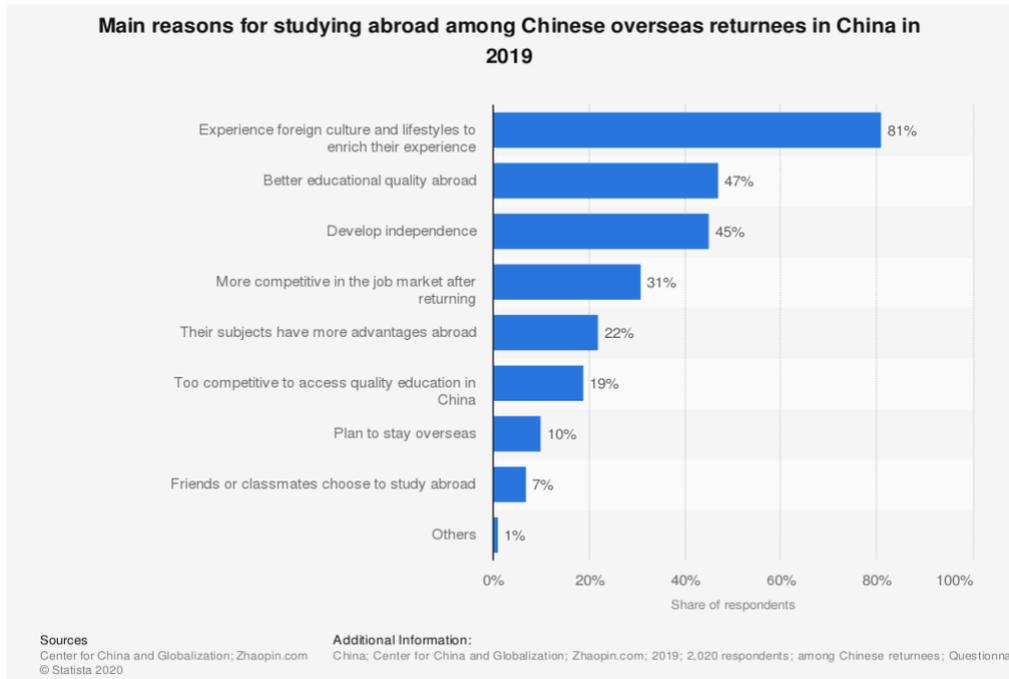


Figure 1.

2. The “Involved” Generation

Prior to analyzing why CIS today are motivated to return to the homeland, an outlook for China’s involution generation must be assessed. Geertz (1963) posed the theory of involution, which he described as “a greater input (an increase in labor) does not yield proportional output”. The modern Chinese term for involution is *neijuan*, which refers to a society where after a type of cultural model has reached a certain form, it can neither be stabilized nor transformed into a new form but will continue to become more complex internally. *Neijuan* is made up of Chinese characters “inside” and “rolling”, which suggests a process that curls inwards, and is described by Chinese anthropologist Biao Xiang as “an acceleration without a destination, progress without a purpose, like Sisyphus spinning the wheels of a perpetual-motion peloton” (2009). Domestic college graduates bemoaned the involution job market as the Chinese market saw the largest number of college graduates in 2021, with over 10.76 million newly graduates looking for job opportunities. On top of this, involution is also witnessed in the education sector where the scores for graduate program entrance examinations are increasing by the years as millions of graduates fail to enroll in a graduate program and must enter the professional world. This assessment serves the purpose of raising an additional question about why many CIS intend to return to China after studying abroad, on top of the concerning involution factor that supposedly drives people away.

3. Conceptual Framework

To best capture how today’s Chinese superstructure advancement prompted this new trend of CIS desires for wanting to return to mainland China upon completion of their abroad education, this study utilized a social-cognitive perspective whereby CIS’s forward-thinking mindsets due to China’s national growth contributed as the strongest predictors for their desires to return post abroad. The rational choice theory (RCT) was deemed as the most appropriate methodology for this study (Eriksson, 2011). The RCT is based under the impression that individuals are rational decision-makers who value the maximization of self-interests for the greatest benefits. The costs-benefits calculus for CIS as decision-makers can be measured in the following way. CIS’s forward-thinking mindset is viewed as the “benefit” as it leads to decisions which bring high labor earnings and returns. In comparison, the “cost” would be brought by the negativities generated from China’s superstructure advancement—

the overly competitive labor market in China today. It is important to be noted that the two variables, CIS’s forward-thinking mindset and China’s superstructure today, are closely connected—CIS’s forward-thinking mindset is a product of China’s national advancement which generated the uprisal of the nation’s superstructure.

A research question has been generated in terms of analyzing CIS regarding their reasons today for wanting to return to China after completing their IHE.

Research Question: How have CIS reasonings for returning to China post abroad shifted in the recent years?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

In this qualitative study, participants are consisted of 31 Bachelor and/or Master level students from mainland China, who are pursuing IHE in 5 different countries, including Canada, France, the U.S., the U.K., and Australia (Table 2). Among which, the majority share of the participants, who are pursuing IHE in the U.S. (12 participants) and Australia (13 participants), range from 9 different universities across 7 states (U.S.) and 5 different universities across 3 states (Australia). The study included participants across a relatively even distribution of degree types, including 8 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students, 7 Liberal Arts students, 6 Social Sciences students, and 9 Business students.

While the total number of participants in this study represents only a small share of CIS today, this group of participants are a microcosm of the most common types of CIS across the globe in terms of areas of study and abroad locations.

4.2 Data Collection

The data gathering stage of this study consisted of three different interview methods, including in-depth on-site interviews, in-depth phone interviews, and in-depth video interviews. Amid the pandemic and location factors, participants in the U.S. Pacific time zone locations and those outside of the U.S. were interviewed via phone or video, while those living in the U.S. Eastern time zone locations were mostly interviewed on-site. The total time stretch for all interviews conducted took approximately 2 months. Due to the nature of the qualitative study and the importance of participant reactions, these interview-style formats were perceived as the most effective data collection methods.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and the theme was mostly conversation-based, preventing any dialogue guidance which could induce biases. The author closely followed a guiding principle which ensured genuine respect and confidentiality to the participants’ personal experiences and opinions.

Table 2. Interviewees’ demographic information

Name Label (First letter of last name - foreign country of study - interview order)	Age	Gender	Education Level (while abroad)	Degree Type	Will return to China upon completion of foreign studies?
G-Canada-1	24	Male	Master's	Business	No
W-Australia-2	26	Female	Master's	Business	Yes
X-U.S.-3	23	Female	Bachelor's	STEM	Yes
Q-U.S.-4	25	Male	Master's	STEM	Yes
Z-Australia-5	24	Female	Master's & Bachelor's	Liberal Arts	Yes
H-U.S.-6	23	Female	Master's & Bachelor's	Social Sciences	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
Z-South Korea-7	27	Female	Master's	Social Sciences	Yes
L-U.S.-8	27	Male	Bachelor's	Pre-med	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
H-U.S.-9	22	Female	Master's & Bachelor's	Social Sciences	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
Q-U.K.-10	23	Female	Bachelor's	Liberal Arts	Yes
Y-U.S.-11	24	Female	Master's	Social Sciences	Yes
H-U.S.-12	21	Female	Bachelor's	Liberal Arts	Undecided rightnow
H-U.K.-13	23	Male	Master's	STEM	Undecided rightnow
L-U.S.-14	23	Female	Master's	Social Sciences	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
Y-Australia-15	26	Female	Master's	Business	Yes
C-Australia-16	24	Female	Master's	Business	Yes
G-France-17	24	Male	Master's	Business	No
L-Australia-18	25	Male	Bachelor's	STEM	Yes
D-Australia-19	27	Female	Master's	Liberal Arts	Yes
W-U.S.-20	27	Female	Bachelor's	Business	Yes
C-Australia-21	27	Male	Master's	Business	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
Z-Australia-22	28	Male	Bachelor's	STEM	Yes
X-U.S.-23	26	Female	Master's & Bachelor's	STEM	No
G-U.S.-24	26	Female	Master's	STEM	Yes
H-Australia-25	27	Female	Master's	Liberal Arts	Yes
H-Australia-26	25	Female	Bachelor's	Business	Yes
C-Australia-27	28	Female	Master's	STEM	Undecided rightnow
W-U.K.-28	27	Female	Master's	Liberal Arts	Yes
S-Australia-29	36	Female	Master's & Bachelor's	Liberal Arts	Yes
H-Australia-30	24	Female	Master's	Business	Yes (after working in foreign locations for X years)
L-U.S.-31	22	Male	Master's & Bachelor's	Social Sciences	Yes

4.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained through the interviews were analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis (reflexive TA), a method for understanding socially embedded patterns (themes) and their related implications. While extensive research has been conducted on CIS, there has been no updates over the recent few years regarding CIS aspirations and expectancies post their abroad education. At the same time, due to emerging factors such as China's technological and multimedia development, the COVID-19 pandemic, China's continuing economic uprising (mostly for the years leading up to the pandemic and in 2020), and the growingly competitive Chinese job market, no research has been conducted to see if CIS today hold different ideals for returning to mainland China after studying abroad. Reflexive TA has been determined as the most efficient method of analysis because it acknowledges inductive and deductive orientations and is able to capture semantic and latent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Since the goal of this paper is to identify a new pattern among CIS for why they would want to return to China post abroad, the reflexive TA, which focuses on laying out new interpretations according to patterns, has been deemed as the most appropriate tool for analysis.

4.4 Findings

4.4.1 Research Question: How have CIS Reasonings for Returning to China Post Abroad Shifted in the Recent Years?

According to the interview findings, a new trend for why CIS return to China post studying abroad has been discovered. Having previously examined that past CIS's (before 2020) top two reasons for returning post abroad are *convenience of reuniting with family and friends* and *good economic development in China*, this study's sample share of 31 CIS (table 5) hold differentiating opinions. While *convenience of reuniting with family and friends* remains at the top of participants' reasons for returning to China post abroad, *good economic development in China* is no longer the second most important reason. More so, this reasoning has not emerged in the top five reasons for returning to China post abroad, according to the participants in the interviews. Another emerging new trend of participants' reasons for returning is *more work opportunities and abilities to find good jobs*. Below, four major factors have been examined to explain this novel trend among CIS after 2020. Specifically, these four factors contribute to CIS's forward-thinking mindsets in different perspectives and together explain the novel findings.

4.4.1.1 Booming Chinese Professional Market

China's professional market thrived over the past few years due to the uprise of its internet industry, especially the giant multi-media companies and e-commerce companies. According to the *Report of Market Prospective and Investment Strategy Planning on China Internet Industry*, by 2021, the penetration rate of internet use has well exceeded over 70% of the total Chinese population, with more than 1.11 billion citizens equipped with daily internet-use tools. Over the past ten years (2011-2021), Chinese citizens' internet penetration rate escalated on a consistent scale, beginning at around 38.3% in 2011, 42.1% in 2012, 45.8% in 2013, 47.9% in 2014, 50.3% in 2015, 53.2% in 2016, 55.8% in 2017, 59.6% in 2018, 64.5% in 2019, 70.4% in 2020, and with the most recent 71.6% in 2021. Led by Chinese-based multinational conglomerates and domestic industry leaders such as Tencent, Alibaba, ByteDance, JingDong (JD) and Pinduoduo (PDD), these companies not only developed flagship technologies that bolstered internet penetration such as short-video platforms, social media platforms, e-commerce platforms, online take-out ordering apps, online gaming, livestreaming platforms, and search engines, but also provided a tremendous number of new jobs for China's young adults which initiated a technology-savvy, social media-prioritized market where millennials favor to work at. Traditionally, China's resources and national strategy to boost the economy is through the agricultural business (Gaudreau, 2019). As the leader of the global agribusiness, China holds over 670 million metric tons of grains, which is about 60% of the world's grain reserves (Gaudreau, 2019). China's recent year push to mass improve smart-device-related internet services has aligned the country to gear away from being an agriculturally based economy (Hvistendahl, 2012). Multiple participants from the qualitative research indicated that China's recent year internet advancements and creation of internet-based job opportunities present a big reason for their desire to return to the homeland:

(1) Q-U.S.-4

"I know the competition is real but there are so many opportunities for people with my background (a master's degree from an overseas university) in the big cities. I really want to work for ByteDance or Bilibili because the pay-rise scale is very good, and the work environment is awesome. I think these companies' efforts on creating short and medium-video platforms have been so popular in China and the market is thriving".

(2) L-U.S.-31

"I have been studying in the U.S. for over 7 years now. I don't think I would've wanted to go back a few years ago but returning is my priority now. For me, what has changed is seeing more opportunities that people like my age will want to work at. China has entered a time where people live on the internet and these internet companies are making a fortune. I see many positions that I would love to work at among those internet giants".

A few other participants have recalled similar reasons that drive their motivation to return. While they are aware of the involuted job market in China and that they are likely to face much more severe job competition against other CIS and Chinese nationals, most participants in the interview believe that the internet-prompted Chinese professional market presents a golden opportunity for people of their background.

4.4.1.2 China's Economic and Superstructure Uprising

While the pre-1978 China saw an annual growth of about 6%, the Chinese economy saw a 9% increase annually pose the 1978 reform (Hu & Khan, 1997). During some good years, the economy even saw an annual increase in the double digits. The lifting of obstacles in the planned economy prior to the reform, such as production, human capital, entrepreneurialism, international trade, and international higher education enlivened the economy (DeLisle & Goldstein, 2019). Four decades of transformation and top-down decisions that completed shifted China's direction into promoting autonomy, education, and open-mindedness have witnessed success through its most recent GDP calculation of 17734.06 USD billion in 2021. Over the recent years (2010-2022), in relations to the higher education sector and the professional market, the nation saw a significant shift in terms of technological advancements, breakthroughs, and economic uprising. The rising of people's purchasing powers alongside the booming internet professional market can be mostly demonstrated through the e-commerce market—the Chinese e-commerce platforms summed a total of 965.1 billion Chinese Yuan (RMB) in sales in 2021. At the same time, China's burgeoning production and export sector also contributed to the nation's rapid economic advancement on the world stage (DeLisle & Goldstein, 2019). Many participants recall that as the world's second largest economy by GDP and the largest economy by purchasing power, the current generation is more convinced to return to the growingly prosperous homeland (Willige, 2016). Further, more than half of Chinese citizens now live in cities as the general population urbanized over the years, with the nation becoming the world's largest trading economy, ranking among the highest for foreign investment destinations (Willige, 2016). China's superstructure also saw a huge boost as a result of the base strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative. Decades of base infrastructure advancements prompted China's superstructure to rise to the top stage, resembling itself as a leader in international economic regimes and a “principal proponent of economic globalization in a time of U.S. retreat” (Willige, 2016).

(1) Q-U.S.-4

“I think a clear majority of [Chinese] people are becoming growingly satisfied with the government's approaches and policies because people are living more happily, the countryside and poorer districts is becoming richer, and the infrastructure is creating more job opportunities that people my generation like”.

(2) H-Australia-26

“You know, all of my family, including myself are heavy online shoppers. We have really witnessed the shopping [e-commerce] platforms maturing over the past couple of years. I think this not only goes to show the advancement of technology but also an economic resemblance that Chinese people are at a time when these new technologies and new trends can be well approached and used. I really think the economy will remain great”.

(3) G-U.S.24

“I was in China in 2007-2008 and witnessed the global financial crisis—and I am just shocked by how much China's infrastructure has grown over the past decade and a half. I think what is super cool though, is that China's economy is not rising because of the agriculture anymore, and there are so many other influence factors”.

Extending Deng's “reform and opening” agenda and Hu's approach to promote sustainable, quality growth, Xi's commitment on promoting domestic brands and domestic products rather than relying on exports have seen its success. The goal to make China's domestic companies competitive globally in newly emerging industries such as AI, multimedia, e-commerce, etc. is coming to a successful return as domestic giants not only become world-known but also supported China's efforts in becoming a global supplier (Willige, 2016). According to CIS today, such advancements in China's superstructure are the main contributor to their desires to return and work there.

4.4.1.3 China's Continuing Pursuit of Academic/Innovative Talents

As the Chinese government continued its plan to attract domestic talents who are overseas and foreign talents to come to China, a series of implementations have been put in place to entice CIS and others. In 2008, the *Thousand Talents Plan (TTP)* was announced, dedicated to bringing leading Chinese scientists, academics and entrepreneurs living abroad back to China (Jia, 2018). The TTP, mostly through monetary incentives and giving prestige, has captivated over 7,000 people to return/come to China in a decade span. Some other major plans aimed at attracting Chinese talents who are overseas and foreign talents include the *Hundred Talents Program* and the *Changjiang Scholars Program*, which also grant significant monetary incentives to talents who qualify and wish to return/come to China. The specific talents listed above are more targeted at top-level talents who are usually PhD-holders who are well established in their respective academic fields. For common CIS who have obtained a Bachelor's degree or Master's degree, Chinese cities also posed various attractive conditions to drive CIS return. Here is an example.

Shanghai—for CIS who obtained a Bachelor’s and/or Master’s degree from a world’s top 500 university and with a cumulative foreign study period of over 1 year, the city of Shanghai established attractive financial and physical benefits. CIS who come to Shanghai can expect a starting salary of about 1.5 times the average salary, a tax-free car purchasing policy, and up to 500,000 Chinese Yuan of government-funded venture capital for entrepreneurs. Further, for talents in the natural sciences and social sciences sector or those who established enterprises in Shanghai, can receive up to 500,000 Chinese Yuan subsidies. Most Chinese cities share some kind of similar strategies in hoping to attract CIS and foreign talents to their cities, which can in return help the economic, technological, and other improvements in those cities.

(1) S-Australia-29

“I have always aspired to work in Beijing, but I was afraid that I would not be able to afford—the house pricing is way too high for a new graduate like me. However, the talent attraction plan in Beijing has grown better over the years, especially for entrepreneurs. I looked to the “Phoenix Plan” under the Chaoyang District and think I might qualify. Anyway, I am looking forward to returning because the incentive has grown much better and I think I will survive”.

(2) W-U.S.-20

“I have read from my home city [Guangzhou] that there is a substantial number of financial incentives for students like me once we decide to enter and live in certain districts, like the Huangpu District. Although not much, this will kickstart my professional career—which is a bonus because I was planning on returning anyways”.

As China continues its expansion in this growingly globalized and diversified world, the government and various cities’ goals to attract CIS and foreign talents will only solidify and intensify. Most participants in the interview indicated that these talent attraction acts are only bonus incentives on top of benefits that are already present such as easier threshold for CIS to obtain a job compared to domestic students (in many instances) and higher prestige as a CIS. As China continue to fulfill its mission of sending student bodies overseas for advanced education which the country needs and attracting them to return through various established incentives, this movement will only increase in the future as these talents really are supporting China’s economic advancement.

4.4.1.4 Family and Familiarity

For the longest time, 60% of CIS indicated that reunion with family and friends have been the most crucial reason for their return to the homeland. However, participants in the interview brought on a new perspective—CIS today are more looking forward to opportunities where they will not only be able to reunite with close ones but also work comfortably, as they consider themselves in “familiar territories”.

(1) W-U.K.-28

“The status as a Chinese student with a good foreign diploma and a high salary isn’t the most important thing for me. I want to be near my family, especially my grandparents, and work somewhere I know I will be close to them. Plus, I know I will find a decent job with my academic background, so I really want to prioritize the work location—somewhere very close to family”.

(2) X-U.S.-3

“I have been in a big dilemma where my mind was bobbling for so long because I knew I wanted to be close to family, but I also was not sure if I wanted to return and work [in Guangzhou]. I will probably find a more decently paid job here [U.S.] but when I stayed in the U.S. for about 3 months after I graduated, I knew I am unable to spend a much longer time here—I want to be in a state of mind where I can work happily and be able to see my friends and family over the weekend”.

This is an interesting new finding as most CIS, traditionally, only recall the importance of reunion with family and friends. This new trend can be viewed as a result of better work opportunities in China where CIS have grown fonder because they will be able to find a good job while staying near their family. Looking into the previous three reasons, China’s booming professional market, China’s superstructure advancement, and China’s efforts to attract CIS talents, the common trend is that the room for better professional opportunities in China has been on a rise. Combining with the already essential reason for reuniting with family and friends, CIS have pertained to more reasons that drive their eagerness to return. Out of the 31 participants, 22 have indicated that being near family (and working near family) is the top reason that drives their return.

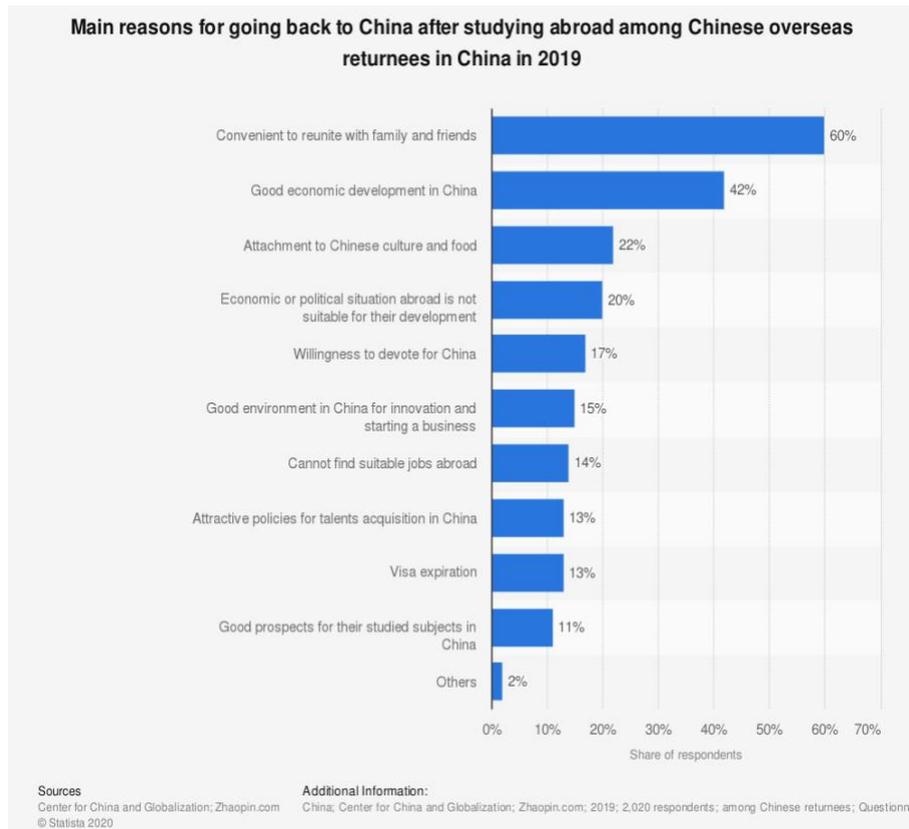


Figure 2.

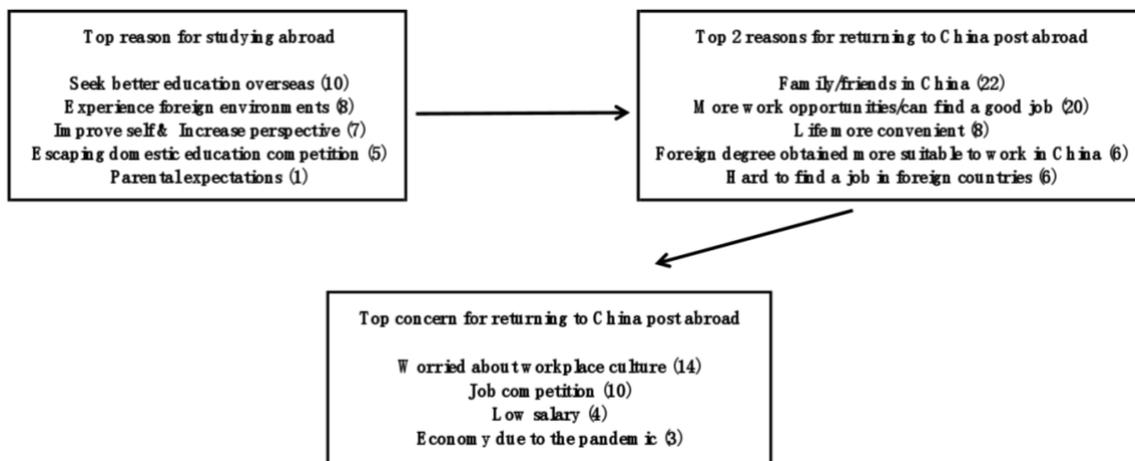


Figure 3.

5. Discussion and Concerns

The research question pertaining to the interview was answered through four parts. First, 20 out of 31 participants indicated that *more work opportunities/can find a good job* is one of two top reasons that fuels their desire to return to China. *China's booming professional market*, led by internet, technology, and multimedia giants, thrusts people's purchasing power as well as tremendous job opportunities. Among which, these technology-savvy companies are more attractive to the younger generation and contribute to more social values to them. Most participants indicated that because these large internet conglomerates promote China's modern development, showcased by the resurrection of e-commerce platforms and social media platforms, they view this change as one that appeals to them and provides work opportunities they favor. Second, *China's economic and superstructure uprising* further enhanced most CIS's will to return. Traditionally, 42% of CIS indicated that *good economic development in China* is a top reason for their desire to return. Interestingly, a majority of participants (over 70%)

indicated that China's growing advanced superstructure has played a more important role in spearheading their return. This is an important finding because amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's economy, including China's, saw a slight decrease since 2021. Despite this negative economic appearance, most participants in the interview firmly believe that China's economy and superstructure will continue to flourish and ascend. Connecting to the first reason, most CIS believe that this uphill trend in China's economy will spark more work opportunities and more opportunities that favor them, as international students returning from overseas. Third, *China's continuing pursuit of academic/innovative talents* has attracted more young scholars to return, on a minor level. The reason why this reason does not play a major role in spearheading CIS return is because most Chinese policies pertaining to talent acquisition are targeted towards high-level scholars, including those with a PhD and who have extensive academic/scientific experience overseas. The participants in this qualitative study are mostly Master level students/graduates who only qualify for a portion of talent acquisition benefits. However, for most CIS who already plan to return to China, such policies only reinforce their desire to return. Fourth, *family and familiarity* contribute to a majority of CIS's reasons for wishing to return. While CIS traditionally aimed to return to be close to family, modern-day CIS have more forward-thinking mindsets where they look out to a spectrum of reasons—in this case it would be the convenience pertaining to being able to work comfortably, near family.

5.1 The New Findings

The number of CIS that return to their homeland China post studying abroad has been increasing by the percentage over the recent years—steady around 80% CIS returning since 2013. However, the strongest reasonings for their return have shifted focus. For the longest time, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018), CIS's top two reasons for returning have been *convenience to reunite with family and friends* and *good economic development of China*. However, as seen by the sample size of 31 CIS in this qualitative study, the indicated top two reasons for their reason are *family/friends in China* and *more work opportunities/can find a good job*. First, CIS in the past have never indicated that work opportunity is a driving factor for their return. However, as seen by rapid recent year technology advancements and domestic companies uprising, China's job market has made shifted into a new world—not only are there tremendous number of new jobs but also jobs that favor millennial's ideal work environments. Next, although reunification with family and friends have always been on the priority list of CIS's desire to return, the participants in this study suggested differently. The study found that reunion with family and friends alone does not pertain to most CIS reasoning for returning, but rather a combination of working and being in a location that is close to family fuel today's CIS in their return.

6. Educational Implications

This qualitative study specifically aims to understand the scope of international higher education pertaining to Chinese international students. Since CIS represents the largest sum hold of all international students and the trend is likely to only increase in the future, and since there has not been a sufficient number of studies pertaining CIS specifically regarding their lives after studying abroad, this study provides a partial analysis of CIS's desires to return to homeland China post abroad. Specifically, since there has not been any research or public results posted for CIS and their desires to return over the recent few years and that China's economy and infrastructure have seen rather significant shifts over the recent few years, this study brings forth an inside look into CIS today and how they are different even compared to a few years ago. The qualitative study does partially prove that CIS today possess forward-thinking mindsets and bears different reasons of why they would return to China.

7. Limitations

This study is conducted on a small sample size of CIS participants. While the author purposefully selected CIS from multiple countries, different degree programs, and different universities to conduct the qualitative study, the results pertaining this study is limited as it cannot represent the majority threshold of CIS today. However, because the majority of the participants indicated similar top reasons why they desire to return to China, this study can be used as a foundation for the continuous examination of modern-day CIS and topics related to them in this area. Further, this study analyzed the participants' statements and identified several new findings which were not found among previous CIS, which the author believes will continue to be an upward trend due to two reasons. First, China's economy, having witnessed its advancement over the past four decades, is believed that it will continue to expand, and its technological advancement will continue to heighten. Second, CIS possess forward-thinking mindsets which allow them to think strategically into the future, which means that traditional reasons that attracted them can alter.

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