

# Survey of International Students from China at York University: A Preliminary Report

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## Background

### Objective behind survey

In 2018, we conducted an online questionnaire survey of international students from mainland China then enrolled in York University. The survey consisted of four parts, aiming to understand (1) these students' demographics and their families' socioeconomic characteristics, (2) their academic background in China, (3) their reasons for studying abroad and their experience of studying in Canada, and (4) their post-graduation migration plan. The objective is to glance into the who, why and where of intellectual migration and relate the various migration plans/decisions to a host of micro, meso and macro factors including but not limited to socio-demographics, networks and institutions, national immigration and talent recruitment policies.

### Method and sample

We approached the target student population through a variety of means, including flyers posted on campus buildings and public spaces, in-person invitation outside classrooms, promotion at events hosted by Chinese international student associations and the university's office for international students, and electronic mailing/broadcasting to relevant student lists and social media groups. All promotional materials (flyers, postcards, email and Wechat messages) contained an embedded link and a QR code for access to the online survey on the Qualtrics platform. We purposely oversampled from the graduate student population for statistical comparisons.

A total of 440 responses were received. 398 are deemed usable in at least addressing the first two parts of the questionnaire. Parts 3 and 4 were completed by 389 and 362 students respectively.

## Preliminary Findings

Based on mostly descriptive statistics, this preliminary report lays out the 'who', 'why' and 'where' of international student migration from China to Canada. The key findings are identified in the subheadings in italic.

### Who are the Chinese international students?

#### *More women among the young and single*

Of the 398 respondents, 54.1% were females, 42.1% were males, and 3.7% preferred not to disclose their gender. They ranged in age between 18 and 44, with over 80% under 27. Their age distribution means that the majority was single (83%) and the only child to their parents (56%). Of those married

(n=64), 75% had their spouse/partner working, studying or homemaking in Canada, and less than half (44%) had children split between China and Canada.

### *Relatively affluent family background*

Generally speaking, they came from an upper middle class background (as defined by both the Chinese government and the McKinsey Quarterly). For 46% of them, at least one of their parents was university-educated. Many (50% of fathers and 43% of mothers) were either entrepreneurs or working in state enterprises; a smaller percentage (25% of fathers and 22% of mothers) worked as civil servants or in private companies. Few (5% of each) were peasants or urban migrant workers, often the poorest group in China. These parents mostly (88%) resided in China. Three-quarters of them owned a car and half of them had an annual household income of over 180,000 RMB when the average household income in 2018 was 21,586 RMB<sup>1</sup>. As such, most students in our sample relied on their parents, fully (46%) or partially (45%), for financially supporting their study and living abroad expenses. Only less than 10% were wholly supported by savings, scholarship and employment income.

### *From all over urban China*

The students grew up and came from all over China (all 4 special administrative regions, 4 of the 5 autonomous regions and 21 of the 23 provinces), with 39% from tier 1 regions, 19% from tier 2 regions and 42% from the periphery.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the majority (¾) had never left their hometown, a fifth had either moved within their province (n=27), to another province (n=33) or even outside mainland China (n=21) before coming to studying in Canada. Overall, while in China, 32 left the periphery for a tier 1 or tier 2 region.

### What are they doing in university?

#### *Undergrads dominate*

At the time of survey, a fifth of the respondents were studying in the English language program in preparation for degree programs, over half were pursuing an undergraduate education, a quarter were in master programs, and 5% were in doctoral studies.

#### *Overrepresented in business-related programs*

Over half of them were studying in the area of business administration and economics. The second largest group (22%) was in science and engineering. Social sciences, humanities and arts accounted for 18%.

### Academic background in China

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<sup>1</sup> Wen, Y. 2018. Income and living standards across China. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. <https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2018/january/income-living-standards-china>, retrieved Septmeber 17, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The regional hierarchy was defined as follows. Tier 1 region includes the Municipality of Beijing, the Municipality of Tianjin, the Yangtze River Delta megalopolis, and the Pearl River Delta megalopolis, all on the east and southeast coast of China. Tier 2 region includes major cities in other parts of China, i.e. Chengdu and Chongqing in the SW, Xian and Lanzhou in the NW, Wuhan in the center, and Dalian and Shengyang in the NE. The periphery refers to the rest of the country.

### *Generally good performers bred for higher education*

An overwhelming majority (90%) had attended high schools (including 12% at the junior high level only) in China, with 66% in key high schools, and 31% performing at the top 10% of their class and 42% having above average performance. 56% had never attended a university in China, and quite a few attended Canadian international schools in China that allow easy transition to the Canadian system. 18% and 4.5% respectively graduated from an undergraduate or graduate program in China. Of these Chinese degree holders, nearly three-quarters went to tier 1 Chinese universities, and they performed well during their undergraduate studies (47% said they were among the top 10% of their class, and 40% said they had above average results). About half of them majored in business administration/economics and engineering, and about 10% each in natural science and humanities.

### Why did they choose to study abroad?

#### *Experience- and job-related*

Apart from some who first came for spousal or other reasons, most came for universities, 54% at the undergraduate and 27% at the graduate level. The rest came for junior high (3%) and senior high (11%) to avoid the severely competitive university entrance examination in China. Their three top reasons for studying abroad were to experience the world, obtain a foreign degree for better job opportunities and to engage in more innovative and advanced research, respectively rated as very or most important by 57%, 41% and 36% of the respondents. Also of note is that 30% wanted to settle and develop their career abroad.

### Why did they choose Canada as the destination?

#### *Appealing environments: social, natural and academic*

In terms of study countries, their top picks were Canada (chosen as first choice by 62%) and the US (chosen as first choice by 31%), followed distantly by Australia and the UK. Before coming to Canada, 5% had studied abroad either in the US, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Japan and so on. Canada was chosen for its social and natural environments, its employment outlook, and the reputation of its higher education sector and the associated academic environment, respectively rated very or most important by 45%, 38% and 35% of the respondents. Quite a few commented on the tuition costs in Canada, and said that the value to cost ratio of a Canadian degree was relatively high.

#### *Possible pull of immigration?*

Over half had pondered about whether they would stay in Canada or return to China when they graduate. Of those 223 people, 30% planned to stay, 50% intended to gain some work experience in Canada before going home while 16% would go home immediately, and 4% would go elsewhere. For staying in Canada, 49% and 43% respectively considered the ease of finding an ideal job and separation with parents/family as challenging.

### Their experiences in Canada

#### *Educational financing not a problem*

As admitted by 67% of the respondents, their decision to study in Canada was not dependent upon financial aids or support provided by the Chinese government or the Canadian university they attended,

another indicator that they came from relatively affluent families. The financial freedom was more prominent among those coming for undergraduate studies (e.g. only 10% of those in graduate studies but over 20% in non-graduate studies said financial aid was unimportant to them).

#### *Transition from undergraduate to graduate studies*

Before attending York University, 9 had studied in colleges in the Toronto area and 72 of the 120 graduate students had obtained a degree from other Canadian universities in Ontario (including York), Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

#### *Business, science and engineering being programs of choice*

At the time of survey, 12% were taking English language instruction classes, 54% were pursuing an undergraduate education, and 32% were in graduate programs (this does not represent the actual distribution as we purposely oversampled from the graduate population). In terms of majors, about half (195 to be exact) pursued economics and business programs, followed by 84 in science and engineering, 68 in social sciences, humanities and arts, and 25 in communications, media and journalism studies. Only a few were in programs on or related to design, environment, health and law. Personal interests appeared to be the most important reason for their choice of academic programs; 46% rated it as a very or the most important factor in their decisions. This is especially so with students majoring in humanities and arts, architecture and design, environment and legal fields when around two-thirds in each group (60 to 70%) rated it as very or most important. Practical reasons followed. They include the ease of getting a job in the field (rated very or most important by 38.9%), the university's reputation in the field, and not having good enough grades for other fields.

#### *The usual adaptation challenges encountered*

Before they came, few had knowledge about lives of international students or their post-graduation career experience in Canada. For the less than 4% who had some understanding, it was primarily through families/relatives already in Canada or former classmates who had studied in Canada. It is thus not surprising that they found life in Canada testing. Pressure from their academic work, dealing with a different language, and difficulties integrating into Canadian campus life as well as the socio-cultural norms at large were the major challenges.

#### *Physical presence is the real meaning of studying abroad*

Yet, when asked to opine on the choices of studying at a Canadian university branch campus located in China, doing a joint degree by splitting their study time between China and Canada, and spending their study time full time in Canada, these challenges became lesser concerning for the majority. Their preferences show that nearly half (47%) preferred to physically study in Canada, a third (39%) favoured a joint degree, and only one-seventh (14%) would like to study in a Canadian university branch campus housed in China. To the last group, proximity to parents/family, more affordable expenses, and convenience mattered most. For the majority, the studying full time group liked to experience the social and cultural environments of Canada and believed Canada offers a better academic environment. They were also attracted by the prospect of immigration. To them, the "real meaning of studying abroad" is to be physically present at a Canadian university for the duration of their degree. On the other hand, the studying part time group considered the experiences of studying in both higher education systems as complementary.

### *Maintaining strong links to China through*

#### *a) Frequent home visits*

Since coming to studying in Canada, they had visited home on average 2.2 times. The frequency of visit was highly correlated with their family's household income. Those in the highest family income bracket went 3.12 times on average compared to 1.77 times for those in the lowest bracket. This applies to those in an undergraduate program as well as those in a graduate program.

#### *b) Optimism about China's future*

They were generally optimistic about development in China. Nearly a third said that it went very well and 58% said that it went well with minor problems. Only 10% said there were many issues requiring improvement. As such, they were confident about the future of China, especially in comparison to Canada's. Of the 363 who completed this section, 15% thought that China had exceeded Canada, and 25% and 52% believed this would be the case respectively in the short and longer terms. Only 8% did not believe that China's development would be better than Canada's. Such optimism was premised upon the level of high-tech developments in China and the abundance of human resources in this area, as well as the economic potential of the country. Their view towards the US is slightly different. Only 13% was not confident that China would surpass the US (compared to 8% towards Canada) whereas 72% was very confident that China would surpass the US in the near term (compared to 25% towards Canada).

#### *c) Awareness of China's overseas talent recruitment policies*

Regarding China's talent recruitment policies, majority (80% of UG and 96% of G) have heard about them but with various level of understanding. Overall, 38% were aware of the policies in general but not the details, 8% understood the policies relatively well, and less than 2% understood them well. To them, the attractiveness of the policies lied in the working conditions, opportunity for promotion, salary, and research funding.

### Post-graduation planning

#### *Initial thinking pivots towards stay*

Before starting their study in Canada, 41% had not thought about what they would do in terms of staying in Canada, moving back to China or elsewhere after their study. For those who thought about it, majority (81%) would like to stay, temporarily (about two-thirds of those with a plan or 60% of the whole sample) or permanently (about one-third of those with a plan or 23% of the whole sample). About 15% would return to China and a small percentage (<4%) move to a third country.

#### *Shift towards getting Canadian work experience before returning to China*

At the time of survey, the percentage of not having a future plan dropped by more than half to 18%. While a majority maintained their original plan (e.g. 71% in the permanent stay category, 56% in the return category), the largest change in each category was a shift to a temporary stay in which they are allowed to work under the various post-graduation work programs. This includes 25% of those who initially planned to return to China immediately after graduation, 25% of those who had planned to move on, 15% of those initially aiming for a permanent stay, and 46% of those who didn't have a plan before they came to Canada.

### *Return is economically grounded and socially substantiated*

43 respondents (12% of sample) chose to go back to China immediately upon graduation. Their reasons for return varied. Apart from family considerations, what deemed important were pulls exerted by economic opportunities, valuable personal/familial social networks, and the grandiose rationale of helping to develop China (at least 30% rated statements related to these reasons as very or most important). Adaptation challenges (in terms of language, life, jobs, immigration) and the potentially tense Canada-China relations were unimportant. Upon return, nearly 40% would like to work in a foreign enterprise, 27% would establish their own business or manage their family business, and 13% would prefer working in a private enterprise. Only 11% would seek their future in governments or state companies. As such, they preferred going to the economic heartlands of China if they were not already from there. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other major cities on the east and southeast coast of China were considered very or most ideal sites for launching their career.

### *Temporary stay as a possible path to citizenship*

172 respondents or 60% of the sample planned to temporarily stay in Canada before returning to China. Apart from the overwhelmingly important reasons of gaining Canadian work experience, accumulating financial independence and experiencing the outside world (as seen by >90%), some (75%) would use that as an opportunity to observe/assess the possibility for immigration. While 23% would go home after the allowable work durations, 40% would only return after obtaining their permanent resident or citizenship status.

### *Permanent stay draws on the difference between Canada and China*

68 or 23% of the sample intended to stay permanently in Canada. To them (particularly those in science, engineering, business and health fields), the abundant opportunities and high economic returns in their fields, a more relaxed lifestyle, and the natural environment in Canada were important considerations. A fair proportion found that they were no longer used to the larger social/cultural/political environment in China. In particular, China's system of doing things was not favourable to their fields (especially for those in humanities, health, science, business). They have become used to the Canadian ways of living and doing things, and found the Canadian society more tolerant, free and equitable. Some said that their way of thinking is no longer compatible with those in China. Some stayed in response to their parents' expectation. Given their fields of study, it's natural to see two-thirds aimed to work in the private sector. Apart from career opportunities, the natural environment of the city they are going to settle mattered (>60% found these to be very or most important). While city size matters to half of the sample, whether there is a sizable Chinese community is unimportant, an indication that mid-size cities can be attractive.

### *Not much interest in moving to a third country*

Only 11 respondents or 3% of the sample planned to move to a third country upon graduation. The top choice country was the US (first choice to 1/3), followed by Western Europe, UK and Australia.

### *What is behind the "no plan yet"?*

65 individuals or 18% of the sample did not have in mind a stay or leave plan. Yet when prompted, a third said they would make up their mind when they get a work permit, become a permanent resident, or obtain Canadian citizenship. This suggests that the proportion of respondents favoring or contemplating at least a temporary stay in Canada is much larger. We estimate it to be around 75%.

### **Next Step**

We will analyze in detail how and to what extent socio-economic-demographics, social networks, institutional factors, national development policies especially those pertaining to talent recruitment, geopolitics and personal outlooks individually and collectively affect student migration decisions and plans.