“Yearning for it” and “no turning back”—A study on Chinese international high school students’ motivations in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak

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Abstract
This paper studies the macro situation of studying abroad in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and the motivations of Chinese international high school students studying abroad. The research shows that from the macro situation, the “push” growth is caused by the epidemic situation, racial discrimination, tightening employment and immigration policies, online teaching, and other reasons, while the “pull” growth is caused by the good control of the epidemic situation and the sense of belonging and security for students in China; however, from the perspective of individual choice, most international high school students still insist on studying abroad, “demand effect” and “cost effect” can explain their motivations of studying abroad. The motivation of those students going abroad unshakably mainly shows “demand effect.” They tend to satisfy the differentiated demand of personal development through studying abroad and believe that this demand is more difficult to obtain in home country. While the motivation of those students going abroad reluctantly mainly shows “cost effect.” The cost of early investment including not only monetary expenditures but also behavioral choices in K-12 education leads to their continued investment.

Keywords
COVID-19, international high school students, push pull theory, demand effect, cost effect

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With the deepening of globalization and internationalization of higher education, the scale of international students is increasing day by day, and study abroad education in China is also booming. According to the latest statistics of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, in 2019, the number of students studying abroad in China increased by 6.25% compared with the previous year, with 41,400, totaling 703,500 (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). Since Reform and Opening Up, the form of education for studying abroad in China has changed from “the state sends students to famous schools” to “individuals (families) pay for themselves.” At present, studying abroad is an effective way to exchange family economic capital for children’s cultural capital, and it has become one of the educational choices of upper-middle-class families in China (Xiang & Shen, 2009). Universities in western developed countries such as the United States and Britain occupy the top of the study abroad chain (Kim, 2016; Marginson, 2008), which has always been the mainstream choice for Chinese families studying abroad.

However, in 2020, COVID-19 swept the world, bringing unprecedented health crises to the world. So far, the epidemic situation has not been effectively controlled in some countries (Mo, 2020). In addition, nationalism and anti-globalization have become increasingly prominent in recent years, and the internationalization of higher education is facing profound challenges (Friedman, 2018; Mok et al., 2020). The global health crisis has further aggravated the resurgent populism, and the hatred and discrimination of foreign students in the mainstream countries have also caused serious physical and mental harm to the overseas students (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

This paper studies the motivations of studying abroad for Chinese international high school students. Based on the theoretical framework of two-way push–pull theory, this study intends to answer: (1) In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, what changes have taken place in the “push–pull force” between the countries where students study abroad and the countries where students come from? (2) In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, why do most Chinese international high school students insist on going abroad? What are the motivations behind it? (3) What changes have taken place in the choice of destination countries for students to study abroad?

Literature review

Research on the motivation of Chinese students studying abroad

A large number of studies have deeply explored the motivation and overseas experience of Chinese students studying abroad. For example, many studies in recent years indicate that consistent with the practice of global elites, overseas diplomas have become synonymous with “successful global citizens.” Studying abroad is gradually showing a popular trend, nevertheless, compared with domestic educational products, studying abroad still shows a series of different characteristics, including smaller target audiences, relatively high cost, and high requirements for individual and family consumption capacity. When it comes to studying abroad, people always think of advanced knowledge, differentiated educational methods and ideas. Therefore, educational immigrants for Chinese families have evolved into a kind of “class-based consumption” and a strategy for class reproduction (Liu-Farrer, 2016).

Lan Peijia’s research on the educational practice of the middle class in Taiwan shows that the parents of middle class families in Taiwan are more inclined to adopt “global security strategies,” aiming at enhancing their children’s competitiveness through different forms of transnational education in the global competition (Lan, 2018). Ma Yingyi’s research indicates that although parents have not interpreted the educational investment and strategy of studying abroad as a process of seeking the class leap for their children, this transnational educational choice is an important process for many parents and students to build the “global middle class” based on their own class advantages (Ma, 2020). In the book Paradise Redefined, Feng Wen, a sociologist,
describes that Chinese students want to change their citizenship from a developing country to a developed country by studying abroad, which in many cases reflects cultural and political significance, rather than the legal significance (Fong, 2010).

In a word, the aforementioned research discusses the decision-making process of Chinese students in the regular period. With the constant worsening of COVID-19 pandemic, people typically have different degrees of anxiety and panic in the face of sudden crisis. As a matter of fact, this kind of psychological state has greatly influenced the decision-making and consumption behavior of studying abroad. In this context, this paper will use the existing data to answer the question of “how did the COVID-19 pandemic change the motivation/decision-making process of Chinese students.”

**Theoretical framework and theoretical perspective**

**Two-way push–pull theory: Beyond the traditional one-way push–pull theory**

The “push–pull theory” was originally used to analyze population migration (Bogue, 1958; Ravenstein, 1876). Altbach takes the lead in applying push–pull theory in analyzing the flow behavior of international students. In 1998, based on the push–pull theory, he pointed out that the sending country (home country) and receiving country (host country) of international students have “push” and “pull,” respectively, and the group of international students left their home country because of “push” and entered the country under the “pull” of the host country. Specifically, some unfavorable environments and conditions in the home country constitute the “push” for students to study abroad, such as fewer educational opportunities; the “pull” of studying abroad includes the host country’s scholarships, educational opportunities, advanced research facilities, suitable socio-economic and political environment, multiple perspectives, and opportunities to experience international life (Altbach, 1998).

Henceforth, this theory has become the mainstream theory to analyze the phenomenon of international student mobility in academic circles at home and abroad. Existing studies have confirmed that the push factors of going abroad include economic reasons, political reasons, poor quality of higher education, and lack of opportunities for higher education. The pull factors of the inflowing countries include university prestige and ranking, scholarship, internationalization degree, and so on (Liu et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2014; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002).

However, the above research fails to realize that the sending and receiving countries of international students also have the properties of “pull” and “push,” respectively. Many favorable factors attract students when they go abroad, which makes them reluctant to leave. Similarly, there are also unfavorable factors that exclude students in the receiving countries, which make them unwilling to go. Therefore, students’ willingness to study abroad is formed under the joint action of the “push–pull” of the sending country and the “push–pull” of the receiving country (Li, 2008; Tian, 2003).

The traditional push–pull theory is often widely applied in normal international relations. However, during the epidemic period, the national border is closed, travel restrictions, and regular visa services are suspended. The anti-globalization trend is enhanced, and the “pull” of sending countries and the “push” of receiving countries are likely to increase. Therefore, we cannot completely rely on the conventional push–pull theory to analyze the phenomenon of international students’ mobility. It should also consider the “pull” of the sending country and the “push” of the receiving country to build a two-way push–pull theoretical model.

**The internal factors of the push–pull theoretical model**

The traditional push–pull theoretical model emphasizes the external factors that influence students’ study abroad behavior, but the subjective cognition of students also plays an important role
in the study abroad decision-making. Lee (1966) pointed out that the same group will make different choices when facing the same pushing force. Thus, it should pay attention to the traditional pushing force and focus on individual characteristics and intermediate factors during analyzing the study of migration. Li (2008), Li and Ma (2013), and other scholars bring subjective factors such as students’ motivation, thoughts, emotions, and wishes into push–pull theory when analyzing international student mobility. And the internal factors (individual factors) of the theory of pushing and pulling force have been widely discussed yet. This study will make a more specific analysis of the internal needs, which are the motivations of Chinese international high school students from the perspectives of “differentiated demand” and “sunk cost effect.”

**Differentiated demand.** It is believed that the private education needs of families can usually be divided into two categories: “excess demand” and “differentiated demand” (James, 1986). Excess demand comes into being when public education cannot provide enough education. Differentiated demand has been generated when public education can provide enough but cannot provide heterogeneous (personalized) or high-quality education (James, 1993). According to the existing literature, under the condition that the public education system has met the basic educational needs and is limited to providing relatively unified educational products, more and more families will seek private education for the individualized needs of educational concepts, educational quality and educational types (Jimenez et al., 1995; Song, 2009). Based on the demand theory, a considerable number of families who decide to study overseas are from the desire of seeking differentiated demand.

**The sunk cost effect.** Based on the classical sunk cost theory, when people make decisions, they are often disturbed by various factors such as time, money and energy (effort) invested by themselves in the past, and lose the rationality of decision-making and make some decision-making deviation, which is called “sunk cost” effect (Arkes & Blumer, 1985; Hou et al., 2020; Leclerc et al., 1995). In the field of education, the example of such cost can be the fact that parents pay tuitions and send their children to tutors preparing for high-stake testing in advance. Such prior investment accounts for a considerable proportion of family expenditures, especially for those who plan to send their children to study abroad. Their sunk costs include not only monetary expenditures but also behavioral choices such as early commitment to an international K-12 education that shuts down the pathway to domestic universities. Since the early investment is likely to lead to behavior of continuous investment, those families are predictable to continue with the endeavor of studying overseas.

**The theoretical framework of this paper**

To sum up, the following Figure 1 is the theoretical framework of this study. This theoretical framework has two major characteristics: First, considering the “pushing force” of the inflow country and the “pushing force” of the outflow country comprehensively, the bidirectional push force’s theoretical model is constructed. Second, considering external factors and internal factors comprehensively, the internal factors are analyzed in detail from two aspects: “demand effect” and “cost effect.”

**Research design**

**Research object**

In this study, a stratified purposive sampling method was adopted, and seven international schools in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing, and Wuhan were selected by stratified sampling
based on the regional (eastern, central, and western) standards. Then, according to the content saturation principle, purposive sampling was conducted, and 21 international high school students were interviewed. Their basic information is shown in Table 1.

**Research methods**

In this study, a qualitative research method was adopted, and one-on-one and one-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each interviewee. After the interview materials are transcribed, they form an initial transcript word by word. After that, the interview records are sorted and analyzed.

In the process of collation and analysis, follow the analytical inductive method of grounded theory, on the one hand, refine and conceptualize the original data; on the other hand, the concepts extracted from the original data are compared with the theoretical framework mentioned above, in order to increase the compactness and integration of the core categories. According to the extract of the original data, theoretical framework, and theoretical perspective that were mentioned above, the paper gradually forms dimensions, attributes, categories, and so on as shown in Table 2. In the process of open coding, the article respects the interviewee’s “local concept,” uses the original words and sentences of interviewees as the basis of concept classification, and refines the open coding such as in-depth development demand, all-round development demand, time cost, money cost, and effort cost; in the process of axis coding, open coding is compared repeatedly, and four categories are extracted: “power and tension,” “obstacle and resistance,” “demand effect,” and “cost effect.” In the process of choosing to code, it is further summarized and sublimated, with “macro situation” and “individual motivation” as the writing framework of the full text.

**Overall situation of studying abroad in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak**

Universities in developed countries, such as the United States and Britain, have higher education quality and prestige in traditional concepts, attractive to high school students in China. Nevertheless, in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, the macro situation has changed, and the
The "push" of mainstream countries studying abroad such as the United States and Britain has increased. On the contrary, the "pull" of China has also increased. It is embodied in four aspects.

First, the epidemic situation has not been effectively controlled in some countries studying abroad, and the life safety of international students cannot be guaranteed. As of February 15, 2021,
### Table 2. Example of categorization process of three-level coding.

| Example excerpts from original literature | Open coding                                                                 | Axis code 1 (dimension) | Axis code 2 (attribute) | Axis code 3 (category) | Select code (core category) |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| “I am more concerned about whether I can stay and work.” | Working opportunities Personal resources Opportunity to broaden one’s horizons | More-less                | Overseas resources      | Push and pull             | Macro situation             |
| “I want to know more Overseas friends.”  |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “Studying abroad can broaden your horizons. It is difficult to achieve this by reading 2 + 2 (2 years domestic courses and 2 years foreign courses) in China.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I am worried that I will be discriminated against after going abroad.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I am afraid that the epidemic prevention and control is not good.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “The most worrying thing now is that the courses are too difficult to graduate” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “It’s too lonely overseas.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I believe the computer major in USA is relatively developed and I hope it can help me further my professional training.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I am personally more suitable for diversified development and good at playing musical instruments.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “The ranking of school majors is excellent” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I can only apply for ordinary universities in China, and the schools that apply abroad are more famous.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I have studied in international schools for many years.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I put a lot of effort into preparing for the language exam and AP course.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “The annual tuition fees of international schools are more than 300,000.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “Chinese and politics are difficult to re-learn. I can’t go back to the college entrance examination.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
| “I am already familiar with this set of international education models.” |                                                                              |                         |                         |                        |                             |
the average number of confirmed cases in COVID-19 has increased by about 86,000 in the past 7 days (CCTV News, 2021b); according to data released by the British government on the 22nd, the cumulative number of deaths from the COVID-19 epidemic has exceeded 120,000, ranking fifth in the world (CCTV News, 2021a); also, cases of variant COVID-19 infection have been found one after another in Canada and other countries, and the infection speed is accelerated (CCTV News, 2021c). The rapid spread of the epidemic abroad has worried some international high school students and their parents. As CD-F-5 said: “My parents and I both feel that the epidemic abroad is out of control and it is dangerous to go abroad.” Talking about the most significant concern about studying abroad in the future, BJ-M-18 said: “I have been worried since the outbreak of foreign epidemics, and foreign epidemics are not well controlled.” Contrariwise, the epidemic situation has been effectively controlled in China. Before sporadic cases appeared in the autumn and winter of 2020, the situation in China was generally stable. At the beginning of February 2021, sporadic epidemics in Hebei and Northeast China were controlled. As of March 3, 2021, there were no new cases in China for 16 consecutive days. CD-F-5 is quite satisfied with the effectiveness of the Chinese government’s epidemic control. It said: “The prevention and control of domestic epidemics are relatively in place, and it is safer to stay in China.”

Second, the epidemic has intensified racial discrimination in the world wide. Since the outbreak, xenophobia against Asian ethnic groups (especially Chinese ethnic groups) has occurred from time to time in Europe and the United States. According to statistics, from March 19 to June 3, 2020, there were 2066 racial discrimination incidents against Chinese in the United States (Chinese for Affirmative Action, 2020). Frequent incidents of racial discrimination have aggravated international high school students’ concerns about univity application and overseas life. As GZ-F-12 said: “I am most worried about being treated differently because of race.” At the same time, under the background of increasingly fierce competition among countries, some Chinese media have made detailed reports on the extreme events of racial discrimination abroad. To a certain extent, it also aroused domestic populist trends and Chinese ordinary people’s dissatisfaction with foreigners. For example, in the early stage of COVID-19 outbreak, the rumor that Guangzhou and 300,000 Africans lived in Yuexiu District and foreigners caused COVID-19 to spread widely made frequent conflicts between foreigners and the local residents. Moreover, this kind of persistent anti-foreign sentiments has also affected students’ decision to study abroad to a certain extent (The People’s Government of Guangzhou Municipality, 2020). WH-M-20 pays attention to the WeChat official account in many aspects of studying abroad. The news of frequent racial discrimination incidents abroad worries him: “I am more worried about being discriminated against after going out, and my life there is not suitable.” On the contrary, it is less possible to face possible discrimination and exclusion if study in China, and always stay with relatives and friends. Furthermore, it is safer to stay with family. SZ-M-8 said: “I feel very at relaxing with family members, no matter how difficult it is, I could always rely on them. Nevertheless, I live alone overseas.” On the other hand, there is a social relationship accumulated for more than 10 years in China, and it is necessary to re-operate its social relationship when going abroad. CD-F-15 thinks: “I think I will face great challenges in the first 2 years of going abroad because I need to re-integrate into the new social relationship, and my current friends are unlikely to go to the same country or school with you, and the discrimination (phenomenon) outside is also serious, so I do not know if I can integrate.” It can be seen that the sense of security and belonging brought by relatives and friends is also a significant “pull” of China under the background of anti-globalization.

Third, with the rise of populism and the anti-globalization trend of thought, the employment and immigration policies of various countries have been tightened continuously, the examination procedures have become cumbersome, and the corresponding application conditions have been improved a lot. The change of employment and immigration policies has aroused the concern of
some international high school students and their families. The United States government issued a decree in June 2020, continuing to freeze the issuance of some “green cards” until the end of the year, and freezing the issuance of some types of non-immigrant work visas, including H-1B visas applicable to technical enterprise staff (Xinhuanet, 2020). CD-M-1, who gave up studying in the United States because the United States tightened its work visa, said, “I am more concerned about whether I can get a Yes work visa and whether the school provides overseas internship opportunities. As far as I know, the United States is now more challenging to stay and work so that I will consider other countries.”

Fourth, in European and American countries, due to the epidemic situation, online teaching and learning have become the “new normal.” Under this background, “studying abroad” is likely to become “studying online at home.” International high school students’ worries about online learning include low learning efficiency, poor learning quality, and no chance to live together. CD-F-5 said: “My self-control is relatively poor, and it is difficult to concentrate in online classes.” CD-F-15 believes: “Online learning is too inefficient, and it feels like resting at home.” BJ-F-17, who is ready to study art, thinks that online learning is not feasible: “I am studying art, we need studios and professional equipment, and we need practical practice. Online learning has not improved much. I am anxious that I cannot get into the ideal school.” More importantly, online learning has stripped off the campus environment and shared life, which is not suitable for people’s physical and mental development. As GZ-M-14 said: “School is not only a place to learn knowledge but also a place to live together. Living together is necessary for people’s sound development, so I do not like online learning very much.”

Motivations and choice of international high school students studying abroad

Although the spread of the epidemic, racial discrimination, tightening employment immigration policies and online teaching, the “thrust” of studying abroad has increased, the vast majority of Chinese international high school students still have the willingness to study abroad except CD-F-5 (Table 3). The following table is an in-depth analysis of the motivations of studying abroad and the choice.

Motivations for international high school students studying abroad

From Table 3, international high school students who choose to go abroad can be divided into two types: “active” and “passive.” Although they show the same tendency in behavior, their motivations are different. This paper makes an in-depth analysis of their motivations.

“Yearning for it”: The active type of going abroad. Because China’s higher education started late, the top universities in western developed countries such as the United States and Britain have

| Table 3. Individual selection types of international high school students. |
| --- | --- |
| Go abroad | Not go abroad |
| Active | CD-M-1、CD-F-3、CD-F-4、GZ-M-6、SZ-M-7、SZ-M-8、SZ-M-10、CD-M-11、GZ-F-12、GZ-M-14、CD-F-15、BJ-F-17、WH-M-19、WH-M-20、WH-F-21 | CD-F-5 |
| Passive | CD-F-2、SZ-M-9、GZ-F-13、BJ-F-16、BJ-M-18 |  |
advantages over many universities in China in many aspects such as schooling philosophy, scientific research equipment, and educational prestige.

Some international high school students who insist on studying abroad believe that only foreign higher education can meet their own needs, which are mainly manifested in the needs of “diversified development” and “in-depth development.” On the one hand, education in European and American countries pays more attention to students’ individualization and diversified development, which is attractive to some students and parents. GZ-M-6’s father graduated from a top famous school, and his mother is a middle school teacher. They try to cultivate their children’s interests and hobbies in daily life and often take them worldwide to enjoy local customs in their spare time. Therefore, when he was a child, he showed talent and enthusiasm in music and sports, and his rich experience also made him have a more mature self-cognition than his peers. After comparing and analyzing the information of studying abroad in many aspects, he thinks that the American education system can better meet his diverse needs of developing hobbies and skills outside of school, as he said: “I decided to study abroad in the third year. I am more suitable for diversified development, playing musical instruments well, and being good at sports. If these strengths can’t be played well in China, there will be regrets. American education is more flexible and can meet my needs.” On the other hand, some international high school students hope to meet their practical needs for in-depth development in professional fields by studying abroad. GZ-M-14 is an excellent student in the eyes of classmates and parents since childhood. He studied in a local famous public school in junior high school and was admitted to the international department of a well-known high school with excellent results in the senior high school entrance examination. He was born into a scholarly family, loves reading and thinking, can make rational judgments on various hot events, and has a reasonable plan for his future development. Otherwise, he will engage in scientific research in the field of psychology in the future, who believes that undergraduate education in top foreign universities is of great significance to his future career development. As he said: “I want to teach and be a professor in a foreign university. It is beneficial for my professional development and career development to study abroad. If I receive higher education in China, it is impossible to find a teaching position in a foreign university.” CD-F-3 is going to study computer science in the United States because the computer science major in American universities is in the leading position globally, where it can realize the profound development of the major. “I have liked the American education model since I was a child. The computer technology in the United States is relatively advanced. Studying computers there helps me master cutting-edge technology.”

Also, some students have a “symbolic demand” for studying abroad because of the value of foreign school diplomas. GZ-M-6 is studying in a well-known international high school in China, which has strict requirements for overseas universities. Considering that he is more likely to study in a prestigious school ranked higher in the world when he goes abroad, he made a resolute decision to persist in studying abroad after the outbreak of the epidemic. “The possibility of success is relatively high, and the average application results are the top 50 schools in the world.” WH-M-19 once attended primary school and junior high school in domestic public schools, and its score is always in the middle and lower reaches of the domestic education system. It is expected that he can only attend secondary or higher vocational schools if he continues to study in China. Facing the realistic situation, WH-M-19 transferred to an international high school after graduating from junior high school and hoped to enter a relatively prestigious overseas university through the international high school. As he said, “I was ranked in the bottom 50% of my grades at that time, and studying in China can only take the road of vocational education. I do not think that vocational education is not good, think that (going to an international school) can enter a more famous school (university).”
For these students, the demand for studying abroad constitutes their “differentiated demand,” which cannot be replaced by domestic higher education. The demand for differentiation comes from the hope of “diversified development” and “in-depth development,” or from the pursuit of diploma symbols and prestige, which makes them embark on the road of studying abroad, which has difficulties and obstacles and has the happiness of gaining. Therefore, even in the face of possible difficulties such as epidemic and racial discrimination, they are still full of yearning and longing for overseas schools, and their heart of studying abroad cannot be destroyed.

“There is no turning back”: The passive type of study abroad. “I have studied in international schools for so many years and invested a lot, who also have been separated from the domestic system for too long, and it is too difficult to transfer to the college entrance examination,” SZ-M-9 said. Although other students insist on going abroad in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, their motivations are quite different. The cost of a 3-year study in international schools and the conversion cost from the international application track to the domestic college entrance examination track make them “irreversible.”

In terms of input cost, they and their families have invested much money, time, and effort in preparing to study abroad. If they cannot make it in the end, all the early investment will be wasted. For example, BJ-F-16 chose to go abroad because of its early money investment. She initially chose an international school, not because of her strong desire to go abroad, but because the foreign residence could not enroll in the local public middle school. However, after the outbreak, she decided to go abroad. She bluntly said, “The tuition fee of an international school is too expensive, and it costs more than 300,000 a year. If I do not go abroad, these tuition fees will be lost.” This sunk cost makes her reluctant to give up this less desirable road. Considering the international situation, GZ-F-13 has applied for top universities in mainstream countries such as Britain, the United States, and Canada. In the preparation process, she has invested a lot of time and energy to prepare for TOEFL and IELTS to meet the application requirements of different universities. It is difficult for her to give up the road of going abroad because of her early time and hard work. “I have spent too much time preparing for the exam in the early stage, and I will go abroad.”

In terms of switching costs, after a lengthy study in the international education system, they have become path-dependent on international courses and overseas university applications, which makes it difficult to switch to the domestic college entrance examination track. With the support of family financial resources, CD-F-2 decided to study abroad. Although the sudden epidemic made this road many difficulties, the long-term study in international schools made it difficult for her to switch to the state of college entrance examination, as she said: “I have been in an international school for 3 years. Now I can only take a regular university, and it is impossible to go back to the college entrance examination.” Moreover, most international schools teach courses in English. SZ-M-9 thinks that under the influence of this course system, it is difficult for him to deal with the mother tongue examination, especially the subjects such as Chinese, politics, and history in the college entrance examination. The high switching cost forced him to continue studying abroad. “I have no other choice. If I choose the college entrance examination, Chinese and politics are too difficult for me besides English. Likely, even the undergraduate course will not be admitted to the college entrance examination.”

Generally speaking, Chinese international high school students who choose to go abroad in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak have two kinds of motivations: “yearning for it” (demand effect) and “no turning back” (cost effect). However, those who are determined to go abroad are dominated by the “demand effect,” while those who are helpless to go abroad are dominated by the “cost effective.” The Figure 2 shows these two kinds of motivations of Chinese international high students.
The choice of destination countries for international high school students to study abroad

Although the vast majority of international high school students still have the willingness to study abroad, there have been adjustments and changes in the choice of countries to study abroad. First, the pattern of studying abroad in the United States has changed. International senior high school students readjust their application scheme in the form of “set,” which is matched with other mainstream English-speaking countries such as Britain, Canada, and Australia or European countries such as Germany. Besides applying for the United States, for example, SZ-M-9 said: “I used to insist on applying for the United States, but now considering the epidemic situation and discrimination against Chinese, I will apply at the same time in mainstream countries such as Britain, Canada, and Australia.” GZ-M-6 said: “I only wanted to apply for the United States, but Sino-US relations are too difficult to guess. If Sino-US relations are terrible, it is also good to go to other famous schools in Europe, and I will consider going to Germany to study engineering dynamics.”

Second, Asian study centers such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have increased. CD-M-1 used the United States as its first choice before, but now it is more inclined to study in Hong Kong or Singapore. As it said, “I will study artificial intelligence and data analysis related majors in Hong Kong or Singapore. Hong Kong and Singapore are close to home and have many job opportunities.” CD-M-11 gave up the United States and took Japan as the first choice. “After I communicated with my parents, I gave up studying in the United States. Now I am going to study in Japan. I am learning TOEFL while learning Japanese.”

Third, the attraction of friendly countries to Chinese international high school students has increased. While the mainstream countries studying abroad such as Britain and the United States have “thrust” due to racial discrimination and xenophobia, some countries studying abroad that were once less popular have increased their “pull” because of their friendship with China. These countries include New Zealand and Serbia. For example, after studying in the United States, CD-M-1 also considers New Zealand mainly because New Zealand is relatively friendly to China.

Figure 2. Motivations of Chinese international high school students studying abroad.
Conclusion and policy recommendations

This paper makes an in-depth analysis of the macro situation of studying abroad in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and the motivations of Chinese international high school students studying abroad. In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, the macro situation of studying abroad has changed to some extent. Due to difficult epidemic situations, frequent incidents of racial discrimination, tightening employment immigration policies, online teaching, and other reasons, the “push” of mainstream countries studying abroad such as the United States and Britain has increased. However, the vast majority of Chinese international high school students still insist on studying abroad under this background.

This paper explores the different motivations of these international high school students from the perspectives of “demand effect” and “cost effect.” One kind of motivation originates from learners’ “differentiated needs” for foreign higher education, which mainly includes the real needs of “diversified development” and “in-depth development,” as well as the symbolic needs of pursuing professional reputation and school reputation, which the domestic higher education system cannot fully meet. Therefore, the study abroad behavior guided by this motivation is more active and firm. The other kind of motivation stems from students’ and families’ consideration of the input cost in international education and the conversion cost to the domestic track. For those who have invested much money, time, and hard work in international education for 3 years (even longer), it is difficult for them to give up the road of studying abroad, and the difficulty and high cost of shifting from the international track to the domestic track also prevent them from changing. For the sake of input cost and switching cost, they are willing to follow the original decision of going abroad. The above conclusions contain the following policy implications.

Further open up the channel from international high schools to domestic high schools and universities

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, some students and families have shaken their willingness to go abroad, and they insist on going abroad from the perspective of the “cost effective.” If there is a suitable way to transfer or enter a higher school in China, they will likely give up going abroad. However, it is inconvenient for international high school students to transfer and study in China.

On the one hand, it is difficult for international high school students to transfer to ordinary high schools. The distinction between domestic enrollment status and international enrollment status (xueji, 学籍) has consolidated the ramp between the two different school systems to a certain extent. Since most international high school students do not keep domestic high schools’ enrollment status, it is not easy to transfer. Also, international school curriculum differs substantially from that instructed in Chinese public schools, it is difficult to transfer between international programs and regular programs. Given this, the government needs to enhance the transfer system’s flexibility further, approve more international schools to retain their domestic status and provide convenience for international students who need to transfer back to schools within the system and take the college entrance examination.

On the other hand, it is hard for international high school students to take routine college entrance examinations and study in China because of enrollment status. Therefore, the local education administrative department takes the approach of “equivalent academic ability in senior high schools” into consideration and determines the academic level of international high school students through procedures to confirm their qualifications for entering the college entrance examination. Besides, the Chinese government should introduce favorable policies to attract more foreign first-class universities to set up branches in China, then use the comprehensive evaluation
system to enroll international high school students, attract excellent student resources by classification, and improve the relevant regulations on academic qualifications certification, to provide more choices for high school students who have the status of international students but want to develop in China under the premise of ensuring the fairness of the college entrance examination.

**Further enhance the attractiveness of domestic undergraduate education**

After the outbreak, in addition to the traditional pull and push factors, the trend of international students’ mobility also depends on the security risks, public health system, and degree of discrimination, visas, employment opportunities, quality, and flexibility of the (online) education course provided in the destination countries. Thankfully, due to the favorable epidemic situation and inclusive social atmosphere in China, the attraction of undergraduate education in China to international high school students has increased. However, the attraction, international recognition, and international popularity of undergraduate education in China need to be further improved. Therefore, China should further strengthen the construction of teaching staff in colleges and universities, take students as the priority, continuously improve the quality of undergraduate teaching, and establish a multi-level, multi-directional, and personalized talent training model to meet the needs of students’ diversified development, profound development and pursuit of prestigious majors and schools, and attract and retain more outstanding talents.

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