



International students' post-graduation migration plans and the search for home [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Research on international student's post migration plans treats migration as a binary stay-return category and focuses on push-pull factors as the cause of this migration. In this paper we expand the definition of migration and consider the role of life experiences and aspirations, particularly the concept of home. We ask, what are the different conceptualizations of home and how are these tied to differential migratory plans? We analyze data from 232 interviews with international students from more than 50 countries who attended a flagship public university in Canada from 2006–2013. We find that students have four ways of thinking about home: as host, as ancestral, as cosmopolitan, and as nebulous. These understandings of home correspond to particular post-migration plans. While students who view home as a host plan to stay, and those who view home as ancestral plan to return, those with cosmopolitan and nebulous conceptions of home have more open migration plans.

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1. Introduction

More than 5 million students are currently enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship, a number that is estimated to increase to 7 million by 2020 (OECD, 2015). In the global competition for talent, the skills of these highly educated international students are increasingly recognized as a key driver of innovation and economic prosperity (Alberts and Hazen, 2013; Bilecen and Faist, 2015; Gaule and Piacentini, 2013; Madge et al., 2014). For this reason, many scholars have sought to understand the motivations and experiences of students who study abroad as well as the national/regional brain drain/gain consequences of this migration (e.g. Baláž and Williams, 2004; Baruch et al., 2007; Findlay, 2011; Findlay et al., 2012; Holton, 2015; Liu-Farrer, 2009; Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014; Peng, 2016; Tindal et al., 2015). Increasingly, however, there is also a recognition that, in addition to considering how and why students make the decision to leave for education, there is also a need to consider whether they

return. International students are potential migrants insofar as, for many, their educational stay is temporary.

The problem is that, not only is the post-graduate migration literature limited (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014), but that this picture of return is complicated by the conceptualization of migration and its causes. First, the description of international students' post-graduation migration as a simple binary of "stay in host country" or "return to country of origin" is limited (e.g. Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Arthur and Nunes, 2014; Soon, 2014). International students have additional migratory options including going to a third place or multiple places that ought to be considered. Hence, studies of student mobility should go beyond the 'stay-return' framework (Geddie, 2013; Tan and Hugo, 2016). Second, current push-pull models of post-graduate migration tend not to work across contexts- the push-pull factors that might matter in China are different in the United States. Therefore, explanations of their migration need to consider how these push-pull factors together lead to their migration plans after university. Rather than a one-time static individual choice their migration decision is a long-term dynamic social process (de Haas and Fokkema, 2011; de Haas, 2014; Lauster and Zhao, forthcoming).

In this paper we expand the definition of student migration beyond stay-return and we move the understanding of the causes of this migration forward by considering the role of life experiences and aspirations, particularly the concept of home. We ask, what are the different conceptualizations of home and how are these tied to

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differential migratory plans? We analyze data from 232 interviews with international students from more than 50 countries who attended a flagship public university in Canada from 2006–2013. We find that students have four ways of thinking about home, as host, as ancestral, as cosmopolitan, and as nebulous. These understandings of home correspond to particular post-migration plans. While students who view home as host plan to stay, and those who view home as ancestral plan to return, those with cosmopolitan and nebulous conceptions of home have more open migration plans. Our analysis demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of “home” for international students and that how students constitute their “home(s)” works in conjunction with push-pull factors to shape where they intend to go upon completing their degrees.

2. Post-graduate migration – beyond stay-return as the outcome

The astounding growth in the number of international students, from 1.3 million in 1990, to 2.1 million in 2000, to more than 5 million today (ICEF, 2015), has triggered a growing concern about where this young, and creative class will go upon graduation. International students are “highly achieved”, “skilled”, “preferred”, and “professional” potential migrants (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; King and Raghuram, 2013; Hazen and Alberts, 2006; Kim, 2015; Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Wang et al., 2015). As such, their post-graduation migration decisions have major impacts for countries engaged in the global competition for talent (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Findlay, 2011).

China, Taiwan, India, South Korea, and many other source countries of international students have long suffered from the brain drain problem (Huang, 1988; Docquier and Rapoport, 2012).¹ China, for example, has been the leading source of international students for many decades. Since the start of the 1978 reforms and opening up policy, the total number of Chinese students who have studied abroad is over 4 million. However, only about half of these overseas Chinese talents have returned (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2015). Given this context, early studies of post-graduate migration have predominantly focused on explaining why international students have not returned to their country of origin (e.g. Baruch et al., 2007; Zweig and Changgui, 1995; Zweig, 1997; Zweig et al., 2008). In their book *China's Brain Drain to the United States*, Zweig and Changgui (1995) identify better economic opportunities in the U.S. as a pull factor and political instability in China as a push factor that explain the widespread non-return among overseas Chinese students. Similarly, Bratsberg (1995) highlights both economic and political factors in explaining international students' propensity to remain in the United States in his analyses of international students from 69 source countries. Li et al. (1996) study Hong Kong students in the UK and evaluated whether they came to the UK mainly for educational reasons or whether their migration was part of a conscious strategy to leave after the mid 1997 return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule.

Indeed, over the last decade, there has been a significant growth in the study of post-graduate migration (e.g. Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Arthur and Nunes, 2014; Baas, 2006; Bijwaard and Wang, 2016; Basford and Riemsdijk, 2015; Collins et al., 2016; Kim, 2015; Lu et al., 2009; Musumba et al., 2011; Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Sage et al., 2013; Tan and Hugo, 2016). Some of this research considers the major recipient countries including, for example, the United States (Hazen and Alberts, 2006; Musumba

et al., 2011), Canada (Arthur and Nunes, 2014), the UK (Baláz and Williams, 2004; Sage et al., 2013), the Netherlands (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016), Denmark (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013), Norway (Basford and Riemsdijk, 2015), Australia (Baas, 2006; Tan and Hugo, 2016), and New Zealand (Soon, 2010, 2012, 2014). There has also been increased attention given to specific groups of international students including overseas Chinese students (Wang et al., 2015), overseas British students (Harvey, 2009), and overseas Indian students (Baas, 2006). In terms of research methods and data, scholars have used qualitative interviews (Basford and Riemsdijk, 2015; Geddie, 2013), focus group discussion (Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Hazen and Alberts, 2006), statistical analysis (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016; Kim, 2015), as well as mixed methods that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014; Wang et al., 2015).

Although major inroads have been made, most studies confine international students' migratory intention as a stay-return binary. As a result, a significant number of studies contain this dichotomy: “Onwards or homewards?” (Sage et al., 2013); “Return migration of foreign student” (Bijwaard and Wang, 2016); “Educated in New Zealand and staying on?” (Soon, 2014); “Should I stay or should I go?” (Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014); “Brain drain, inclination to stay abroad after studies” (Baruch et al., 2007); “To return or not to return” (Zweig, 1997). Table 1 presents a selection of many of the titles of post-graduate migration studies.

In contrast to this portrayal of migration as a binary, a comparative study of foreign students in London and Toronto shows that there are multiple geographic directions in which students feel pulled upon graduation (Geddie, 2013). Many international students have no future migrations plans- it is open (e.g. Musumba et al., 2011). A recent British survey examining the motivations and aspirations of international students found that approximately 20% plan to live in a third country immediately after graduation and that about 40% see their future in a third country in five years' time (Packwood et al., 2015). Indeed, a key issue with the stay-or-return portrayal of post-graduate migration is that, as Geddie (2013) points out, international students are not “free agents”. Their migration and career strategies are not simply shaped by their personal preferences (Geddie, 2013). Hence, there is a strong need to consider the lifetime mobility aspirations of international students and their mobility beyond the ‘stay-return’ framework (Tan and Hugo, 2016).

3. Post-graduate migration, beyond push-pull factors as the cause

Much of the current literature on international students' post-graduate migration intentions/decisions emphasizes the role of macro-level push-pull factors such the state and its institutions, and micro-level push-pull factors such as social ties, as well as personal, economic, and professional factors (e.g. Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Bijwaard and Wang, 2016; Hazen and Alberts, 2006; Kim, 2015; Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Musumba et al., 2011; Soon, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Zweig and Changgui (1995) identify better economic opportunities in the U.S. as a pull factor and political instability in China as a push factor that explain why so many Chinese students stay overseas (see also Bratsberg, 1995). Also focusing on large number of international students in the United States, Alberts and Hazen (2005) have investigated the factors that motivate them to stay or return upon completion of their degrees. They classify a wide variety of factors into professional, societal, and personal ones and suggest that, while international students often choose to stay for professional reasons, for societal and personal reasons they tend to return. Most recently, Bijwaard and Wang (2016) have explored how individual labour market changes and

¹ More than half (53%) of all students currently studying abroad are from Asian countries and, in particular, China (17%) (ICEF, 2015). The *brain drain* happens when students from less developed countries studying in North American, European, and other Western countries choose not to return after they have completed their studies (Baruch et al., 2007; Zweig and Changgui, 1995).

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