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## An investigation of push and pull motivations of Chinese tourism doctoral students studying overseas



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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify Chinese tourism doctoral students' motivations for staying overseas by using the push-pull model. Through purposive and snowball sampling, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese tourism overseas doctoral students or graduates. The results identify four motivations: academic related, individual related, overseas experience related, and family/friends related motivations. Theoretically, this study introduces a push-pull model relevant to the doctoral education programme that operationalizes what motivates and appeals to Chinese overseas doctoral students. Practically, this study provides valuable information for educational institutions in designing and promoting the doctoral programmes for international students.

### 1. Introduction

Among all foreign students studying outside of their home country, Chinese overseas students have been one of the largest and fastest growing groups over the past few decades, reaching 544,500 in 2016 ([China Education Online, 2017](#)). Specifically, the proportion of Chinese overseas students is ranked first in eight major countries for education: the United States, the UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand. The number of Chinese overseas students has been increasing since 2000 except for 2007, 2013, and 2016 ([China Education Online, 2017](#)). Considering China's economic growth and rising household incomes, it is predicted that the number of Chinese students studying abroad each year will peak at between 700,000 and 800,000 within five years ([Luo, 2017](#)). Researchers are attracted to this group due to the importance of Chinese overseas students in the global education export industry.

Researchers have examined Chinese overseas students from a variety of perspectives, such as motivations ([Li & Bray, 2007](#); [Qi, 2014](#); [Dimmock & Ong Soon Leong, 2010](#)), students' choice of an overseas study destination ([Counsell, 2011](#); [Shu & Scott, 2014](#)), study experiences ([Dimmock & Ong Soon Leong, 2010](#); [Sablina, Soong, & Pechurina, 2018](#); [Wu, 2015](#)), student adjustment ([Quan, He, & Sloan, 2016](#); [Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006](#)), students' encounters with criticisms of China ([Hai, 2015](#)), and return intentions ([Cheung & Xu, 2015](#)). The majority of previous studies focused on Chinese overseas students who were undertaking undergraduate and master's programmes; however, very little is known about Chinese overseas doctoral students ([Myra, Mary, & Mark, 2018](#); [Ye & Edwards, 2017](#)). As [Yang, Volet, and Mansfield \(2017\)](#) noted, due to the specialised nature of doctoral study and the exclusive focus on research, some of the previously identified findings among general international students may not apply to this group. To fill this gap and verify the differences between doctoral students and undergraduates for future study, this research focuses specifically on doctoral students.

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The flourishing of the tourism industry in China has drawn great attention from the government, due to tourism's role in boosting economic development and creating a large number of employment opportunities (Xu & Reed, 2017). As a result, more and more students choose this discipline as a way of gaining a respectable career (Barron & Arcodia, 2002). In recent times, international doctoral students from China in tourism studies have become a substantial demographic. Overseas governments and universities are focusing on attracting international tourism doctoral students from China because of the revenue and academic contributions they bring to host countries. From the host countries' and universities' point of view, there is an urgency to investigate what attracts Chinese tourism doctoral students to study overseas. Thus, this study seeks to offer an exploratory understanding of Chinese tourism doctoral students' motivations for studying overseas by using the push-pull motivation model.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Push and pull factors influencing international student motivations

The push-pull model was originally developed to explain the factors influencing human migration (Lee, 1966). More recently, this model has become one of the commonly used tools for researchers to examine international education flows (e.g., Lee, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahan, 1992). McMahan (1992) was one of the earliest scholars to apply the push-pull model to exploring factors influencing international student motivations and decisions by examining the motivations of international students from 18 developing countries to the United States. She pointed out that the push factors are related to the attributes of home countries, such as the availability of higher education and the home country's economic strength, and the pull factors are related to the economic, political, and social factors of the higher education destination (in that case, the United States). Wilkins, Balakrishnan, and Huisman (2012) found that the majority of the research has adopted the push-pull model for examining international student motivations since McMahan's (1992) study. One of the most highly cited studies was done by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), who examined the motivations of international students from four Asian countries who had gone to Australia to undertake a post-secondary programme. They concluded indeed that push factors operate within a source country to drive students to study overseas, whereas pull factors operate in the host country to attract students to go to that particular country for study. Wilkins et al. (2012, p. 417) further summarized previous studies on international students' motivations and pointed out that the most common push factors in the literature are "lack of capacity and opportunities in students' home countries, lower educational quality, employer preference for overseas education, the unavailability of particular subjects, and political and economic problems in the home countries" and that the most common pull factors are "quality of education and reputation of country/institution, high rankings, improved employment prospects, opportunity to improve English language skills, and opportunity to experience a different culture."

Although the push-pull model has been used to examine students' motivations of studying overseas, we are not aware of many studies that have focused on Chinese doctoral students' motivations for choosing to study overseas. Therefore, this study aims to identify the push and pull factors that influence Chinese doctoral student motivations. In terms of the literature discussed above, push factors are defined as the influential factors from China and pull factors are defined as the influential factors from host countries in this study.

### 2.2. Motivations of Chinese international students

Chinese international students have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (see Zhu's (2016) review). A number of research articles on Chinese international students' motivations have been published over the last few decades. Diverse motives were identified, such as gaining prestige (e.g., Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhou, 2015), quality and variety of education (e.g., Fang & Wang, 2014; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2006), an intrinsic personal attraction (e.g., Griner & Sobol, 2014; Yang et al., 2017), social and peer pressure (e.g., Gatfield & Chen, 2006), social and cultural experience (e.g., Li & Bray, 2007), and English-speaking environment (e.g., Bodycott, 2009). The researchers found that students' motives for studying were quite diverse among different groups (e.g., fields, level of degree, and host countries), and no clear consensus has been reached. Moreover, these studies predominantly focus on international undergraduates or postgraduates in general. The attention paid to Chinese doctoral students has been limited.

### 2.3. Chinese international doctoral students

Compared with other groups of students, such as undergraduates, researchers have found that the doctoral students have their own characteristics, such as being few in number and facing high expectations (Evans & Stevenson, 2010). Some studies have focused on international Ph.D. students. Scholars have explored international doctoral students' learning experience from different perspectives, including motivation (e.g., Brailsford, 2010; Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005; Zhou, 2015), supervision practice (e.g., Doyle, Manathunga, Prinsen, Tallon, & Cornforth, 2018; Kim, 2007; McClure, 2005; Wang & Li, 2011), language and communication (e.g., Goode & Murphy, 2007), professional research development (e.g., Evans, 2007; Hancock & Walsh, 2016; Trice, 2004), and social interaction patterns (e.g., Borg et al., 2009; Dang & Tran, 2017; McClure, 2007; Trice & Yoo, 2007).

Only a few studies touch upon the motivation for studying Ph.D.'s overseas. The identified motives are diverse, including personal objective, professional development, and self-enhancement. Institution ranking, advisor, and the research team were also highlighted (Shen, Liu, & Chen, 2017). Some external factors (e.g., family, teacher, peers, and finance) are also found to be important in influencing students' decisions to study Ph.D.'s overseas (e.g., Yang et al., 2017). As for the challenges students have during their study,

besides the common issues of language, communication, and intercultural adaptation, the literature review indicated that the supervision relationship, professional research development, and academic practice were important factors in influencing the learning experience of international doctoral students. Though a diversity of difficulties had been identified, very few scholars have explored how to support students. While the majority of studies in this field focused on science and nursing students, little research has investigated students in the tourism field. These research gaps are now being addressed in this current study.

Although some studies have explored international doctoral students' experience, there has been a comparative neglect of Chinese international doctoral students. Notable exceptions include the studies of Yang et al. (2017) and McClure (2005). Yang et al. (2017) demonstrate that enriching life experiences, self-cultivation, broadening perspectives in research, improving career prospects, and contributing to life betterment are the common motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree among Chinese students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) fields, while Li (2002) specifically explored the issue of international publication and found that the Chinese doctoral students are generally confident in writing and publishing English papers internationally.

As discussed above, previous studies have deepened the understanding of international doctoral students' experiences and concerns about their research. However, very little is currently known about Chinese international Ph.D. students' motivations and difficulties, and even less about those studying tourism. The specific needs of this group have also been insufficiently researched. Bearing this in mind, it is the aim of this paper to investigate the push and pull motivations of Chinese tourism doctoral students in studying overseas.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

Though there are several studies related to Chinese international students, as explained in the literature review, very few explore the issue of Chinese tourism doctoral students' motivations for studying overseas, especially by using the push-pull model. The case of Chinese students is important, as they are the largest proportion of foreign students. The aim of this research was not to test whether the previous findings of overseas students can be applied to Chinese students or to tourism students specifically, but to obtain insights into motivations of Chinese overseas tourism doctoral students in their own words. This entailed a constructivist paradigm, assuming a relativistic ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic method. Constructionists focus on "what" and "how" questions, from which researchers can obtain participants' meanings and deeper understandings in order to build a conceptual analysis (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2002). Compared with the methods of hypothesis testing, survey research, and statistics, a qualitative-exploratory research methodology allows room for interpretation and adaptation from the relatively limited existing research (Merriam, 2002).

Both of the authors are Chinese with experience of studying their Ph.D.'s in tourism overseas, so we are insiders into the phenomenon under investigation. This exploratory research included auto-ethnography as the first stage of research design. Auto-ethnography enables the researchers to provide unique insights, thoughts, and observations, so researchers' reflexivity is openly discussed (Atefjevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007). Following that, an individual semi-structured in-depth interview approach was adopted in order to understand students' opinions, as questionnaires and their analysis tend to achieve only a superficial level of understanding (Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009; Qi, Smith, Yeoman, & Goh, 2017). The hybrid approach extended beyond the ethnographers' own experiences and enhanced the reliability and authenticity of the analysis (DeBerry-Spence, 2010). According to Johnson (2002), in-depth interviews are used:

if one is interested in questions of greater depth, where the knowledge sought is often taken for granted and not readily articulated by most members, where the research question involves highly conflicted emotions, [and] where different individuals or groups involved in the same line of activity have complicated, multiple perspectives on some phenomenon. (p. 106)

#### 3.2. Data collection

During the first stage of research, data were collected in the form of reflective journals. Both of the authors reflected on our doctoral study experiences and recorded personal written narratives with the guidance of research questions. During this process, we focused on our own experiences and self-reflection, especially the aspects of motivations. Unstructured data were collected through participant observation, memos, field notes, and interpretation of meanings. The performance of auto-ethnography allowed us to be "insiders" and conduct the research from an epistemology of "insiderness." Being part of the story, the our own experiences made it possible to gain "inner knowing." The auto-ethnographic data seek to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand the phenomenon of Chinese tourism doctoral students studying overseas.

For the second stage of research, overseas Chinese tourism doctoral students were identified through criteria-based sampling and snowball sampling techniques. As both of the authors did doctoral study in New Zealand, this study initially recruited three Chinese students in New Zealand through personal links for in-depth semi-structured interviews for the purpose of pilot study. These three interviews and the auto-ethnographic data laid the foundation for the main phase of interview, and the interview guide was also revised. The final interview guide consisted of questions about students' motivations for studying their Ph.D.'s overseas (e.g., What kinds of factors attracted you to come to this university?). Due to the nature of the constructivist approach, the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Questions were flexibly adapted for each participant based on the interaction.

In total, 22 interviewees were involved in this research. Twelve of them were male and 10 were female. Table 1 summarizes the

**Table 1**  
Profile of respondents (N = 22).

	Gender	Year enrolled in	Destination country
1	M	Graduated	New Zealand
2	M	Graduated	Australia
3	M	First year	New Zealand
4	M	Second year	New Zealand
5	M	Third year	New Zealand
6	M	Graduated	UK
7	M	Second year	New Zealand
8	M	Third year	United States
9	M	Third year	Australia
10	M	Second year	New Zealand
11	F	Third year	New Zealand
12	M	Third year	New Zealand
13	F	First year	Australia
14	F	Graduated	New Zealand
15	F	Graduated	New Zealand
16	F	Third year	Australia
17	M	Second year	New Zealand
18	F	Graduated	New Zealand
19	F	First year	UK
20	F	Third year	New Zealand
21	F	Graduated	New Zealand
22	F	Second year	Australia

demographic description of the interviewees. The investigators found that no new information emerged during the latter part of the interview process. Hence, data saturation was achieved. To ensure the validity of this research, analyst triangulation (Corbin & Strass, 2008) and participant feedback were adopted. That is, both of the researchers analysed the data independently and then compared their results in order to reduce potential bias (Kwek, Wang, & Weaver, 2014). The authors also followed up with the interviewees to see if the findings represented their opinions, and also to capture further “evidence” of their thoughts (Qi et al., 2017). The interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded with the consent of participants. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim into text for further analysis.

### 3.3. Data analysis

According to Luborsky (1994), the researcher should become acquainted with the data before analysing them. Following this, the authors read the reflexive research journals and the interview transcripts several times and then started a systematic coding process (Cresswell, 2014). With the facilitation of NVivo, the data were fragmented and coded line-by-line. This was a “break down data” analysis process, and the next stage was a synthesizing process of larger segments of data. A number of overarching codes and umbrella categories were formed and then grouped based on the three research questions, that is, three main themes. Table 2 demonstrates the coding process. This development process has been used by several researchers (e.g., Mayring, 2000; Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). Throughout this process, the data were analysed in Chinese. Bearing the influence of translation on the validity and reliability of qualitative research in mind, the authors follow Twinn’s (1997) strategy of using only one translator to maximize the reliability of the study. Hence, the first author translated all the emerged codes and categories into English independently at the end

**Table 2**  
Coding process.

Data	Codes	Categories	Themes
An overseas doctoral qualification is recognized widely and enables me to look for a job all over the world. For example, I may be able to find a job in Australia or the UK after graduating [from New Zealand]. However, it seems hard for the graduates from China [universities] to find a job overseas.	Recognized qualification	“A more recognized qualification”	Academic-related
Supervisors play a key role in the success of a doctoral student... I was eager to study with a supervisor with high reputation when I decided to start my doctoral study.	Supervisor reputation	“Supervisor”	Academic-driven
I have been interested in Western culture like food, music, and movies since 10 years old. Doing a Ph.D. here provides me an opportunity to spend several years on experiencing them.	Cultural attraction	“Experience overseas culture”	Experience-related
My parents think that it is easier for me to find a decent job with an overseas doctoral degree. So they encourage me to do my Ph.D. here [in New Zealand]...You know, many friends or classmates choose to study overseas after [gaining] Bachelor [degree]. To be honest, their influence is a big reason...	Parental push, peer influence	“Parent expectation” “Friend influence”	Family/friends-related

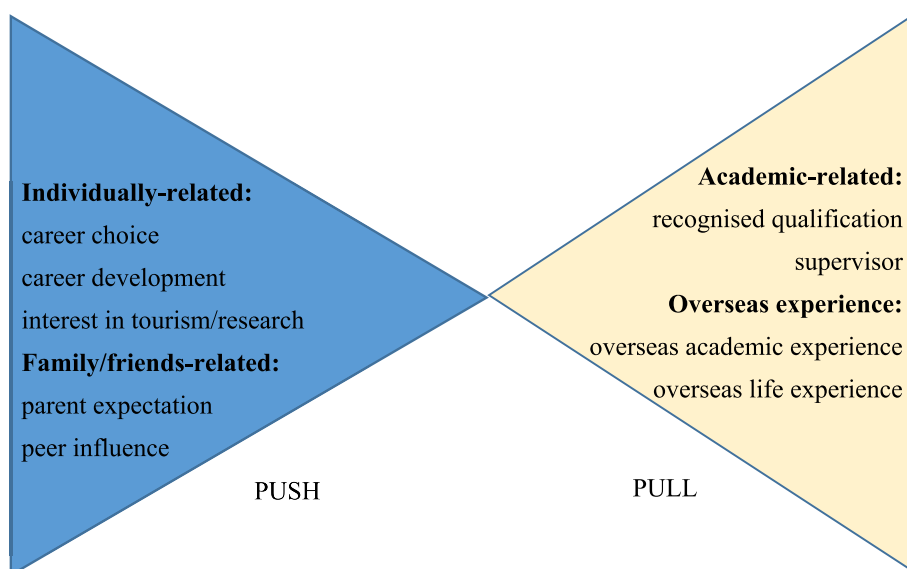


Fig. 1. Push and pull motivations of Chinese tourism doctoral students studying overseas.

of the data analysis. With the aim of minimising the influence of the grammatical style on the analysis, the second author acted as ‘auditor’ to double-check the translations especially when no equivalent word exists. In this paper, example quotes from participants have been lightly edited for grammar, but meaning has not been altered.

#### 4. Push and pull motivations

From the authors’ reflective research journals and the interviews, it has been identified that individuals choose to pursue their doctoral study in tourism overseas for a range of motives. From the coding, a variety of responses emerge, such as “to gain a recognised doctoral qualification”, “scholarship opportunity”, “to learn more things”, “to experience overseas culture”, and “parent expectations”. The codes and categories that emerged were refined to four themes: academic related, individual related, overseas experience related, and family/friends related motivations. At the end, the categories of academic related and overseas experience related serve to “pull” students abroad, while the individual related and family/friends related motives are “push” factors. (see Fig. 1)

##### 4.1. Push motivations

In this study, push motives are factors that related to the attributes and internal sociopsychological reasons of students themselves. In the interviewees’ experiences, individual related motives and family/friend related motives are the most common. Individual related motives include career choice, career development, and interest in tourism/research; family/friend related motives focus on parents’ expectations and peer influence.

##### 4.1.1. Individual related motives

**Career choice.** The participants frequently mentioned career-driven motivations, especially career choice and career development, as important factors that pushed them to study overseas. Career choice was one of the most common concepts mentioned by the interviewees. Five respondents expressed that their goal of becoming a university lecturer was an important consideration, and a doctoral qualification was a compulsory qualification for being a lecturer. The majority of participants agreed that an overseas doctoral qualification has become increasingly important for those who want to work in Chinese universities, as Chinese universities prefer to recruit overseas doctoral graduates. A typical comment was this:

*Being a lecturer in the University is my dream... Some Chinese top universities only recruit candidates who hold an overseas doctoral degree. It would be an advantage for me to find a lecturer position in a Chinese university after completing my doctoral study overseas.*

**Career development.** Another point that related to career-driven motivation was career development. An overseas doctoral qualification was believed to be an essential part of career promotion in Chinese society, especially for state-owned companies and academia. Therefore, studying overseas was viewed as a ladder for career development:

*I was not satisfied with my job at that time. With the aim of changing the status of my life, I chose to study my doctoral degree overseas... An overseas doctoral qualification enables the door of a better job to open for me.*

Another respondent similarly stated:

*I felt disappointed about my previous job. The room for my career development was too limited. Qualification is so important in Chinese society... Compared to a Chinese doctoral qualification, a doctoral qualification from an overseas university is more valuable. I expected to get a better position after my graduation.*

**Interest in tourism/research.** The interview participants frequently mentioned the motive of having a strong interest in tourism or of wanting to do research when they talked about why they chose to study their doctoral degree overseas. Nine respondents mentioned this. A typical comment was this:

*I have studied tourism management for more than 8 years. I spent several months thinking about what I wanted to do after completing my master degree. I did love tourism academic research. I am really interested in academic research. This faith drove me to start my doctoral study.*

In contrast to undergraduate and master studies, doctoral studies are research-based. It normally takes more than three years for a doctoral student to focus on one selected research topic. From the first author's experience, he believed that:

*Being passionate about research is the key attribute to the success of a Ph.D. candidate. Without my strong interest in tourism, definitely I would not have chosen to pursue a doctoral degree.*

#### 4.1.2. Family/friends related motives

**Parent expectations.** Interestingly, it has been identified that Chinese students going overseas for a doctoral study were influenced by their family members (especially parents). When talking about motivations to study overseas, the first author of this paper highlighted the influence of his parents' expectations. He also had a reflection in his research journal:

*My parents did not go to university and had been laid-off workers since 1997. Due to their lack of skills and education, my parents had to keep changing occupations to raise their family. As the only child, I am the focus and the hope for my parents... The best way to change my life is to achieving a higher qualification ... Therefore, my parents did whatever they could to support me to obtain a doctoral qualification overseas.*

The second author shared the same feeling as the lead author. Her parents' expectations played a great role in influencing her decision to study her Ph.D. overseas. During the interviews, five respondents mentioned that their parents' willingness encouraged them to obtain a doctoral qualification overseas. For example, two respondents commented as follows:

*Qualification has been regarded as one of the most important factors that influence your career development for several hundred years. In my parents' eyes, a higher qualification is a guarantee of life quality.*

*My parents think that it will be easier for me to find a decent job with an overseas doctoral degree. Qualification is an important indicator in Chinese society. A doctoral degree may even be regarded as an honour for my family. My parents are proud of my overseas doctoral study.*

**Peer influence.** It has also been identified that some students were influenced by their friends or classmates. One of the typical examples was a respondent who expressed that her motivations for starting doctoral study overseas were influenced by her friends who were studying or working overseas. The stories she heard from friends were attractive and made her curious to go abroad for a further study. Several other participants also mentioned the factor of peer influence in their decision to study overseas.

## 4.2. Pull motivations

Pull motivations are antecedents related to the destination countries and education organizations that satisfy participants' needs and desires, and hence pull them to study there. In the present study, academic motives (i.e., to gain a recognised doctoral qualification and supervisor) and overseas experience are the most two common categories.

### 4.2.1. Academic related motives

**To gain a recognised doctoral qualification.** For the Chinese doctoral students in tourism, an overseas qualification was a big attraction for them to study overseas. As the second author reflected:

*Thinking about what motivated me to choose to study in a foreign country, the main reason was to get an "effective" qualification... From the conversations with colleagues in my school, I noticed that the recognition of overseas diploma was one of the most important considerations for Chinese students.*

During the interviews, 10 respondents mentioned that obtaining a doctoral qualification from overseas universities (especially reputable Western universities) was more valuable than obtaining a doctoral degree from Chinese universities. Some respondents explained that the worldwide-recognised doctoral qualification from an overseas university was important for the Chinese students in getting a position in an academic field. One, for example, said:

*There are so many doctoral graduates in China recently. The majority of them are eager to work in the University as a lecturer... An overseas doctoral qualification is recognized widely and enables me to look for a job all over the world.*

Gaining an overseas doctoral degree was not only essential for academic jobs; many students also expressed that the degree from



universities in Western countries was also “more convincing” for other employers and could help one gain a higher salary.

Likewise, one respondent explained the motives of gaining a recognised degree by emphasizing the relatively high academic achievements in Western universities and the advantage of writing in English, which further facilitated publication in international journals. This was a big attraction compared with studying in China.

**Supervisors.** The participants in this research identified that working with a particular supervisor is a big motive for overseas doctoral study. The first author of this paper is a typical example. As reflected in his journal:

*When I chatted with other doctoral students in tourism and their previous experiences before starting the doctoral study, they all highlighted the importance of a chief supervisor... I am a firm believer in the importance of supervisors' influence. I applied to study with a famous supervisor relevant to my topic.*

The desire to be supervised by overseas world-famous supervisors drove some of the respondents to pursue their doctoral qualification overseas. Seven interview respondents mentioned the influence of supervisors for their doctoral applications and that it would be an advantage for them if they could study with a respectable supervisor. As one respondent explained:

*Supervisors are important. They not only influence what you can learn, but also play an important role in job hunting. A reference letter from a famous supervisor may be extremely helpful... I was eager to follow a respectable supervisor when I decided to start my doctoral study.*

Moreover, some respondents also pointed out the factors of master's study and good academic environment among overseas universities as influencing their decisions.

#### 4.2.2. Overseas experience

**Overseas academic experience.** Participants held gaining overseas academic experience as an important motivation. Some interviewees stated a desire “to experience an overseas education system and academic environment”, and they believed that the Western education system was different from China. The following statements, from two respondents, indicated the motive of gaining overseas academic experience:

*I really wanted to experience an overseas education system and academic environment. I was told that the Western education system and academic environment is better than China. I wanted to experience them myself.*

*From my master experience, I felt that I really do not like the academic environment in China. Plagiarism and academic misconduct are common among scholars [in China]. Some lecturers in my uni told me that the academic atmosphere in Western countries is good, so studying overseas became the first choice for me.*

**Overseas life experience.** Gaining overseas life experience was also a driver for some students. Ph.D. study is usually a three-to four-year period, and it provides individuals with a good opportunity to experience the local life. The second author is a firm believer of this, as reflected in her research journal:

*I want to see the outside world. Therefore, I decided to go overseas to open up my horizons. This is one of the most important reasons... From the conversations with other overseas Ph.D. students in my field, I realized that the overseas life experience is a big attraction. Broadening their own horizons, letting their children experience different life style, is a common reason.*

Several interview participants also mentioned the attraction of experiencing overseas life for them in making the decision to pursue their doctoral study overseas. For example, one respondent said that doing a Ph.D. overseas is providing her an opportunity to spend several years experiencing the local culture, such as food, wine, music, and movies.

## 5. Discussion

The present study continues along the research line of international education flows, incorporating push-pull model. The findings are in line with existing international education motivation literature, suggesting that students are motivated by a variety of reasons to study overseas (e.g., Lesjak, Juvan, Ineson, Yap, & Axelsson, 2015; Liu, Bridgeman, & Adler, 2012). This paper identified that a variety of factors motivate Chinese tourism doctoral students to study overseas, and some subtle differences with students in other fields emerged from the interviews. Investigation of the “push” factors revealed two themes. The first was career development. This is in line with existing literature (e.g., Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009) suggesting that overseas education is mainly related to career advancement. In tune with other studies, it is suggested that pursuing a Ph.D. was seen as a springboard to getting a better job (e.g., Ahmad, Hassan, & Al-Ahmedi, 2017; Maringe & Carter, 2007). The second theme was family/friend related. The findings suggest that parent expectations and peer influence are two factors that influence participants' choice to study overseas. In its details, this finding contrasts with other literature on Chinese overseas doctoral students, such as Yang et al. (2017) and Shen et al. (2017). Previous research has shown parental influence in choosing destination countries among undergraduate students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and this was echoed in our findings, but we identified Chinese traditional cultural values as a driver of parents' desires for their children to pursue an overseas doctorate, as well as a motivator of students' own for learning overseas. Our findings thus complement the work of researchers such as Mingyuan (2006), who considered the impact of traditional Chinese culture on Chinese education.

In terms of pull factors, students' choices to study in a different country appeared to be influenced by academic related reasons and a desire for overseas experiences. In terms of academic related factors, the attraction of supervisors was evident. This is not

surprising, considering the research focus of Ph.D. students. This finding contrasts with literature on undergraduate students' motivations to study overseas, in which the factor of the supervisor is not highlighted, but the institution reputation and ranking are usually emphasised (e.g., Ahmad & Buchanan, 2017; King & Sondhi, 2018). It was found here, in common with previous studies (e.g., Waters & Brooks, 2011; Yang et al., 2017), that the desire for overseas experiences played an important role in influencing Chinese students' decisions to study overseas. However, this study extended the overseas experience from natural environment to the academic environment.

## 6. Conclusion

In line with the broader overseas education literature, which emphasises the importance of understanding students' motivations, this study employed a push-pull motivation model to focus on Chinese tourism doctoral students. The findings support arguments by several commentators (e.g., Mazarrol & Soutar, 2002) that Chinese students' choice to study overseas is dependent on a variety of "push" and "pull" factors from both the home and host countries. The findings of the present study have significant implications for governmental policy makers, educational organizations, and other related stakeholders in order to effectively position themselves in the market. In order to attract substantial numbers of overseas students, it is necessary for the destination government and educational institutions to consider the importance of the push and pull factors that influence students' decision making. Based on this, they can establish the appropriate marketing and internationalisation strategies to promote their doctoral programs. Providing a positive academic environment and having world-famous supervisors are likely to be vital for doctoral students, which is a big difference compared with undergraduate students. Furthermore, this research also suggests that the special meanings attached to education have unavoidably influenced Chinese students' decisions to study overseas, which helps to explain the increasing number of Chinese students all over the world.

Although useful insights were gained via the in-depth interviews, the main limitation associated with the current study is the sampling method adopted, as snowball sampling is often criticized in relation to verifying the eligibility of potential respondents and controlling the types of participants as well as the data quality (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Although the investigators tried to involve participants from different countries, the majority of the interviewees ended up being from New Zealand and Australia. Despite this limitation, this study is still important and useful. Given the increasing number of Chinese students studying overseas and the scarcity of research on doctoral students' overseas study motivations, exploratory work like the present study is well warranted.

This study also opens up several other avenues for future research. Doctoral students should be examined and more overtly compared with other groups of students such as undergraduates. In addition, further studies may be conducted to explore students in different fields. Various cultural groups could also be compared. In terms of Chinese students specifically, further research could also more thoroughly assess the influence of traditional Chinese cultural values on students' choices, given their identified importance in this study.

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