

Beyond Borders: Analyzing the Motivations and Life Planning of Chinese Students Studying Abroad

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Abstract

This study explores the complex motivations that drive Chinese students to pursue education abroad, focusing on the interplay between subjective experiences and broader socio-cultural, political, and economic dynamics. It examines how students seek to escape various pressures in their home environment, including familial rejection of sexual orientation, resistance to parental career expectations, strained social relationships, and other forms of social suffering. Drawing on clinical ethnography and ethnopsychiatry developed within the PASSI@Unito and PASSI@Polito projects—interdisciplinary initiatives at the University of Turin and the Polytechnic of Turin—this research situates students' migration experiences within the broader context of China–Europe relations. By analyzing the multiple dimensions of educational migration, the research reveals how studying abroad becomes a strategy for negotiating subjective crises and envisioning alternative life trajectories. Ultimately, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how micro-level struggles are shaped by macro-level forces, offering insights into how universities can better support international students in building self-confidence, fostering meaningful social connections, and clarifying their future aspirations.

Keywords: student migration, ethnopsychiatry, Chinese students, Italy

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Introduction

Chinese student migration for higher education has significantly increased over the past two decades. In Italy, their numbers grew from 1,136 in 2008 to nearly 8,000 by 2019/2020 (Huang, 2022). This reflects China's role as a major source of international students and Italy's growing appeal as a destination, prompting deeper exploration of students' motivations and how study abroad shapes their futures.

Research in international education and youth studies highlights how these decisions stem from both personal and structural factors—ranging from identity struggles and family expectations to China's educational pressures and the appeal of freedom abroad. Studying overseas is often more than academic; it is a symbolic and existential step, tied to aspirations of self-realization, cultural exploration, and better career prospects (Huang, 2022; Jiao, 2025). It may also mark a transformative phase where new identities and life plans emerge, especially from anthropological and clinical perspectives.

This article explores why Chinese students choose to study abroad, focusing on Italy, and how they plan their lives during and after. Drawing on qualitative data from the PASSI@UniTo and PASSI@PoliTo projects, we present five case narratives based on interviews and clinical ethnography. These stories highlight diverse motivations, from personal issues like sexuality or anxiety to broader socio-political constraints in China and the desire for freedom in Europe. We also examine how study abroad reshapes students' goals, identities, and choices about the future.

Our analysis combines ethnopsychiatry (Beneduce, 2007; Zempléni, 1985) and clinical ethnography (Kleinman, 1995; Taliani, 2011) to contextualize students' psychological experiences, along with an intersectionality lens (Collins & Bilge, 2016) to explore how gender, sexuality, class, and nationality intersect in shaping their paths. For instance, being an LGBTQIA+ student or a young Chinese woman abroad adds unique dimensions to the study experience and adaptation process.

This study is guided by several key research questions: What personal motivations and structural conditions drive Chinese students to pursue education abroad? In what ways does the experience of studying abroad function as a means for reimagining alternative life trajectories? How do students construct symbolic meaning around their mobility, and how do they envision their futures in light of these experiences? Additionally, we draw on insights from the PASSI intercultural mediation team to examine the role of cultural mediation in student support. We critically reflect on the risks of institutional misrecognition and conclude with recommendations aimed at enhancing university support structures for international students.

Literature Review

Chinese Student Mobility: Macro-Level Dynamics

Chinese students lead global outbound mobility, driven by macro-level forces like globalization, neoliberalism, and media exposure to cosmopolitan ideals (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Li & Bray, 2007). The world beyond China is often imagined as more open and liberating—fueling students' aspirations for self-realization abroad (Cheng & Berman, 2012).

Domestically, China's economic growth and supportive policies (e.g., one-child policy, scholarships) have expanded access to overseas study (Austin & Shen, 2016). Simultaneously, the pressure-filled Gaokao system (the "National College Entrance Examination") and stigma tied to academic failure push students to seek alternatives. Foreign education offers a socially acceptable "second chance" and a break from rigid pedagogy and exam-focused learning, criticized for stifling creativity and self-expression (Bodycott, 2009).

Western institutions, by contrast, promise academic freedom and cultural diversity. Italy, in particular, is seen as a space for autonomy and exploration. Still, macro conditions intersect with family expectations shaped by Confucian norms. Parents often influence study decisions, viewing overseas education as a route to family honor and upward mobility (Bodycott, 2009). Gender norms also shape choices—women, for instance, may face pressure to balance study abroad with marriage expectations (Martin, 2022).

Micro-Level Motivations and Subjective Factors

On a subjective level, students seek academic and career advancement, improved language skills, and cultural exposure (Huang, 2022). Many desire growth through global experience, describing study abroad as a path to "become stronger" or live more freely.

Beyond education, sensitive motivations often play a role. The exploration of identity representations is a key factor, particularly for LGBTQIA+ students who may feel unsafe or repressed in China. Study abroad can offer a safer space to live authentically (Cui & Song, 2024), though some still face challenges related to race or intersectional discrimination.

Mental health concerns also emerge. Students burdened by academic pressure or social anxiety may view overseas study as an escape and a chance for reinvention. Interviewees described feeling "invisible" at home but hopeful that life abroad would allow them to flourish socially.

Social background and identity representations intersect with motivation. Students from rural or modest backgrounds may be driven by economic need, while urban elites pursue cosmopolitan goals. Gender adds another layer—women may use the opportunity to gain independence, while men may feel pressured to attain credentials for social status.

Life Planning and the Study-Abroad Experience

Studying abroad frequently marks a pivotal turning point in the lives of Chinese students, shaping their life trajectories in ways that extend well beyond academic achievement. The transition to international study often accelerates personal growth by fostering early independence in managing finances, housing, and self-care responsibilities, which in turn cultivates resilience and maturity (Wang & Collins, 2020). For many, this period serves as a temporary departure from socially prescribed timelines in China—such as early career entry or marriage—offering a space for self-discovery, reflection, and future-oriented planning (Zhang et al., 2024).

However, this liminal phase may also delay traditional markers of adulthood, particularly for female students who view studying abroad as a means of resisting gendered expectations around marriage and caregiving (Martin, 2022). These students often find themselves negotiating new freedoms and constraints simultaneously, navigating between evolving global norms and enduring Confucian values of filial piety, gender roles, and family loyalty.

Upon returning home, some students experience reverse culture shock and alienation, as reintegration into familiar structures can feel constraining after the relative autonomy of life abroad (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Others, influenced by their transformative experiences, revise their original aspirations entirely—choosing to pursue employment, postgraduate studies, or permanent residence abroad.

Ultimately, the decision to study abroad reflects a dynamic interplay of constraint and aspiration, situated within complex intersections of gender, class, national identity, and global belonging. The present study contributes to this growing body of literature by offering person-centered, narrative accounts of Chinese students in Italy, analyzed through ethnopsychiatric and intersectional lenses. This approach underscores how the experience of migration shapes not only educational outcomes but also broader imaginaries of who students can become and how they define success.

Methodology

Research Context and Approach

This research draws from the PASSI@UniTo and PASSI@PoliTo projects. **Passi@Unito** was launched at the University of Turin in the 2018, as an initiative of the Internationalization Office and Professor Simona Taliani. It is currently coordinated by Professor Beneduce within CRETAM, the Research Center for Ethnopsychiatry and Anthropology of Migration, part of the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society at the University of Turin. In May 2022, the project was extended to the Polytechnic University of Turin, within the Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST), under the scientific direction of Dr. Silvia Aru and as part of the **Life@Polito** initiatives, coordinated by Professor Claudia De Giorgi. The projects aim to support international students through counseling and cultural mediation by addressing emotional, psychological, and academic challenges. The interdisciplinary team used an ethnopsychiatric and clinical ethnographic approach, combining therapeutic care with qualitative inquiry.

In this contribution we employed a narrative, person-centered methodology, focusing on five in-depth case studies of Chinese students who engaged with PASSI services between 2020–2024. These students were in undergraduate or graduate programs and were selected through maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) to capture a range of motivations and experiences. Each participant gave informed consent for the use of anonymized data.

Data Collection

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews lasting one to two hours, often in Mandarin with bilingual researchers or interpreters. Conversations focused on students' backgrounds, motivations, adaptation challenges, identity changes, and future goals. Guided by clinical ethnography principles, we paid attention to narrative content and emotional tone, often entering intimate territory such as family conflict or mental health. COVID-19 emerged as a contextual factor in many narratives, especially around isolation and disrupted plans, though it was not the study's main focus.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim. We used ethnographic methods, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis that developed codes for recurring themes (e.g., family pressure, identity exploration, mental health). Themes were then organized around our main research questions: personal motivations, structural influences, future planning, and symbolic meanings of mobility.

We also applied intersectionality to examine how gender, class, and geography influenced each story—for instance, how a gay student from a rural area experienced mobility differently than an urban female peer. Cultural idioms and expressions were interpreted within their sociocultural context.

To ensure analytical rigor, all the authors (one trained in anthropology, one in clinical psychology and one in cross-culture studies) reviewed and discussed the data, with additional input from the PASSI team. This collaborative approach ensured cultural and psychological depth while maintaining ethical sensitivity.

Theoretical Framework Integration

This study adopts a methodological framework grounded in clinical ethnography (Kleinman, 2020), which facilitates an understanding of how personal experiences acquire meaning within specific cultural and social contexts. In parallel, we draw on the principles of ethnopsychiatry to examine how experiences of migration, identity conflict, and socio-cultural dislocation intersect with students' emotional well-being (Beneduce & Martelli, 2005). To further deepen our analysis, we employ an intersectional lens (Collins & Bilge, 2016), which enables us to explore how overlapping dimensions of power—such as gender, nationality, class, and sexuality—shape students' lived experiences both in Italy and in their country of origin.

To ensure ethical rigor and participant agency, all names and identifying information were anonymized. Participants were invited to review their narrative summaries and provided informed consent for the inclusion of their stories. Revisions were made where necessary to ensure both factual accuracy and participants' emotional comfort.

Brief Findings

Micro-Level Motivations: Personal Narratives

Yu – “To Live My Dream and Prove Myself”

Yu, from a northern Chinese city, faced academic disappointment after missing admission to a top Chinese university. Studying in Italy allowed him to redeem himself in the eyes of his ambitious family and pursue his passion for car design. His story illustrates study abroad as a second chance for self-actualization and regaining self-worth.

Shaoran – “Searching for Acceptance and Freedom”

A closeted gay man from Hunan, Shaoran saw studying abroad as a way to escape societal and familial rejection. Italy symbolized a freer environment to explore his identity. While he gained

new freedoms, he also encountered racism and isolation, reflecting the complex realities of intersectional identity abroad.

Zhang – “Emerging From the Shell”

Zhang, a shy only child from Beijing, sought personal growth and independence. Motivated by a desire to overcome social anxiety, she embraced the challenges of studying in Italy. Despite initial struggles and lockdown isolation, she found confidence and plans to continue her education and career abroad.

Zhao – “Opportunity and Return”

Zhao, a computer engineering student, was pushed by his family to seek a prestigious foreign degree. Though initially motivated by ambition and academic freedom, his priorities remain family and pandemic.

Wang – “Opportunity and Escape”

Wang, by contrast, used study abroad to delay traditional expectations of marriage and conformity. Italy provided her with independence and space to redefine her path.

Thematic Synthesis

Personal Growth and Freedom: All students linked study abroad to self-development. Whether to heal, escape, or challenge themselves, each saw the experience as a catalyst for transformation. This echoes broader trends of individualization in China and how global education markets “becoming a better self.”

Escape from Constraints: Students like Shaoran and Wang viewed Italy as an escape from societal or familial restrictions. Their motivations were shaped by China’s cultural pressures, and Europe represented a temporary or long-term reprieve from these expectations.

Family Pressure and Support: Family was a major influence across cases. Yu and Zhao were driven by a desire to meet family expectations; Wang and Shaoran used the opportunity to subtly resist them. The interplay of filial piety and independence shaped their decisions and future planning.

Challenges and Resources: All students encountered challenges—pandemic disruptions, racism, loneliness, academic adjustment—which produced forms of suffering and pushed them asking for psychological counselling. Through it, they gave new meanings to their experiences and shaped in a new way their goals: good interactions within the social context often led to extended mobility, while persistent struggle prompted a return home.

Transforming Life Planning: Study abroad shaped future plans significantly. Students reimagined their paths—some planning to stay abroad for further study or work, others choosing to return with new insights. Their narratives show study abroad as a turning point in defining adulthood and autonomy.

Discussion

Educational Migration as a Hybrid Process

Chinese student migration is more than a study choice—it blends subjective, psychological, and socio-political dimensions. From a subjective point of view, it offers a path to negotiate their identity representations and their mental well-being. Socio-politically, students participate in global flows and act as possible bridges to connect different socio-cultural contexts. We adopt an ethnopsychiatric approach in clinical practice, which involves situating students' discomfort, symptoms and experiences within broader contexts; tracing their history, relationships, and the multiple reasons behind their mobility; finding out the roots of their difficulties and avoiding cultural reductionism (simplification, stereotyping, generalization). It also means to question the symbolic reference systems through which students give meanings to their experiences as well as to understand their relationship to both their socio-cultural system of origin and the new socio-cultural environment. The goal is to conceive of care not only as support for the individual, but also care for the social context.

Shaoran and Zhang used mobility to address the subjective conflicts, but their challenges didn't disappear abroad. Migration doesn't erase distress but may create space to face it or seek help, especially when supported by culturally sensitive services like PASSI counseling.

Intersectionality shows how student experiences differ based on class, gender, discipline, or sexuality. Universities must avoid treating "Chinese students" as a single group. Specific attentions to these topics are essential in order to build safe spaces, such as LGBTQIA+ or female networks.

These journeys also mirror global trends. Dissatisfaction with China's academic rigidity and a desire for freedom motivate students, while Europe's open education policies attract them. Italy, through English-language programs, is boosting its global appeal, and projects like PASSI are therefore more necessary. Positive student experiences, like Yu's or Zhang's, enhance institutional reputation abroad.

The Role of Cultural Mediation in Student Support

The multilingual team at PASSI played a critical role in helping Chinese students navigate the complexities of Italian academic and cultural systems, highlighting the essential function of cultural mediation. In its absence, institutional support structures risk misrecognizing students' actual needs—interpreting silence as disengagement, or overlooking less visible stressors such as homesickness, racial discrimination, or anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such misrecognition often arises when institutions adopt a monolithic view of Chinese students or misinterpret culturally embedded behaviors. For instance, a student's reluctance to attend office hours may stem from unfamiliarity with academic norms rather than a lack of interest or motivation. Cultural mediators served as crucial intermediaries, bridging these interpretive gaps and fostering communication between students and university staff. Their presence not only enabled more accurate assessments of student well-being but also ensured that students felt acknowledged, understood, and supported within the host environment.

Implications and Recommendations

Tailored Orientation and Ongoing Support: Universities should implement structured orientation programs that extend beyond the initial arrival period. These programs should provide clear guidance on academic expectations and offer continued support tailored to evolving student needs, such as stress management, intercultural adjustment, and career development.

Culturally Competent Counseling Services: Counseling services must be staffed by professionals who are either multilingual or have undergone training in cultural competence. Mental health support should be framed in culturally sensitive and accessible terms to reduce stigma and encourage utilization among students from diverse backgrounds.

Intercultural Training for Faculty and Staff: Faculty and administrative staff should receive training in socio-cultural diversity, including differences in communication styles, classroom behavior, and cultural norms. Such training should also address the political and economic realities affecting students' home countries, enabling educators to respond with greater awareness, empathy, and pedagogical flexibility.

Enhancing Belonging and Peer Engagement: Institutions should actively support Chinese student associations and organize intercultural events that foster inclusive participation. Encouraging peer-to-peer interaction—both within and beyond the classroom—can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and enhance students' academic and social engagement.

Recognizing and Valuing International Student Contributions: The linguistic, academic, and cultural contributions of Chinese students should be acknowledged and integrated into university life. Opportunities for involvement in research projects, peer mentoring, and academic seminars can enhance their sense of belonging and agency. Engaging alumni networks can also facilitate mentorship and support recruitment efforts.

Adopting an Intersectional and Differentiated Approach: Universities must move beyond one-size-fits-all programming and adopt an intersectional lens that recognizes the specific needs of sub-groups, such as women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and non-native English speakers. Even modest structural changes—such as flexible curricula, tailored visa support, or alternative assessment methods—can significantly improve student outcomes and well-being.

Reflections on Student Migration and Life Trajectories

Student migration is more than an academic event—it's a transformative life phase marked by growth, exploration of different identity representations, and knowledge of new socio-cultural contexts. For many Chinese students, it represents a time of accelerated learning beyond textbooks: building life skills, understanding cross-cultural dynamics, and developing self-awareness.

Sociologically, the experience of studying abroad reflects what Farrugia (2016) identifies as the “mobility imperative”—a growing expectation for young people to pursue transnational mobility as a marker of personal development and social distinction. For many Chinese students, this imperative aligns with aspirations for global exposure, self-actualization, and future competitiveness. However, these ambitions often collide with deeply rooted Confucian

values emphasizing academic achievement, filial duty, and social conformity. As students attempt to reconcile these competing logics, they may encounter both a sense of empowerment and profound ambivalence, navigating complex tensions between global ideals of autonomy and culturally embedded expectations at home.

The concept of liminality offers a valuable lens for understanding the transitional experiences of international students. In this in-between phase, they are temporarily released from the normative timelines and roles prescribed by their home cultures, which allows space for experimentation with identity, lifestyle, and relationships. However, this sense of freedom is frequently accompanied by emotional dislocation and uncertainty. As Korwin-Kowalewska (2020) observes, the liminal space can foster both intercultural learning and psychological vulnerability. For Chinese students studying abroad, this ambiguity can produce divergent outcomes—some embrace the opportunity to reinvent themselves, while others, like Zhao, feel destabilized and retreat toward familiar cultural frameworks. As Gu et al. (2010) explain, “the intercultural experience is not only cognitive but deeply emotional and existential” (p. 13). The capacity to navigate this liminal phase is therefore shaped not only by individual coping strategies but also by the availability of institutional support and meaningful social connections.

Importantly, the effects of studying abroad endure long after graduation. Life planning changes—students may return home, stay abroad, or migrate again. Regardless of trajectory, they may gain lasting skills: assertiveness, adaptability, global outlook. Some of these students become cultural brokers who move fluidly between worlds, influencing not just their careers but broader transnational networks.

Studying abroad also carries symbolic weight—it embodies hope. Students invest in the belief that life abroad will offer freedom, success, or transformation. Many found what they sought, even if in surprising ways: Yu gained confidence, Shaoran found love, Zhang found her voice, Wang found independence, and Zhao found clarity.

Existentially, going abroad raises deep questions: “Who am I?” “Who can I become?” Students learn to embrace multiple, intersecting identity representations—Chinese, global citizen, expat, LGBTQIA+—developing what might be called intersectional resilience. Navigating overlapping cultural, social, and subjective spheres, they become more aware of themselves and the world, embodying the core themes of anthropology and psychology.

Conclusion

Chinese students studying abroad engage in journeys that blend personal subjective aspiration, cultural identity, and structural forces. This study, through five case narratives in Italy, revealed how micro-level motivations—like escaping constraints or pursuing self-growth—are deeply shaped by macro-level factors such as China’s education system, social expectations, and global opportunities. These students’ decisions carry symbolic meaning, serving as acts of subjectivation and hope.

Using an interdisciplinary lens—combining anthropology and clinical psychology, we highlighted the importance of viewing students not as data points, but as individuals navigating emotional, socio-cultural, and institutional complexities. Concepts like ethnopsychiatry and intersectionality illuminated silent struggles and transformative experiences. For example, Shaoran’s case showed how cultural stigma can become psychological distress and how migration, while a coping strategy, requires support in the host context to truly be healing.

Our findings emphasize the need for culturally responsive support. Chinese students must be seen in their dual reality—straddling home culture and host society. When institutions offer tailored counseling, academic assistance, and inclusive community-building, students thrive. But failure to recognize their lived complexity risks alienation. Conversely, genuine recognition leads to personal and institutional enrichment.

Projects like PASSI show how cultural mediation and interdisciplinary expertise can bridge communication gaps and prevent or help managing crises. Investing in international student well-being is also an investment in future global relationships. Today's student is tomorrow's cross-cultural professional whose experience shapes long-term engagement with the host country.

This study contributes to broader understandings of youth transitions and educational mobility. It supports the idea that studying abroad is both a rite of passage and a zone of suspension—offering growth through disruption, and a temporary space to reimagine adulthood. These dual functions make the experience both profound and at times disorienting.

The phrase “Beyond Borders” encapsulates more than geography. Students transcended socio-cultural norms, personal limitations, and institutional frameworks. Their journeys ripple outward—impacting families, universities, and global networks. Migration for education is not just about learning in another country—it is about becoming in another country.

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