

The Life Experience and Satisfaction of Foreign Students in Eastern China: A Case of Anhui Province

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Abstract

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the migration intentions of foreign students and to have a better understanding of their life experiences in eastern China with a focus to Anhui province. A questionnaire survey sent to foreign students studying in Anhui province and depth interviews were used to investigate these migration intentions. Screening method was employed to all 527 participants and only 464 respondents were considered for further analysis. The results show that few students arrive in Anhui with the intention of immigrating permanently. Various factors including business opportunities, security and personal factors among many others influence them in decision-making process. The results reveal that there is no significant intentions to stay permanently however, there exist instances with a slight increase in the length of stay from 0% (initial) to 1.9% (after two years) and a steady variation of 30% of all respondents who wish to stay for short -period ranging between 2-3 years was noted. On the other hand, family and societal factors as well as length of stay was seen to be the high contributing factors leading to 58% of all respondents' decision to go back to their home countries immediately after completion of studies. Furthermore, results show that there is a gap in Chinese education system on human racial equality leading to lower satisfaction of African students living in China which may threaten China's sustainable economic growth image in African market. This study is helpful for policy makers and education system upgrade plans. However, following the area limitation used herein, there remains need for further studies on the subject using large scale to avoid generalizations made in this study.

Keywords: Migration, Immigration, International student, China, Decision-making

1. Introduction

Since the late 1990s, competition for skilled workers and the internationalization of education have become primarily necessary to a successful knowledge economy, (Lu et al., 2009) especially the current globalization context has fundamental implications for the mobility of people across geographical and cultural boundaries (Baruch, 1995; Iredale, 2001; Koser & Salt, 1997; Shenkar, 2004; Stalker, 2000). As a result, many developed industrial countries have attracted an inflow of scholarly skilled immigrants. A good portion of these immigrants have received their higher education in the host country and often have chosen to become permanent residents during or after their educational experiences in the host country. The rapid increasing level of mobility is an important manifestation of the internationalization of professions and professional labor markets in the digital era (Ackers & Bryony, 2005; Carr, Inkson & Thorn, 2005; Iredale, 2001). Internationalization of teaching and research are critical objectives for most governments and tertiary institutions for many reasons including; raising quality standards and global relevance, attracting the best students and staff, generating revenue, pushing the frontiers of knowledge through research and promoting internal diversity (Council, 2012; Philip et al., 2009).

Interestingly, many traditional suppliers of international students such as Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and mainland China which in the past sent substantial numbers of students abroad to study have adopted aggressive national and international strategies to transform themselves from sending countries to receiving countries in terms of international students'

enrollment (Sidhu, 2005; World Bank, 2007; Chan & Ng, 2008; Ruby, 2010; Wen, 2012, 2013, 2014). Developed countries dominated the competition for international students. Countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which have traditionally attracted a large share of about 80% over the years are currently faced with new aggressive competitors such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan and China in the share of the growing body of students who cross national borders for educational purposes. Studies from Asteris (2006), show that the number of international student all over the world has dramatically risen from 1.7 million in 1999 to 2.1 million in 2003 and the number is predicted to reach 5.8 million around 2020. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recorded 3.7 million students studying outside of their country of citizenship in 2009 (OECD, 2011).

China has placed attracting international students on its agenda along with the growing of global influences, economic development, and international engagement. Recently, China has clearly and loudly expressed its ambition to compete with other traditional and new receiving countries in terms of international enrollment by setting a goal of attracting 500,000 foreign students to study in China by 2020. While China has been the major source of supplying international students to western developed countries, its share of the international education market has also boomed from attracting a significant number of students from Asia and beyond (Hvistendahl, 2008).

Overall, research on migration outcomes specifically for international students who study outside their home country for any degree level is lacked especially from the emerging economies. Furthermore, in contrast to the rich studies on international students' mobility in western countries, scholars seldom examine the government-initiated inbound mobility of international students in China (Wen, 2014, 2017). Notably China is part of the global shift in the destination for international students. It has grown from an insignificant player to a major destination in less than a decade. By 2008, China had become the only emerging economy with a higher than 2% global share (Zhao 2011). Therefore, by advancing the body of research on emerging study destinations and to compliment the knowledge in this field (Hu et al., 2016). Our present study empirically investigated international students' intentions regarding whether or not to return to their home country on completion of their degree, and how these intentions change over time and whether their life experiences influence their impression about China.

We consider four main questions in this study; what factors do students consider in deciding whether to stay in China or return to their home countries after graduation? How do these factors vary by nationality or other characteristics such as gender or field of study? What kind of image or impression do international students hold about China? How well do international students feel satisfied with their academic, social-economic, emotional experiences in the host institution?

The study is organized as follows first begins with a review of surveys trends and life experiences and migration behaviors of international students. It then explains the data collection methods and the research findings. Finally, insights and implications are discussed.

1.1 International Student Survey, Life Experiences and Realities in China

International students constitute a significant portion of student bodies in many universities around the world, and their academic success, health, and psychological wellbeing are important issues for the students themselves, for university administration and for research communities (Buddington, 2002; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). International students are transient visitors to new and different academic communities and are increasingly a feature of the social, cultural and academic life of many countries (Montgomery, 2010). To further increase the number of international students in China is one of the major targets of educational reform and development. In order to realize the target, it is necessary to understand comprehensively the opinions of international students. Some previous studies have applied international student surveys utilized in other countries to examine the experiences and satisfaction of international students in China. It was revealed that international students' levels of satisfaction in terms of study, administration, and living services to be consistently and remarkably lower than those of students in other countries and international benchmarks (Ding, 2010; Wen, Chen, Bai, & Cao, 2013). According to Yeh and Inose (2003), international students face many challenges such as language, culture, academics, finances, racial discrimination, and homesickness. Multiple studies show that international students are lonely once they reach their study abroad destinations because of the lack of familiar friends and social networks, and the lack of familiar cultural or linguistic environments are more of salient issues for the case of China. It is of no doubt therefore that social support and social connectedness are very important in ensuring that international students succeed in their new environment. Sherry, Thomas, and Hong Chui (2009) cited in the thesis work of Barg, Sarah. J (2013) found that international students "acknowledged the importance of language issues, understanding new cultural norms, financial problems, friendships and social support".

1.2 Migration and Motivation behavior of International Students in China

As the world's sixth-largest destination country for transnational education, China has a growing stake in policy discussions on transnational education. International students come from different cultural backgrounds, educational systems and with different expectations and purposes. Hall (2004) put forward that, "because moving to a different country is an important life changing decision, it seems obvious that various reasons and motives, including economic, political, and religious ones play a role therein". These students play an important role in the educational export industry (Burrell & Kim, 1998). They bring money to institutions and communities and contribute to the diversification of communities in the countries they are studying (Gillard, 2009 as cited in Tran, 2009). Most of them come from developing countries, with some seeking a professional credential (Beaver & Tuck, 1998) and many just simply seeking international qualifications. With these qualifications they hope to get well-paid jobs when they go back to their countries. After graduating, they will play an important role in academic cooperation and connection between countries (Rai, 2002).

These large numbers not only have far-reaching implications for the Chinese education system, but also for immigration, since many international students choose to remain or leave China after completing their degrees. International students usually make entry to China on Student Visa (X1) and live with student resident permit throughout the study durations but

owing to their desirable skills and the contacts they make during their stay, opportunities exist for many to adjust their status from students to immigrant workers once they have completed their degrees.

According to Baker and Finn (2003), even though students' migration intentions are an imperfect measure of the number of students who actually return, they are a useful indicator of future migration decisions and more importantly, they provide insights into the factors that students take into account in making their decision (Li et al., 1996). The return migration of international students has been identified as one of the most significant gaps in the literature on highly skilled migrants (Balazs & Williams, 2004).

2. Method and Data

This study used the data sourced from international students from 20 countries who are living and studying in Anhui province. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. However, questionnaire based survey was the primary tool and for a deeper investigation interviews were used. Based on resources and availability of data, Anhui was chosen as study area. Though 527 international students have participated in questionnaire based survey, only 464 responders from 20 countries were selected after the screening method and grouped as Africans for those from African countries, Asians for Asian countries, Europeans from European countries, North Americans and Latin Americans for further analysis. The screening method was aimed to check if the responder has read the questionnaire carefully before giving the answer to ensure the quality of research data. Though the number of interviewees was not big compared to the questionnaires respondents, 120 students from 20 various studying programs at different levels and from different countries participated in the interview. This limitation was influenced by the depth of the interview. The selected respondents were grouped purposefully into three categories. Freshmen (first year), ongoing students (second to third year) and final year (ready to graduate) were identified as first category, second category and third category respectively. Based on the nature of study area only students in degree program system were considered from bachelor to doctoral level (Figure 3). In addition, few advanced scholars were also considered. The participants are enrolled in various programs including Mathematics, physics, chemistry and material science, Life science, Engineering, information science and technology, Computing science and technology, Earth science, management science, humanities and social science, public affairs, nuclear science and technology (Figure 2). For deeper analysis, a hypothesis testing was employed to check whether or not a particular questionnaire responses were related to specific demography categories (like region of origin, level of study or gender). An example is where respondents were more likely to cite satisfaction on "societal racial equal treatment". The hypothesis was generated and tested from the groups considered (Asians, Africans, Europeans, Latin Americans and North Americans) by Chi-square tests and significance at 95% level were reported. It is very important to acknowledge the limitation of the study area and the results may not represent the situation in private schools or the entire country situation. It is also important to note that the location of the study can influence the migration intentions.

2.1 The Screening Method

In order to ensure the quality of data, two screening questions were added in the

questionnaire separately, targeting people who did not pay much attention in reading the questionnaire before giving the answer. Those who failed to give the correct answers were removed accordingly.

2.2 We Would Like to Get a Sense of General Preference

Most modern theories of decision making recognize that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. To demonstrate that you've read that much, just go ahead and select both red and green among the alternatives below, no matter what your favorite color is. Yes, ignore the question below and select both those options.

What is your favorite color?

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| White | Pink |
| Red | Blue |
| Green | Black |

3. Results and Discussion/Main Findings

Over the last two decades, China has experienced a steady increase in number of international students from less than 50,000 international students in 2000 to more than 400,000 in 2017(Figure 1) which is very close to the Chinese government target of accommodating a half million of international students by 2020.

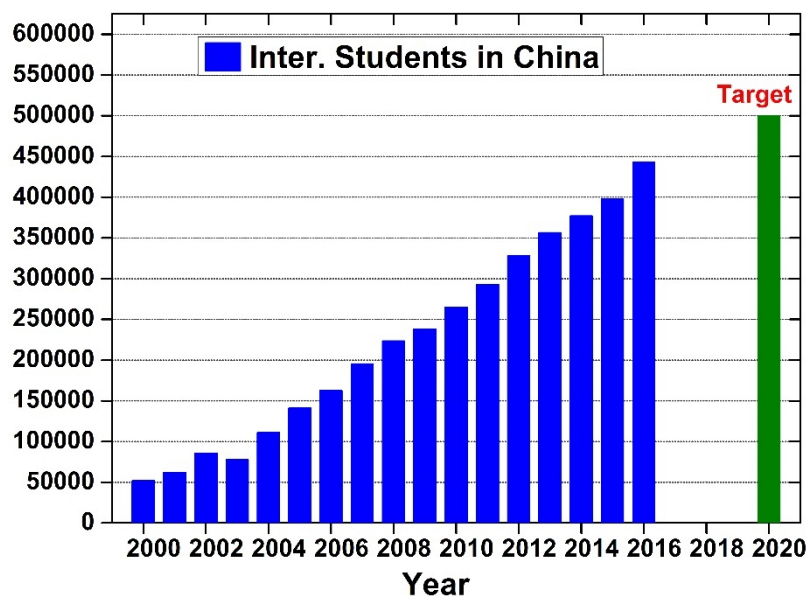


Figure 1. (a) Number of international students enrolled in universities in China, Based on data from <http://www.cafsa.org.cn>

Figure 2 displays the number of survey selected participants by field of study. The results show that management science, Human and social science, engineering, life science and public admiration major have enrolled more international students than others (Figure2).

Apart the universities priorities and targets, many of the international students seem to be much attached to Management and Engineering related fields. The program level of selected participants is also analyzed. The results show that a high number of participants were doctorate candidates (250) followed by Master program candidates (170), bachelor candidates (103) and (4) advanced scholars. This highest number of doctorate candidates came from University of science and technology (USTC) because of its mission and vision as one of the best research centers in China.

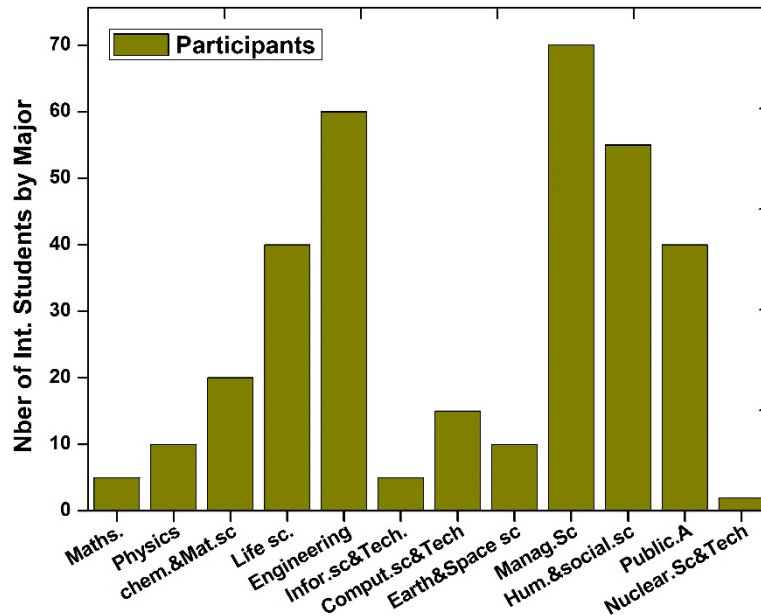


Figure 2. Number of participants by field of study

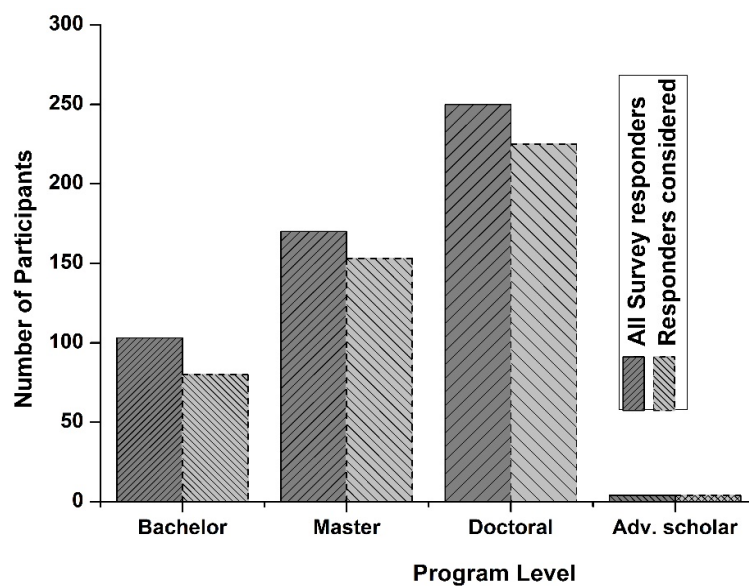


Figure 3. Distribution of participants by program level

There are many reasons that international students have considered to choose eastern China

as their destination for further studies (Table 1). The motivation reasons vary from place of origin to another. For better education as reason which is likely to be common for all the respondents of our questionnaire, Africans show the highest proportion with 85% of all participants while Asians group reveals to be the most attracted by many funding opportunities at the level of 85%. This may be attributed to the recent significant increase of scholarships for ASEAN members by the Chinese government. The safety of China has been also identified to be the most personal common factor which motivates 85% of all respondents to come to China. This may be linked to the Chinese government politic strategy which emphasizes on the role of the people and their safety. The doctorate candidates were significantly higher than master and bachelor students to choose good education as key factor ($P= 0.007$). Generally, better education expectations and safety are revealed to be the leading factors for students to decide to come to China with 75% and 85% of all respondents respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. Motivation to come to China (Anhui province): Proportion of respondents who stated each reason (%)

Reason	All respondents	Asians	Europeans	Africans	Latin Americans	North Americans
Better education	75	72	32	85	78	40
Many funding opportunities	65	85	40	72	65	23
safe country	85	82	78	83	80	75
Desire to experience new culture	42	12	78	82	62	65
opportunity to make money	45	12	68	45	35	12
Expectation to get good job after studies	78	68	8	75	68	5

It is expected that after completion of the study, students should return back to their home countries. However, this study reveals different reasons why some international students decide to stay in China even after the completion of their studies. Those reasons vary from professional to personal factors. Though societal factors such as family, friends and relatives push some students to go back to their home countries immediately after getting their degree, some other reasons including easy doing business, safe and stable country, environmental friendliness, marriage with Chinese, job opportunities and travelling have been noted to be the keys factors motivating some students to decide to stay (Table 2). Ease in doing business, environmental friendliness and travelling reasons proved to be the most influencing factors to stay in China by a large number of students responding to our questionnaire. Table 2 indicates that 89% of Latin American respondents believe that China has a better environment to carry out the business activities while North Americans find China as a place of job opportunities at 80% of all responders. We tested the relationship between citing ease in doing business,

environmental friendliness and job opportunities factors and found that those who marked China as a best place to do business, also reported job opportunities as factor to stay in China. However, Africans and Asians revealed to be the least motivated by job opportunities with 2% of Africans and 15% of Asians compared to 76% of Europeans and 80% of Americans. This suggests that the region of origin of international students may be pivotal in getting a job rather than being knowledge based structure. Yet, a deeper analysis is needed to have a better conclusion. Getting married with a Chinese has been observed to be the minor reason to stay in China with only 2% of all respondents marking that reason. This may be linked to the cultural difference which was not investigated deeply in the current study.

Table 2. Main reasons to stay in China after studies completion: Proportion of respondents who stated each reason (%)

Reason	All respondents	Asians	Europeans	Africans	Latin Americans	North Americans
Ease in doing business	62	52	70	25	89	88
Safe and stable country	58	33	18	10	42	39
Environmental friendliness	20	25	41	0	45	40
Job opportunities	65	15	76	2	60	80
Marriage with Chinese	2	5	3	1	2	0
Travelling	80	20	68	22	32	65
Others reasons	10	30	20	10	11	22

No matter how the reasons to stay in china differ from one region to another, still the balancing of advantages and disadvantages of life in home country and in China has to be taken into consideration. In the questionnaire, we considered advantages and disadvantages but due to some replication only disadvantages in both China and home country are presented in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. Cultural difference was revealed to be the most cited disadvantage of staying in China with 65% of all responders irrespective of their region of origin (Table 3). This reason is likely to be associated with home region with 8 % (Lowest) of Asians, 38% of Europeans, 55% of Africans, 50% of Latin Americans and 60% (highest) of North Americans. The non-significant disadvantage was found in Asians which may indicate some cultural similarity between China and its neighboring countries. The cultural difference factor was noted to be increasing with distance separating China and considered regions. Despite the well-known Chinese welcoming attitude, Africans revealed to experience discrimination more than other considered regions. It was noted that 45% of all Africans cited discrimination as one of their major disadvantage in China. Social network and language barrier was found to be the highest disadvantage factor for international students to stay in China cited by 78% of all questionnaire responders. Chinese foods and China politics have been revealed to be the pointless disadvantages through all respondents. On the other hand,

poorer job opportunities were noted to be the most cited (42%) to be the disadvantage factor back home. With the Europeans and the Latin Americans, North Americans, Asians and Africans follow the pattern in respect (Table 4). Having “Bad political situation” in home countries was also marked by 23% of respondents (Table 4). It was interestingly revealed that Africans have the highest level of better quality of life (93%) in like manner only 7% of Africans pointed out poorer quality of life as disadvantage factor which may be partly explained by the fact that most of those who came to study in China are from noble families and their expectations to get good job back home is also higher. Irrespective of their home origin, gender, major or level of study; family, friends and relatives have been cited by many international students as the highest motivation to return home after the completion of their studies in comparison with others reasons (Table 5). This indicates that family is very important for all human beings.

Table 3. Disadvantages of staying in China: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group)

Reason	All respondents	Asians	Europeans	Africans	Latin Americans	North Americans
Cultural differences	65	8	38	55	50	60
Environmental problems	45	3	10	60	55	13
Hard to get Job	20	55	4	54	35	2
Discrimination	8	0.5	1	45	15	2
Unfamiliar with foods	15	3	5	10	8	5
China Politics	5	1	18	2	12	19
Socio-Networkproblem and language	78	40	70	68	69	73

Table 4. Disadvantages of the home country: proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group)

Reason	All respondents	Asians	Europeans	Africans	Latin Americans	North Americans
Poorer quality of life	14	8	20	7	11	15
Bad Political situation	23	22	10	26	18	26
Poorer Job opportunities	42	36	56	38	52	47
Family expectations	8	15	5	20	12	0
Restrictive beliefs	6	3	5	0	6	2

Table 5. Main reasons to return to home country: Proportion of respondents who stated each reason (% of that group)

Reason	All respondents	Asians	Europeans	Africans	Latin Americans	North Americans
Marriage reasons	80	28	36	89	83	81
Family, Friends and relatives	79	81	69	91	82	88
Better job opportunity	21	40	9	65	35	18
Feeling comfortable	18	12	30	71	55	36
Better condition of life	44	47	37	58	45	29
Good environment	50	15	9	51	17	13
Other reasons	12	4	0	6	6	0

3.1 To What Extent do You Agree With the Following Statements About China?

The high level of disagreement has revealed the affordable cost of study in China, good weather and climate, Chinese as open-minded people and working opportunities for International students. On the other hand, high level of agreement has been noted for a safe country, rich culture, and hardworking people and moderately agreement was noted for technologically advanced country (Figure 4a). A slightly high percentage of respondents were satisfied with the assistance at the first arrival (70%), food (55%), accommodation (60%) and clothing (50%). Generally, bank service and entertainment received a very lower satisfaction (Figure 4b). This lower satisfaction can be attributed to the language barrier and the strict rules governing the exchange of dollar in China, however deeper analysis is needed for a better conclusion. Though only the overall average information was displayed (in this study), the issue of societal equal racial treatment raised more attention for respondents from African countries. The satisfaction/dissatisfaction level differed significantly among region of origin ($P=0.003$), with approximately 85% of Africans being dissatisfied on societal racial equal treatment, 30% Latin America, 5% of North America, 2% Asians and 10% Europeans (not presented). As long as China will continue to invest economically around the world and more specifically in Africa, more international students from Africa will be enrolled in China. Therefore, the issue of societal racial equality will further be raised and the country has to find a proper way of educating people accordingly.

“I feel so bad when little kids and even grown people, point fingers at me and say look at this black person (heiren), for me it’s an unusual behavior” said Johna PhD student from Nigeria.

This study indicates that there is a gap in Chinese educational system on human racial equality which is in agreement with a recent findings by Professor Liang YuCheng from Sun Yat-Sen University. “A number of Chinese residents who haven’t spoken with Africans always have negative opinions based on their limited knowledge and impressions” and he suggests to authorities to encourage the media to introduce more balanced reports on Africans.

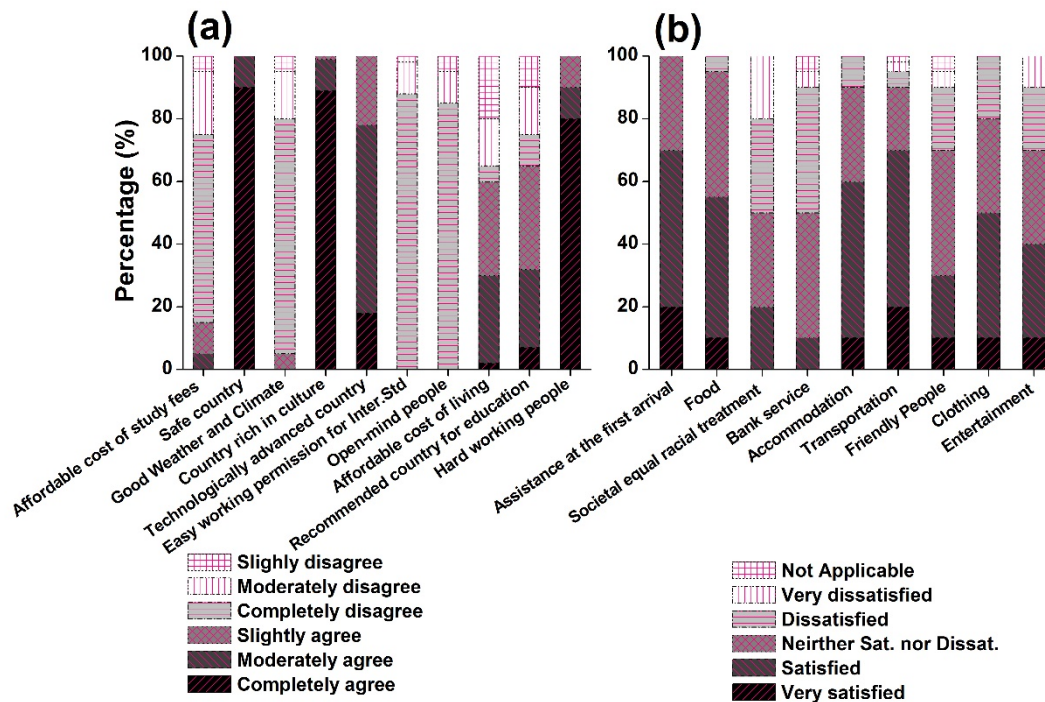


Figure 4. (a) Level of agreement on selected statements and (b) international students life satisfaction in China

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to have a better understanding on migration intentions of international students in China and their life experience satisfaction with focus on Anhui province. A two-third of all respondents revealed making a clear decision of returning home after the completion of the studies. One-third of respondents did not think about their decision “I don’t know group”. Students who have a plan to stay for a short period ranging from 1-2years were also considerably high with 24% of all respondents. Those who would like to stay for a period ranging between 3-5years are 8% and more than 5 years are 5%. None was noted to have initial plan of staying permanently. After one year of stay in China, the intentions and expectations trend is likely to be changed with increasing percentage of those who clearly decide to go back to their home regions after graduation jumping from 33% to 40% and those who decide to stay in China rising from zero to 1.5%. The rising of these two categories is closely linked to the decreasing of “I don’t know group” from 30% to 15% of respondents which indicate the importance of time in decision making process. The students who decide to stay for short period have also increased slightly after one year. For a deeper understanding of the role played by time in decision making, variation after the second year analysis was employed. The results show that, the number of students deciding to return home has kept a steady growth reaching 58% of all respondents and the number of students who decide to stay permanently also increase to around 2% of all respondents. It is important to point out that the number of students who wish to stay for short period between 2-3years has not significantly changed with time but those who wish to stay for a period of 3-5years has decreased considerably after the second year (Figure 5).

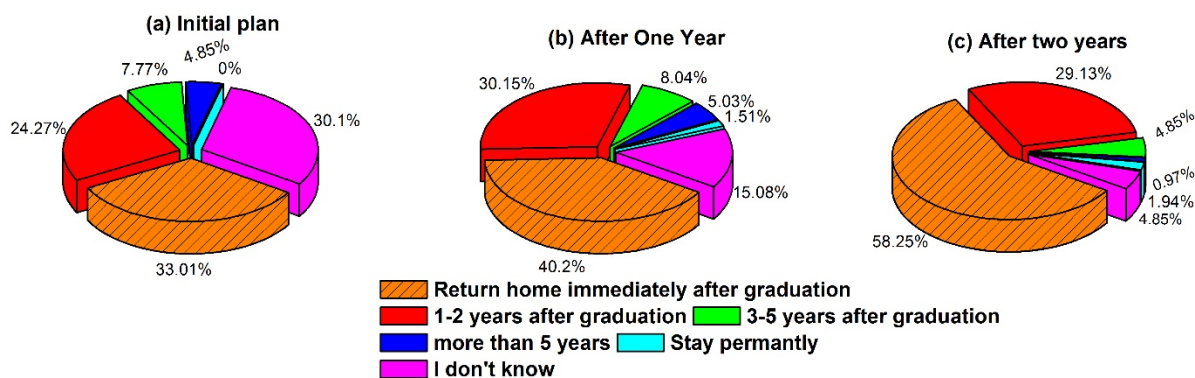


Figure 5. Migration intention decision making process (a) first plan, (b) after one year (c) after two years of stay in China

This study suggests that few students arrive in China with the intention of immigrating permanently. However, various factors influence them in decision-making process. Although, the results reveal that the migration intention is significantly very lower, some major factors have been identified including business opportunities, China economic growth, security, country political stability, marriage and personal factors among many others. On the other hand, family and societal factors along with staying period reveal to be the high contributing factors leading to 58% of all respondents deciding to go back to their home countries immediately after completion of studies while 30% wish to stay for short -period ranging between 2-3 years for business opportunities and travelling as main factors. A significant low level of African students' satisfaction with their living experience in Chinese community show that china has not paid sufficient attention to improve its supply of racial equality in its education system which may threaten its image on global market. Therefore, more racial equality is highly recommended to enhance education sustainability and satisfaction for all international students in China.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest whatsoever.

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