

## Putting Down Roots or Homing Instinct?

### -- Exploring Multidimensional Motivations in the Employment Decisions of Returnee Overseas Students

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#### Abstract

Amid the rising "returnee wave" and the notable "homing effect," the employment decisions of overseas students reveal considerable diversity and unpredictability. Current research often emphasizes macro-level factors like policies and economic push-pull dynamics, while paying less attention to the micro-level psychological mechanisms shaped by overseas experiences and the interplay of diverse motivations. This study focuses on regular overseas students as its primary subjects, using a questionnaire survey to systematically identify and categorize the multidimensional factors influencing their decision to return home for employment. Findings indicate a significant "homing effect," with 67.78% of respondents leaning toward or firmly choosing to return. At the same time, the phenomenon of "failure to put down roots" abroad is prominent, where cultural barriers, difficulties in social integration, and visa obstacles serve as strong passive push factors. This study constructs a multidimensional framework integrating both "emotional pull" and "passive push" forces, revealing the "homing" decision as a complex trade-off. It offers an empirical basis for policy optimization and individual decision-making.

#### Keywords

**Returnees; Homing Effect; Employment Decision; Multidimensional Motivations; Talent Mobility.**

#### 1. Introduction

In the context of global talent mobility and China's "Strengthening the Nation through Talent" strategy, the "homing effect" among overseas students has become a notable social phenomenon. Yet beneath these macro trends, individual decision-making logic remains diverse and uncertain. While existing research widely discusses structural motivations like policies and economics, there is still a lack of systematic empirical investigation into the micro-level psychological mechanisms formed through students' specific overseas experiences and their interaction with macro-factors.

To address this gap, this study empirically investigates the following questions: What core motivations drive the "homing" of overseas students? What is their relative importance? And what role do passive factors related to "failure to put down roots" play? Based on a survey of 329 overseas students and returnees, this study builds a data-driven, multidimensional explanatory framework integrating macro and micro perspectives. The aim is to deepen theoretical understanding of contemporary international talent mobility mechanisms and provide practical guidance for relevant stakeholders.

## 2. Literature Review and Research Gap

### 2.1. Domestic Research Review

Domestic research on returnees has followed a clear evolutionary path. Around 2000, studies often served national strategies, focusing on the importance of returnee talent for scientific, technological, and economic development. By around 2010, research began focusing more on the motivations for return itself, quantitatively analyzing the roles of policy, economic, and family factors. Around 2020, the perspective shifted toward individual overseas experiences, cultural adaptation, and identity issues. After 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred discussion of the "homing effect," with studies paying more attention to emotional dimensions, uncertainty, and the interaction of multiple variables in the return decision.

### 2.2. International Research Review

International research has undergone similar shifts. Early studies primarily explored reasons for one-way talent flow from a macro-structural perspective. Around 2010, theories of "brain circulation" and "talent return flow" became mainstream, focusing on the interaction between return decisions and transnational mobility. Research in the last decade has increasingly turned toward non-economic factors, with cultural identity, sense of belonging, and social capital becoming key elements influencing decisions.

### 2.3. Research Gap and Significance

In summary, existing research has two main shortcomings: first, micro-level mechanisms remain vague, lacking empirical depth on how specific overseas experiences translate into decision-making motivations; second, group diversity is often overlooked, with the voices of regular overseas students overshadowed by elite narratives. Therefore, this study focuses on regular overseas students as its core research subjects. Through a quantitative survey, it empirically tests and integrates external structural factors and individual micro-factors influencing their return decision, revealing how these factors interact and expanding the explanatory power of "talent mobility" theory. At the same time, it may encourage talent recruitment policies to pay more attention to the diverse needs of "returnees" and serve as a decision-making reference for overseas students, offering insights and practical value.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

### 3.1. Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

This study used an online questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was designed based on a literature review, covering personal background, intention to return/stay abroad, and scales measuring influencing factors across policy, economic, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Two open-ended questions were also included to collect qualitative feedback.

The questionnaire was distributed via social media, ultimately collecting 329 valid responses. Sample characteristics are as follows:

Gender: Slightly more female (58.36%) than male (41.64%) respondents.

Status: Covered the full spectrum from current students to employed individuals, with "Returned and currently job hunting" being the largest group (25.23%), ensuring timeliness and diversity.

Family Background: Over half (66.57%) were not only children; family residence was evenly distributed, with Tier 3 cities and below (31.91%) and rural areas (20.97%) together accounting for over half the sample, enhancing the representation of regular overseas students.

### 3.2. Data Analysis Methods

This study used Excel for data analysis:

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to present basic sample characteristics and intention distribution,

For ranking questions, comprehensive scores were calculated to determine the relative importance of various motivations,

Average scores were calculated for all scale questions to assess the overall influence of each factor.

## 4. Analytical Framework

Li, M., & Bray, M. used a push-pull model, categorizing individual students' motivations for studying abroad into academic, economic, social/cultural, and political aspects [1]. Meanwhile, Mazzarol, T., & Soutar, G. N. suggested that international students' choice of host country depends on various "pull" factors [2]. Inspired by this, to systematically analyze the decision-making logic of overseas students returning for employment, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework, dividing decision-influencing motivations into four interrelated levels.

### 4.1. External Structural Factors

This level focuses on the macro and meso environments shaping decisions, mainly including domestic policy environment and economic pull, as well as the policy environment push of the host country. These factors constitute the external constraints and opportunity space for decisions.

### 4.2. Individual Micro-Factors

This level delves into the subjective experiences and psychological constructions of individuals during their overseas study, mainly including cultural adaptation experiences, identity, career expectations, and family background. These factors constitute the internal drivers of decisions.

### 4.3. Factor Interaction Mechanism

The core of this framework emphasizes that the above factors do not operate in isolation but are in dynamic interaction. For example, a student with a strong perception of domestic policies may more actively align their career plans with them, thereby strengthening their intention to return. Conversely, strong cultural identity might amplify their positive perception of favorable domestic policies.

### 4.4. The Link Between "Failure to Put Down Roots" and "Homing"

When students face limitations in their host country due to visa barriers or cultural integration difficulties, hindering their initial goal of "putting down roots" abroad, this "passive," negative experience combines with the "active" attraction existing back home. Together, they push toward the "homing" choice, making "homing" somewhat a strategic exit in response to the "failure to put down roots."

## 5. Research Findings

### 5.1. Sample Characteristics and Distribution of Return Intention

Table 1 shows a clear "homing" intention. Regarding preferred employment location, the groups "Firmly choose to return" and "Inclined to return" combined account for a high 67.78%, forming the mainstream. The "Firmly stay abroad" group accounts for 15.20%, indicating a clear return trend.

**Table 1.** Intention of Employment Location After Graduation

To make a choice	Subtotal	Proportion
I decided to return home	116	35.26%
I prefer to return home	107	32.52%
Not sure	29	8.81%
Preference to stay overseas	27	8.21%
Determined to stay overseas	50	15.2%
Number of times this question has been effectively filled out	329	

### 5.2. Key Motivations

Analysis of the ranking question on return motivations shows the top three motivations by comprehensive score are:

Family reunion, caring for parents (Comp. Score: 5.13),

Identifying with domestic culture and social environment, sense of belonging (Comp. Score: 5.11),

Attraction of domestic talent recruitment policies (Comp. Score: 5.15).

Table 2 shows that although policy attraction has a slightly higher comprehensive score, the percentage selecting "Identifying with domestic culture and social environment, sense of belonging" as the most important factor (18.83%) is much higher than for "Attraction of domestic talent recruitment policies" (11.71%). This indicates that emotional ties and cultural identity are the core drivers of "homing." In contrast, economic rational factors like "Domestic salary" and "Career opportunities" are relatively less important.

**Table 2.** Main Reasons for Choosing to Work in china

To make a choice	Combined scores	First place	Second place
Domestic talent acquisition policy attracts	5.15	26(11.71%)	45(20.27%)
Family reunion, care for parents	5.13	36(16.14%)	36(16.14%)
Identify with the domestic culture and social environment and have a sense of belonging	5.11	42(18.83%)	25(11.21%)
There is a better social network at home	5.04	33(14.86%)	27(12.16%)
Combination of domestic salary and living costs is more attractive	4.89	31(13.96%)	26(11.71%)

### 5.3. "Failure to Put Down Roots"

Table 3 shows that for the group choosing to stay abroad, "Host country immigration policy and visa convenience" is the most important motivation by a significant margin (Comp. Score 5.38, and 24.68% ranked it first). This conversely confirms that "failure to put down roots" is a key passive factor pushing toward "homing." It suggests that not everyone actively abandons life abroad; rather, stringent visa policies make "staying" an unattainable hope for some.

**Table 3.** Main Reasons for Choosing to Stay Overseas

To make a choice	Combined scores	First place	Second place
Overseas migration policy and visa facilitation	5.38	19(24.68%)	7(9.09%)
The career path overseas is clearer and the space is greater	5.18	7(9.09%)	14(18.18%)
Salaries and benefits are higher overseas	5.12	15(19.48%)	11(14.29%)
He has adapted to overseas cultrual life and likes the local environment	5.03	10(12.99%)	16(20.78%)
Pursuing a better work-life balance	4.84	10(12.99%)	11(14.29%)

Furthermore, data in Table 4 further supports this conclusion. Approximately one-third of respondents considered "Cultural barriers and differences felt in the host country" as having a "relatively large" or "very large" influence. This data clearly depicts the social integration challenges some students face abroad, constituting practical resistance in the process of "putting down roots."

**Table 4.** Perception of Cultural Barriers and Differences in the Host Country

To make a choice	Subtotal	Proportion
It had no effect at all	37	11.25%
The impact is less	53	16.11%
General	38	11.55%
The impact is greater	114	34.65%
The impact is huge	87	26.44%
Number of times this question has been effectively filled out	329	

### 5.4. Policy Perception and Group Differences

Jonkers, K., & Tijssen, R., in their research, empirically analyzed the impact of Chinese talent recruitment policies on researchers' return and subsequent development [3]. Similarly, policy factors are also significant for the student population. The questionnaire shows that 59.88% and 60.48% of respondents considered talent recruitment policies and specific benefits, respectively, to have a "relatively large" or "very large" influence. However, their average scores across all scale questions were not the highest, and their recognition as the "most important" factor in the ranking was lower than emotional/cultural factors. This indicates that policy is an important "catalyst" rather than a "decisive" factor; its effectiveness needs synergy with individuals' deep-seated emotional and family needs to be maximized. Zweig, D. provided a detailed analysis of measures China took in the early 21st century to reverse "brain drain" [4]. Group differences are beginning to appear. Although limited by sample size for in-depth analysis, the combined sample proportion from Tier 3 cities and below and rural areas exceeding 50% itself indicates that students from ordinary family backgrounds have become

an important part of the "returnee wave." Their decision-making logic is more likely based on practical considerations and family dependence, aligning with the study's focus.

### 5.5. Qualitative Data Insights

Feedback from open-ended questions provided some authentic and vivid insights into respondents' thoughts. One respondent described moments of "particularly wanting to return" due to cultural differences and language barriers. Meanwhile, the greatest expectation regarding returning for employment focused on "overseas-acquired skills and experience precisely matching domestic job requirements," while the biggest worries were "current difficulty finding jobs domestically" and "inability to readapt to the environment." This reveals that "homing" is not the endpoint but the beginning of "re-adaptation" challenges, with widespread anxiety about whether one can fully readapt and integrate into the domestic market after experiencing the overseas environment.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1. "Homing": The Confluence of Emotional Pull and Passive Push

The empirical data of this study indicate that the "homing" decision is largely a confluence of emotional pull and passive push forces. On one hand, a sense of responsibility towards family and belonging to native culture constitute a strong and stable internal pull. On the other hand, the real-world barriers of "putting down roots" abroad form an external push, making "homing" a practical, even strategic, choice for many regular students after weighing their options. This conclusion goes beyond simplified narratives that view returning solely as "patriotism" or "chasing economic benefits."

### 6.2. From "Economic Recruitment" to "Emotional Recruitment" and "Environmental Retention"

The findings suggest that current talent policies focusing primarily on economic incentives and settlement benefits, while necessary, may not fully address the core concerns of overseas students. Alberts, H. C. & Hazen, H. D. mentioned that although the Chinese government's incentive policies for students are somewhat attractive, many Chinese students still choose to stay abroad after graduation [5]. Therefore, policy design should transition from "economic recruitment" to "emotional recruitment" and "environmental retention." "Emotional recruitment" means emphasizing homeland sentiment and cultural identity more in outreach. "Environmental retention" requires building an environment where their talents can be utilized and they feel comfortable living, including a fair job market, an inclusive social atmosphere, and genuine appreciation and acceptance of overseas experience, as one respondent hoped: "not having to compromise between adapting locally and leveraging overseas advantages."

### 6.3. The "Dual Challenges" of Regular Overseas Students

The regular overseas students focused on in this study face "dual challenges" before and after their return decision. Abroad, they need to cope with the pressure of "failure to put down roots." Upon returning, they face the challenge of "re-integration", how to effectively utilize the cultural capital acquired overseas within the local context. Hao, J., & Wen, W. explored the cultural re-adaptation and career development challenges faced by Chinese returnees from Australian universities [6]. The "homing" stories of Chinese returnees are microcosms of ordinary youth navigating constraints and seeking personal development space in this era of globalization and individualization.

## 7. Result

Based on the empirical analysis of 329 valid questionnaires, this study reveals several key findings. The decision of overseas students to return is shaped by a multidimensional trade-off among emotional/cultural factors, policy/economic factors, and their actual circumstances abroad. Family ties and cultural belonging emerge as the core emotional drivers, outweighing purely economic considerations. Practically, the inability to put down roots—often due to restrictive visa policies, cultural barriers, and social difficulties—acts as a significant push factor for returning. While talent policies exert notable influence, their effectiveness depends on precise alignment with individuals' deeper emotional needs and career aspirations.

As Baruch, Y., Budhwar, P. S. & Khatri, N. stated, the most important factors influencing foreign students' decision to return or stay are perceptions of the host country's labor market, the student's adaptation process, and family ties in both host and home countries [7]. Therefore, policies should extend beyond economic incentives to address emotional integration and professional environment. This aligns with existing observations that labor market perceptions, adaptation processes, and family connections critically shape mobility decisions. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for institutional support in career planning and psychological adjustment, both abroad and after return.

## 8. Conclusion

This study concludes that the return decision of overseas students is a complex and multifaceted interplay of emotional, practical, and policy-driven factors. Core emotional drivers, such as family ties and cultural belonging, consistently surpass purely economic motives, while persistent structural barriers abroad frequently prompt return. Talent policies can prove effective only when they adequately respond to deeper career and emotional needs. Future research should employ more rigorous sampling methods and longitudinal research designs to better capture the dynamics of decision-making. Further investigation into the heterogeneity across disciplines and host countries would also help to refine and strengthen theoretical and policy frameworks.

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