INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SECURITY: A VIEW FROM BEIJING

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Abstract

Security is an integral component of the relationships that shape the lives of students hosted by foreign countries. International student security became a source of contention between nations in 2008 when China’s Government charged that Australia was failing to adequately provide for the safety of Chinese students. In this paper we draw on interviews undertaken in Beijing to highlight the importance of student security and the need for hosts to accord attention to the views of parents as well as students. Our findings reveal parents play a major role in the study location decision, tend to accord security greater weight than do students when location is being debated within the family, utilize a range of strategies to keep students secure, and believe host governments and institutions have primary responsibility for student wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

Security is an integral component of the relationships that shape the lives of students hosted by foreign countries. We broadly apply the term security to include all social influences that contribute to student safety and well-being. This issue became a topic of diplomatic exchange in 2008 when China’s government charged that Australian officials were failing to adequately protect international students from violence. Initially these protests were greeted with spin by host governments and education institutions convinced Australia’s reputation as a secure study destination was unassailable. The facade quickly faded when international students took to the streets to protest against assaults they were enduring and the incidents began to be reported in the international press. Rather than providing substantial resources to police and other forms of security infrastructure Australian political leaders focused on how to contain the risk that the reporting of such incidents might damage the profitability of the education export industry and the lucrative ‘Australian brand’ (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett & Marginson 2010). In this paper we draw on interviews conducted with students and parents in Beijing to clarify how the families of international students address student security. The contribution is unique for it draws on both parent and student views and adds a qualitative dimension to the many quantitative studies that have documented student preferences and practices. Our overarching aim is to help focus debate on international student security rather than on the financial security of the education export industry. We argue parents play a critical but undocumented role in study location decisions, that they have different priorities than students, and they commonly assist their offspring to study overseas because the student has not achieved success at home. Further, parents utilize a range of strategies to enhance student security and believe host governments and institutions have primary responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of international students.

Previous Studies

The relationship between international student security and study destination choice has been the subject of a substantial body of research (Mazzarol & Hosie 1996; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Yi, Lin & Kishimoto 2003; Olivas & Li 2008; Cubillo-Pinilla, Zuniga, Losantos & Sanchez 2009; Dessoff 2009). This literature is overwhelmingly based on quantitative measures designed to clarify student preferences and levels of satisfaction, thus enabling education suppliers to more effectively market international education. Collectively, these studies have revealed that the processes associated with the study location decision involve the balancing of multiple costs and benefits including reputation of education institutions, ease of obtaining a visa, knowledge of potential host countries, personal recommendation, financial cost, climate and personal security (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). Marketing oriented researchers have tended to define security narrowly with Mazzarol & Souter (2002), for example, equating security with safety from crime. The confined character of this understanding is rooted in the survey method of analysis and contrasts with the comprehension advanced by Clements (1990) who, in seeking to assist the construction of a sociology of security, locates the notion in its Latin root securus meaning without care and suggests securitization is a ‘social process (with some instinctive spontaneous properties) aimed at achieving relatively safe social, political and economic (spaces) communities’ (Clements 1990, 6).

Clements (1990, 2) rightly observes that without security ‘social life would be both meaningless and relatively dangerous’ but in so doing accepts absolute security is unattainable and in many cases undesirable because individuals and societies must balance opportunity against risk. Just as women who wish to become mothers must balance the dangers of pregnancy against the benefit of having a child, international students and their parents must balance the benefit of an international education against the risks associated with living and studying in a foreign country.

1 The parent group included three other family members who participated in the study in the role of parents.
Hence the ‘trick is to discover not how to avoid risk, for this is impossible, but how to use risk to get more of the good and less of the bad’ (Clements 1990, 4).

Marketing researchers who have surveyed the location decisions of international students accept that the processes entailed in deciding where to study involve the balancing of opportunities and risks. Consequently, along with identifying key attractors and concerns these analysts have striven to identify the varying weights students apportion these influences. Values have been shown to be subject to change over time and influenced by individual preference and national and community cultures. Market researchers have also generated a broad consensus that the academic reputation of nations and institutions is the primary attractor for students and personal security is the primary issue that tempers the importance accorded academic reputation (Mazzarol and Souter 2002; igraduate 2008; Blight 2006; Bush, Brett & Archer 2008).

That security is an important international education issue has tended to be shaded by education providers. This appears to be an attempt to avoid discussion of this issue in order to contain the possibility that students will come to associate international education or a specific location or institution with threats to their security. Avoidance and denial, however, has meant policies and programs that can further student security have remained under developed and the response to threats that affect both students and the reputation of education suppliers remain inadequate. As a consequence, the role of security has been under-researched with scholars generally surveying students regarding the issues that were important to them when deciding their preferred study location. This singular focus on student preferences has generated a consensus that the most important determinant informing the study location decision is the academic reputation of an institution with security being a secondary determinant. However, the weakness of the case underpinning this belief should be clear given research on college choice within OECD nations has shown that commonly it is the preferences of parents rather than students that prevail in study location decisions. Further, in China decisions relating to the highest level of education students should strive for and the majors they should take are normally joint endeavours involving both students and parents (Turley 2007; Ceja 2007; Xia, Xie, Zhou, DeFtain, Meredith and Combs 2005, 299). This information is important particularly in light of studies relating to the international student experience, which tend to show strong links between students and their parents - the latter in many cases being financially dependent on the former (Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson 2006; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir and Forbes-Mewett 2010).

In the case of Chinese students it is arguable that parents are likely to play a particularly important role because the one-child policy has induced a high level of protectiveness within families and enabled relatively well-resourced parenting (Ross 2009). This situation has particular relevance for the security of Chinese students for as Northrup (cited in Clements 1990, n.p.) observes, relatively well resourced individuals have a larger envelope of space in which they can function without fear of being ‘invaded by others’. Having greater resources, Chinese international students are commonly able to live ‘in better housing, in safer parts of town and [have] less need to work or travel’ than their counterparts from South Asia (Ross 2009, n.p.). This point is also stressed by Clayton, Crozier & Reay (2009, 157) who examined ‘the security of locality … in relation to dealing with risky and often alien educational environments’. However, while the capacity to provide resources empowers Chinese parents to limit the extent to which others may ‘invade’ the lives of their international student offspring it can also curtail student agency. In brief, resourcing offspring strengthens the power of parents to demand their views are heeded when study destinations are being determined. The strength of the student-family link and the power of Chinese parents to influence student decisions suggest that when seeking to understand the study location decision process researchers should garner the views of students and parents. This is the approach of the current study.

The research approach

We gained the assistance of a large reputable Chinese education agent in Beijing who was advised that the questions to be asked were structured to clarify the importance participants
accorded student security, the character of the location choice process, primary security concerns, steps taken to secure student’s wellbeing, and who parents deem responsible for international student security. The agent recruited and briefed the participants each of whom was a student or family member of a student registered with the agency. The interviews were conducted by the authors, all of whom were English speaking Australians with one originating from Beijing and also able to speak fluent Mandarin. The interviews were semi-structured and all participants were offered a choice of speaking English or Mandarin with the use of interpreters when necessary. Some, mainly students, elected to speak in English but early in the interview most indicated they could more easily provide answers in their native tongue. The participants included 40 parents and 10 students all of whom were committed to an education overseas. They shared their experiences generously and there was no obvious variance in the information shared with the Chinese interviewer and that provided the two other investigators. Generally, the interviews were of 30 minutes duration, however, some extended well over the time allocated as many parents wished to use the opportunity to obtain more knowledge of Australia and international education in general. The interviews were taped, translated where required, and then transcribed. The transcripts were analysed manually with the development of themes in mind (Bryman and Burgess 1994). Quotes used in the following empirical section are followed by a participant code: S = Prospective Student, M = Mother; F = Father; G = Guardian (includes relatives other than parents). The letter code is followed by a number that was allocated to each participant; for example, S1 = Student, Transcript number 1; S2 = Student, Transcript number 2; M3 = Mother, Transcript number 3, F5 = Father, Transcript number 5; G2 = Guardian, Transcript number 2; and so on. The research approach outlined above underpins the presentation of the data in the followings sections.

Security and Opportunity

Parents and students reported that they accord security a high priority when choosing a study destination though this was an issue of much greater concern to parents than to students. Indeed, almost all parents identified security as a key influence while most students emphasised the educational and social opportunities offered by various options. This finding is compatible with research that has shown:

In comparisons involving personal and altruistic fear, respondents regularly reported greater fear for others (spouse, son, daughter) than for themselves, and only rarely did they report more fear for themselves than for others in their household. However afraid adults in family households may be for themselves, they almost invariably worry as much or more about others in their household as they do about themselves (Warr and Ellison 2000, 569, emphasis added).

Fear for their sons and daughters were clearly manifest in parents’ assessment of prospective host country study destinations. There was, for example, universal agreement the US was not a safe study destination and the security situation in the UK was questioned by numerous parents.

For countries like USA and UK, there are too many guns in the USA, and school often has violence, and in the UK, there are explosions and terrorist attacks. (F34)

We can’t go to the United States. It’s too far away, and, it’s not stable. So we did not even think about it. (M24)

I know UK is not very good, too much fighting on campus. They are not very friendly to Chinese students. If a country can provide safety environment for international students, it will be good enough…. My cousin did not choose to go to the USA, and it was also because she did not like racial discrimination in the USA. She feels that there is no security there, and she cannot be happy there. (G28)

This perspective was shared by students including by those who had chosen to study in the US or the UK. Students, however, tended to be unconcerned by the perceived dangers in these
countries or simply refused to allow their fears to outweigh the opportunities offered by US and UK education institutions.

Well I think America is definitely not a very safe place but … there are many famous universities…. Their standards’ really good - say Yale, Harvard and Princeton, Cornell, Dartmouth. Now this factor overrides the other factor [meaning safety]…. I mean say if I go to study in Yale I can get a research fellowship so I don’t have to pay anything so that’s why we choose. Most of the students are really poor so we can’t afford, so we have to choose a place where they provide this money so we can do research and also we can get our academic credentials. (S50)

The negative views associated with the UK were somewhat surprising given the British Council (BC) has sustained a campaign to promote Britain as a welcoming study destination as a consequence of the belief racism is widespread in the UK (Merrick 2007; CUBO 2008). Our finding challenges education institutions and regulators who are tempted to offer but not provide a safe and welcoming environment. For our interviewees the key issue that belied BC marketing was the telling fact that Chinese students have to register with the police.

I mainly worry about … their attitude towards Asian people. For example, in England, I am not happy that they required the Chinese to go to the police department to get registered, because we don’t need to do this in other countries. I am especially not happy about this. (S1)

The ugliness of racism was also raised in relation to Russia though as with the quality of US and UK education institutions student security was commonly balanced against the quality of courses and financial cost.

My son studies music, majoring in saxophone. I think Russia is very good in music…. I worry about the security. My son called back a few days ago saying that there will be a skin-head parade, so the class will be stopped today. The music is good, but the security is terrible. We did compare Russia, France and Austria, the three countries that are very good at music. But comparatively, Russia is cheaper. (M12)

Much less concern was demonstrated by an uncle of another student studying in Russia.

Because this is not my own child, so my thought cannot be the thoughts of parents. I think safety will not be the most important. You will have safety problem in China too. It depends on the student. My concern is, and I discussed this with him before, that whether he can follow the class in the first year. This is the key issue. (G11, emphasis added)

The uncle suggested his relative lack of concern for his nephew’s security was a consequence of the somewhat distant character of the relationship but the contribution of one father suggests parents do not always prioritize security over opportunity.

You go out to study. If you want to be safe, you’d better stay in China, stay by your parents. If you want to choose from the two, I would say study comes first (F34).

By contrast with the negative views of safety in the USA, UK and Russia most interviewees, though not all, believed Australia provided a safe and welcoming environment even if few praised the quality of an Australian education.

Some of the bad guy[s] [in host countries] killed some students. So that is my worry but I never heard from Australia about this. (M49)

Australia. I think public securities are good there…. My friends and relatives have been there, and they said it’s quite stable there. (M1)
As far as I know, because I have not been abroad before, and I learned from television and from friends that Australia and New Zealand are good, and England is also good. I have not been there. (S1)

I have not made any studies on this I heard from my colleagues’ kids that Australia and Japan are relatively safe. (G11)

Mainly it is personal safety. The other is whether Australia has racial discrimination. It has good transportation safety, medical care systems, and living environment. At least he should have personal safety protection. Then, there shouldn’t be racial discrimination. And traffic safety. (M32)

These positive appraisals of student security in Australia preempted ‘exposures and warnings’ subsequently issued by China’s Government (Nyland et al 2009, 8). This order of events may explain why there was only one dissenting view on this issue:

I heard that when studying in Australia, the good guy and the bad guy are only one step away. So I worry very much. In Australia, will there be someone take him to places like casinos? (F44)

Despite the above view, there was little concern about the level of security in Australia. It should be noted at this point that participants were aware that we interviewers were from Australia and this may have coloured their answers.

While fear of crime dominated concerns relating to all countries other worries were identified. Parents of boys feared their sons would have difficulty coping with daily life.

If he lives there, he may have problems taking care of himself. (F34)

The students should be well managed even after first year in university. For Chinese students, even after they finish university, they still cannot take care of themselves well. This is common. (F33)

I think the child will tend to rely on parents when he stays with parents in China, and will have very poor ability to take care of himself. (M24)

For many, language was also perceived to be a concern. One father commented of his son who was already studying overseas, ‘he could not understand what was said. His mind is empty’ (F44), while others students yet to leave China and their parents feared the language difficulties they might encounter.

English is my concern. I heard a lot from friends and newspaper and the media saying that even if you have high scores in IELTS, you will still not understand when you get there. (S20)

One of the most salient findings was that parents were deeply concerned their sons and daughters may become ill and have no one to care for them.

It's only safety and health issues, such as going to hospital, and things like that. (S1)

I mainly worry about illness. (S1)

Who cares for them if student is ill, for example, in case of catching cold, or fever? … Will student[s] help each other if one has fever, and cannot move? Will the teachers help? (F2)
...there shouldn't be much to worry, except when ill, there should be some security in medical treatment. (S14)

... we are not sure, the medical care when getting ill. Is it covered through purchasing insurance policies, or will it be entirely borne by us? We need to know what security measures the university can provide. We certainly have such concerns, but I guess maybe we should ask the details when we get there. Because we don’t know, so we worry.... Also, there is the issue of accidents. Of course this is very special situation. But if accident happens, where we seek help? Organizations or individual? This we don’t know. (M14)

The salience of this finding relates to the fact that the many comments were spontaneous responses to an open ended open question. Participants advanced so queries related to health it was clear they were deeply concerned and lacked adequate knowledge of health care and insurance in the host country. Though parents were assured by the recruitment agent health insurance would be dealt with upon arrival many were ardent in wanting this information prior to the students’ sojourn.

Who Decides?

Clement’s (2009, 4) advises that the ‘search for safety is a balancing act’ this being an activity that entails weighing security against opportunity and balancing stakeholder views.

Mostly it is because of my wife. She wants to send our son abroad very much. I also think it’s a good idea, but we need to agree on this, though she has more saying. (F2)

Of course as parents, like the traditional education of the family, at the age of 22, it should be the time for her to make her own decision, but in Chinese tradition, such decisions should be approved by parents. (F17)

When making the decision, we all had the same idea. Our family is very democratic. It is not that you must listen to me. If the parents decided, and the child insisted on not agreeing, we shall not make her go. We discussed together, and we the parents wanted, and she agreed.... Our family is very typical in China; it is 4, 2, and 1, meaning grandparents, parents and one child. Grandparents on the mother side will not participate in this, so the main family members will be grandpa and grandma, parents, and the child. Everyone will take part in discussion. Why do we need all of them to discuss? One reason is that grandparents provided more financial support. If grandparents don’t say yes, we would not have enough financial resources. We need to use their fund to provide enough support of her... So we discuss and decide all together. (M31, emphasis added)

The democratic process explained above was substantially diminished when the mother explained her daughter had changed her course preference because of family pressure:

She wanted to study Japanese in university, but we all disagree. We cannot oppose her too much, and tell her what she should and what shouldn’t do. Then, she did not get into her ideal university, so we think this is a good opportunity to tell her to go abroad to study a better major, because our family can support her....to study finance and business. We are very satisfied with this major, and she accepted it as well. I think parents played 60% of the role, and she 40%. Why 60%? This is because we provide financial support, and without support, she would not be able to go. If parents did not propose this and discuss with her, she would stay in China to study Japanese, or propose to go to Japan. We did not want her to go to Japan, so we discussed with her, and said she’d better go to Australia. After discussion, at least she thought what we said was reasonable. So I said now you make decision yourself. (M31)
The foregoing revealed Xia et al (2005) finding that higher education decisions in China tend to be made jointly extends to international education. Typical of many responses, they reveal a decision making process where parent views are very important if not determinant. Exceptions were few. Only one student insisted the decision where to study was not influenced by his parents. This is not to suggest student preferences are irrelevant but that students did not make the decision alone. Indeed, in one case a father made it very clear that the parents determined where their son would study and it would appear that at best the latter merely had a right to veto a decision he disliked: ‘We made the decision. He cannot decide, but he has to agree’ (F23). In brief, comparing parent and student concerns against the reported dynamics contributing to the location decision revealed that families tend to compromise. The interviews revealed a mix of influences that balanced opportunity against costs, though security invariably remained an important influence. The responses suggest caution needs to be exercised when drawing on student preference surveys to determine which issues decide where international students elect to study and parent’s concerns for security should be accorded greater attention by actors that wish to recruit high quality international students.

**Reasons for Relocation**

Our interviewees had previously decided to undertake study outside China, which meant the group did not include individuals who had allowed concerns regarding security to undermine such a decision. But the fact that almost all parents were worried about student security raises the question why these individuals were prepared to accept the risks associated with international education. Answers to this question centred on the desire to attend a well-regarded university, character building, and a wish to improve English language skills. A surprising number of parents (25 per cent) also candidly admitted the main reason they had chosen to have their sons and daughters study overseas was because their offspring had not secured a place at a leading Chinese university.

According to the situation of my daughter, she was not able get into a first class university in China, so she was worried. So we discussed which university my daughter could get in. I did not have very ambitious goal of getting in certain university, but hoped that she could go abroad after undergraduate studies. (M30)

First reason is that she is now in a five year college of teachers. When she graduated from junior middle school she was not sure if she can get into university, so she went to a professional college, just be on the safe side. Now she does not want to be a teacher, and wants to have a better career, so she chooses to go overseas to have more opportunity. (G45)

Maybe he did not do well in the examination, or he did not study well enough, he failed to get into the university. If he could take the examination again next year, he might still not be able to get in the university that he likes. If this is the case, he’d better go overseas to try something new. (F25)

The university entrance examination in China eliminated a large number of students. So he did not go to a good university in China. If he wants to have a better development in China, he needs to get a good masters degree. The university in China is already very competitive, so he only managed to get into one, and obtained a diploma but it is not very attractive one in China. So we hope he can go to overseas to get a better one to improve his chance. (F43)

The above examples were broadly representative and this finding suggests that in balancing risks and opportunities, the opportunities offered in the home country may be as equally important as are those offered by hosts internationally.
For some parents the importance of an international educational was enhanced by a belief that the experience would be character building.

If you consider the big environment … we’d better send our son abroad to see the world, and get some experiences of foreign environment, the society and people, get more information, and increase capabilities. (F2)

We wanted to let our daughter go out to see the world, learn more things. (M42)

Our son worked for two years, and felt that he did not learn enough knowledge. He said, Mum, I wanted to study more. I said, ok! He is the only child. It’s good for him to have some experiences of living in foreign countries, to experience some hard life. He wanted to, and we ought to support his decision. (M26)

It’s mainly because he is already grown up, we want him to go out to live on his own, and see the world. It should be good to him to travel to more places. (F23)

It was commonly believed that an international education experience would encourage greater independence and broaden horizons. Parents’ comments relating to a desire for student independence tended to relate to their sons, while those relating to the broadening of horizons can be attributed to both sons and daughters. This is a finding consistent with the work of Lin and Fu (1990) and Xu (1991) who report that contemporary Chinese families encourage both individualism and family connection.

Who has Responsibility for Security?

Supporting a previous study relating to international student security and relocation (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008), most interviewees believed responsibility for international student security should be apportioned across four dimensions – government, host institution, families, and the students themselves. Apportioning varied between participant responses with most believing responsibility lay primarily with the university and the government in the host country.

... it should mainly be the responsibility of the university. Government should have a special policy for international students, so that they can go to see the people that are responsible. I think this should be done by the government, and the university is very important, because students study there. (M1)

It should be the local government, police, or the university. There should be special personnel to be responsible for this. (S1)

First, it should be the university, because my son is studying there, so the university is directly related to the students…. I send my son there to study, so the university should be responsible for that. (F2)

The above participant reconsidered his position later in the interview:

First, it’s government, then, second, it is the university…. First, the government should have stable policy for universities. We don’t know much about foreign countries and the securities of foreign government for universities. (F2)

These findings correspond with the assertion that ‘Chinese people maintain a relatively strong belief in the need for the state to provide social protection’ (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008, 114). However, while interviewees believed students’ hosts shared primary responsibility for security provision they did not accept that once the student was resident in a host country their own governments were without responsibility. Many parents observed that if the security of an international student was threatened they should turn to their consulate.
In fact I really think that actually the protection should be from our embassy, consulates, if there are any. But I have asked people there. If something really happened, they do not really have the time and energy to take care of this. One should expect our embassy should be able to provide some help. But because there are so many people, I know someone working in the embassy; he cannot help so many people. So I did not count on this. (M18)

China has consulates in foreign countries. Chinese children may ask their embassy for help, and the embassy will help. After all, they are Chinese overseas students. (F33)

Embassies, such as the Chinese embassy, you may go to them for help in case of emergency. Before our child left, I gave him two lists, with telephones of the consulates in Toronto, and the embassy in the national capital. One list is in his wallet, and the other in his dormitory. In case of emergency, he may ask help from them. (M29)

The view that Chinese international students should turn to their consulates if host governments and institutions fail to provide adequately for their safety is shared by China’s officials. The New Zealand government became very aware of this perspective in 2003 when the Chinese Ministry of Education declared New Zealand an unsafe study destination and consequently devastated the education export sector. Similarly, it was brought home to Australia in 2008 at a seminar in the New South Wales Parliament that was attended by 150 Chinese students who were advised safety was not a serious problem in Sydney. At this point the promotion of this comforting message was undermined when a Chinese consulate representative advised that he had surveyed 100 Chinese students and found ‘more than one in four had been a victim of crime, 20 had been burgled at home and six had been robbed, several at knifepoint’. The official then proceeded to make it clear that the parents of international students in China can influence their state officials by advising that China’s government wanted Australia to take immediate steps to rectify this unsatisfactory situation. After a six-week period, China’s diplomats expanded on their initial intervention with ambassador Zhang Junsai declaring publicly that his government was unhappy with the security being provided Chinese students and insisting these students ‘deserve better’ from their hosts and subsequently informing the Australian government of steps the embassy would be taking to ensure this goal was realised (Nyland et al 2010).

Interviewees did not accept that because they believed education suppliers and government officials had ultimate responsibility for ensuring international student security this exonerated other parties. Both parents and students emphasized the importance of self-determining agency.

The government is only the larger environment, and the university should be responsible for the smaller environment. Also the student should have self-consciousness about securities. (M12)

... we need to take good care of ourselves, to protect ourselves.... I think we need to learn the local rules, regulations and laws. This is very important, because when we learned the rules, then we can follow them, and protect ourselves. (S14)

Students and parents offered numerous comments on how students could contribute to their own security the following being indicative.

Don’t go out too late and do not show others you have money. (S1)

Do not speak to strangers, and study in a normal way, and do not do things that student should not do. (S20)

Don’t learn to become a bad guy. I don’t know if there is someone seductive. (F44)
Some parents acknowledged students needed to make an effort to understand the host culture and ensure they have the language skills to communicate with local authorities.

First I ask my daughter to observe local laws, and study well. We don’t know foreign countries well, but we know they have laws and we need to observe the laws in our life. Second, security is a complicated issue…. We cannot asking too much of the local authorities, we can only protect ourselves well. (F5)

In case of threat or crisis, we need to tell the school, and let the school to contact the police station, or we call the police by telephone. This needs that we first try to study English well, and get to know the society well. So basically, it’s the language ability, and insurance. (F2)

If we have relatives and friends there, we will tell her to contact them, and get help when needed. And we need to contact frequently. Now, we at home feel there is really not much help. (G28)

A lack of familiarity of the host country was troubling for many. They feared risk to person and property. It was widely believed that greater knowledge of the host country would contribute to student security and there was concern that students had not been provided with sufficient knowledge to ensure they remained safe.

CONCLUSION

Our qualitative approach adds a new dimension to the international education literature, which is a field of study that has been dominated by quantitative student surveys. The depth of insight into the processes entailed in the study location decision made possible by embracing a qualitative approach has been further enriched by the fact that parents as well as students were interviewed. These features together revealed that Chinese parents play a critical but previously undocumented role in the study location decision. It has also been shown that the preferences of parents are not consistent with the great emphasis on reputation of education institutions that surveys of student preferences invariably report. Reputation of the education supplier is important and tends to be clearly reflected in the final outcome of the location decision process. But so too is the weighting parents place on student security an emphasis that is not necessarily captured by asking students what was important to them when they were deciding where to study. When seeking to balance security and costs against opportunity the interviews have shown that Chinese families tend to choose outcomes that balance the preferences of students and parents. What this finding suggests is that there is a level of participatory democracy within the Chinese family that both those seeking to promote international student security and international exports would be wise to remember.

Understanding why parents who are concerned for the wellbeing of their sons and daughters would have them study outside China has revealed that Chinese parents balance security against opportunity. A surprising number of parent interviewees reported their offspring were studying or intended to study in another country because they had not achieved the grades required to gain entry into an elite Chinese education institution. These parents were willing to balance the short term threat to the student’s security entailed in having them study in another country against the long term danger that they will not be able to gain the lifetime security that may be generated through gaining qualifications from institutions of high repute. In many cases it was believed that a degree from a low level institution in another country outweighs the rewards likely to emanate from gaining a qualification from a low level Chinese institution.

Finally, both parents and students accepted they have a responsibility to provide the means that will enable the student to remain secure while studying in a foreign land. However, both were adamant that host governments and universities must share this responsibility and their own government has a duty to ensure this is done. The strength of this conviction and the fact that it is
shared by Chinese state officials explains why China’s government elected to intervene both in New Zealand and in Australia. In 2009 the international education sector became fixated on the way that the Indian Government and media responded when Indian students protested at what they saw as the failure of the Australia Government to provide for their security. What was missed in the clamor, however, was the quiet insistence of Chinese officials that the security of their student citizens must be adequately provided for by their hosts. International education theorists and practitioners should pay due attention to this perspective and in so doing remember that the parents of Chinese international students have influence within China.
REFERENCES


