

# “There are always two voices...”: International Students’ Intentions to Stay in the United States or Return to their Home Countries

Heike C. Alberts\* and Helen D. Hazen\*\*<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The scale of movement of international students has increased dramatically in the post-war period, with the United States acting as a major destination owing partly to a good education system and generous funding of graduate studies. Officially, these migrations are expected to be temporary and visa restrictions are applied accordingly; in reality many international students never return to their home countries. Despite the large number of international students in the United States, little research has been done about this group of professional migrants. Using focus group interviews, we investigate the factors that motivate students to stay in the United States or return home on completion of their degrees. We identify three categories of motivating factors: professional, societal, and personal. Among our study participants, professional factors were generally cited as encouraging the students to stay in the United States, while societal and personal factors were more likely to draw them back to their home countries, although wide variations existed among individuals. Our results suggest that certain patterns exist among national groups. These operated in two main ways. First, specific characteristics of the home country (such as difficult political circumstances) provided state-specific influences on the decision-making process. Second, the relative weight assigned to each of the three groups of factors appeared to differ among national groups.

---

\* Department of Geography and Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, Wisconsin, USA.

\*\* Department of Geography, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minnesota, USA.

## INTRODUCTION

The pros and cons of host and home society must surely be discussed by every migrant at some time. As international students from Germany and the United Kingdom undertaking graduate studies in the United States, we were no different. We felt torn between wanting to return home because of friends and family in our home countries and feeling generally more comfortable there, and wanting to stay in the United States to take advantage of professional opportunities. The longer we stayed in the United States, the more factors we felt we had to take into account. Our international friends struggled with the same issues, and we spent hours discussing the pros and cons of returning home or staying in the United States. In these discussions it became clear that certain factors mattered to all of us, while others were specific to our respective home countries, and yet others particular to individuals. In order to pursue these ideas, we developed this study.

The exchange of highly skilled individuals among countries is not a new phenomenon, but the scale of international academic exchanges has increased dramatically since World War II, with the United States acting as a focus of activity (Cheng and Yang, 1998). The initial push to increase international student enrolment in US universities was in response to fears that the United States was falling behind the former USSR in science and engineering fields, a fear that was reinforced by the “Sputnik shock” of the 1950s (Ong and Liu, 1994). Immigration of trained professionals was supplemented with an increase in the number of international students, especially after 1965 when changes in immigration law made it easier for foreigners to enter as international students and then adjust their status to permanent residency (Ong and Liu, 1994). Since then, the number of international students in the United States has increased steadily. The State Department issued only 65,000 student visas in 1971; by 2000 that figure was 315,000, and in 2002 the number of international students in the United States may have reached 1 million (Borjas, 2002). As a result, it has been estimated that in the early years of this decade foreign students received 35 per cent of doctorates in the physical sciences, 49 per cent of those in engineering (Borjas, 2002) and almost half of those awarded in economics (Baker and Finn, 2003).

It is widely agreed that many international students do not return to their home countries on completion of their degrees, although there is disagreement over the exact proportion that remains in the United States. Johnson and Regets (1998) reported that in the early 1990s more than 60 per cent of foreign doctoral students *planned* to stay in the United States after completing their degrees, and sources documenting students from particular countries often provide even higher figures. Few sources report how many students *actually* stayed,

however, owing to the challenges of obtaining this information. Finn (2003) provides one study that does quote actual stay rates, calculated from data provided by the tax authorities. He found differences in stay rates by discipline (with stay rates being highest for science and engineering students and lowest among economics and social science students) and nationality (with the highest rates among Chinese (96%) and Indian students (85%) – the two largest international students groups in the US). A few articles in the popular press have also reported return rates among students and professionals, particularly those from India and China (e.g. Baum, 1994; Yatsko, 1997), usually emphasizing how few return. Even though students' migration intentions are an imperfect measure of the number of students who actually stay (Baker and Finn, 2003), they are a useful indicator of future migration decisions (Li et al., 1996). More importantly, they provide important insights into the factors that students consider important in making their decision.

The 1960s and 1970s spawned an extensive literature about the movement of highly skilled migrants from developing countries to the West – the so-called "brain drain". This literature centred either on the consequences of the brain drain to the countries of origin or on the benefits to the host countries, but largely neglected to explore the motivations of individuals. Interest in professional migrants increased again during the 1990s, partly due to a paradigm shift away from the focus on brain drain to a world systems perspective that emphasized interconnections among countries (Ouaked, 2002). The term "brain circulation" was coined to represent the fact that many migrations of the highly skilled are temporary, not permanent, as the original brain drain literature suggested (e.g. Gaillard and Gaillard, 1997; Johnson and Regets, 1998; Pellegrino, 2001). Despite this paradigm shift, there is still little information available about highly skilled migrants (Iredale, 2001), particularly those from high-income countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, or Japan – all countries which send large numbers of professionals to the United States (Cheng and Yang, 1998). This is somewhat surprising as there is now increasing concern in many high-income countries about the loss of skilled individuals, as evidenced by European Union (EU) fellowships to encourage the repatriation of highly skilled Europeans.

Those studies of professional migration that do exist tend to focus on professionals sent abroad by their companies or recruited through specific recruitment programmes. Relatively little is known about other forms of skilled migration, and studies on international students are particularly scarce. Most of the information that has been collected about international students describes their experiences in the host country (e.g. Bystydzienski and Resnik, 1994; Ghosh and Wang, 2003), particularly in the contexts of education and psych-

ology (e.g. McNamara and Harris, 1997), rather than their migration patterns. Rao (1979) provided one of the few broad-scale studies on international students and migration, using a quantitative analysis to investigate international students in the context of the brain drain in the 1970s. Most other studies of international students in the United States have focused on one single nationality (e.g. Zweig and Changgui (1995) looked at Chinese students), or one discipline (e.g. Baker and Finn (2003) assessed stay rates among economics students). Other authors have examined international student mobility within the EU (e.g. Balaz and Williams, 2004; King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Li et al., 1996). While these studies have greatly enhanced our knowledge of international students' migration experiences, the findings cannot easily be applied to the US context because most international student migrations in the EU take place between two EU countries and, therefore, do not face the migration restrictions that must be tackled in the United States. Furthermore, the prevalence of exchange programmes such as ERASMUS means that the majority of international students in Europe are exchange students, rather than degree-seeking students.

A number of studies have analysed how people decide whether or not to migrate. These studies usually emphasize that decision making is a complex process involving a large number of factors (e.g. Fischer et al., 1997), but few studies examine which of these factors are common across the board, which ones exhibit patterns by nationality, and which ones are specific to individual circumstances. Furthermore, most studies continue to focus on immigrants – people who migrate with the intention to stay in the host country – and not on people who adjust their status after a temporary stay in the United States, as is the case for many international students. As a result, few studies concern themselves with exploring the factors that determine whether or not a migrant returns. In fact, Balaz and Williams (2004) identify the return migration of international students as one of the most significant gaps in the literature on highly skilled migrants. Studies that examine the microlevel processes involved in international student migrations, especially those related to return migrations, are, therefore, particularly apposite.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In order to get an understanding of which criteria international students take into consideration when trying to decide whether or not to return home on completion of their degrees, and to learn about their personal views on their migration decision, we conducted a series of focus group interviews with students from six different countries. In addition to the focus groups, we had informal conversations with international students from a variety of other countries, some of which are also reported here.

We chose focus groups as our main research tool because they allow the researcher to observe relatively natural conversations between people and make it possible for the participants to direct the conversation (Morgan, 1996). This was particularly important in this context as we did not want to lead the conversation according to our own preconceptions. As female students of the same age, both studying geography, and from countries with a similar standard of living to the United States, we did not want to introduce biases from our very similar personal backgrounds and experiences.

Each focus group was with students of one nationality on the grounds that individuals from different socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts might use different criteria to make migration choices. As Morgan (1996) points out, organizing focus groups around meaningful categories incorporates a comparative dimension in a research project and can facilitate conversation among participants. It is important, however, to realize that differences among students of the same nationality can be masked by such an approach, and so the researcher must be wary of essentializing nationality from the data collected.

The focus group interviews took place between July 2003 and May 2004. All participants were international students enrolled at the University of Minnesota at the time of the interview. We aimed to include as diverse a body of students as possible within the focus groups, in order to capture as many opinions as possible. We had approximately equal numbers of male and female participants, together representing 16 different disciplines, including the sciences, humanities, arts, and professional schools. Although the majority of participants were pursuing doctoral degrees, our groups also included masters and undergraduate students. All students had arrived in the United States between 1993 and 2003. Table 1 shows the number of participants from different categories.

We conducted focus groups with students from China, Greece, India, Japan, the Netherlands, and Tanzania. Our choice of nationalities was not geared toward getting a representative sample of all international students at the University of Minnesota, but rather to sample within subpopulations that we felt would provide different motivations for their decisions. These subpopulations included students from low-income as well as high-income countries, and students from countries sending large numbers of international students to the United States, such as India and China (452 and 694 students at the University of Minnesota during the 2003-2004 academic year (Open Doors, 2004)), as well as countries that send relatively few (just 12 Dutch and 20 Greek students attended the University of Minnesota during the 2003-2004 academic year (Open Doors, 2004)). Our decision to interview students from three different continents was geared toward covering a wide cultural spectrum. A diversity of views in each

individual focus group was ensured by organizing each focus group to have both male and female participants, as well as students from a variety of disciplines. We recruited our participants by posting an announcement about our study on the listservs of a variety of international student organizations and by using the friendship networks of international students we already knew to spread information about our study and ask for volunteers.

TABLE 1

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 31 PARTICIPANTS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

Category	Number of participants
Country of origin	China (4), Greece (5), India (7), Japan (5), the Netherlands (5), Tanzania (5)
Discipline	Social Sciences (18), Science & Engineering (11), Professional Degrees (2)
Sex	Female (15), Male (16)
Year of arrival for current degree	1993 (2), 1995 (1), 1997 (2), 1998 (4), 1999 (7), 2000 (6), 2001 (4), 2002 (2), 2003 (3)

Our focus group interviews lasted on average an hour and a half. We asked open-ended questions, trying to elicit as much discussion among group members on the issues under study as possible. Throughout the focus group interviews we also frequently asked the participants to provide us with more detailed background about their respective home countries, for example, whether or not their home countries encouraged international students to return after the completion of their degrees, and how students evaluated the labour markets in their respective fields back home. We took extensive notes during the focus group interviews, and then fully transcribed the tape recording of each meeting afterwards. Each of our transcripts was checked for accuracy by at least one member of the respective focus group. We then proceeded by coding the interview transcripts and searching for common themes. Next we tried to identify patterns by groupings such as nationality, gender and discipline. We also paid close attention to interactions between students. In particular, we looked for evidence of agreement or disagreement between group members, and noted the interpretations that the students themselves provided of other group members' comments. This is critically important for getting an understanding of both individual voices and shared points of view among participants – one of the main advantages of collecting data through focus groups (Goss and Leinbach, 1996; Morgan, 1998). Finally, we asked a member of each focus group for feedback on our draft article in order to make sure that we did not misinterpret or misrepresent any statements made during the interviews.

## ORIGINAL REASONS FOR COMING TO THE UNITED STATES

Before we can think about students' motivations at the completion of their degrees, we have to understand why they decided to come to the United States as international students in the first place. We, therefore, asked our participants what had originally motivated them to come to the United States. While our informants brought up a large number of factors, two stood out as the most universal: the availability of funding for graduate education and the overall quality of US graduate programmes. Students from all focus groups agreed that funding opportunities in the United States were far better than those available in their respective home countries or in other countries that they had thought about applying to for graduate school. The good reputation of US graduate schools also contributed to their decision. This is consistent with previous studies that found that international students believe that US graduate education is superior to that in their home countries (e.g. Baker and Finn, 2003). We did identify some differences according to discipline. Students in technical fields were more likely to mention better access to equipment such as research labs and computers as a major factor, while students in the social sciences were often attracted by the breadth of courses available and the possibility of interdisciplinary work. Several Asian students stated that their disciplines do not exist or are marginal back home (e.g. Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology). As May<sup>2</sup> (China) explained, "[My discipline] was cancelled in China when the Communist Party came to power. They thought everything should be under the order of the State. Why did we need social scientists?"

While professional reasons were clearly dominant among the students who came to complete degrees in the United States, those who initially came as exchange students usually cited getting experience abroad, a "certain fascination with the US" (Jonas, the Netherlands) or curiosity as the main reason for their initial visit.<sup>3</sup> Once in the United States many of the students found that they also liked that they were welcomed as international students and felt comfortable in the international academic community, as evidenced by the following exchange in the Dutch focus group:

Ria: [Americans] are pretty open and accepting, and they like international students.

Mies: I think that's a big reason why I came because as an international student you feel welcome here. (...) It makes you feel at home. They have all these opportunities for you like Small World Coffee Hour and the international student associations. So even as an international student you don't feel lost.

A number of the motivating factors provided by informants were specific to conditions in the home country and, therefore, showed patterns by nationality.

Many of these focused on academic issues. Both the Dutch and the Japanese students in our focus groups described the academic atmosphere in the United States as more open and less hierarchical than that of their home countries, noting that student relationships with faculty were “more relaxed” (Ria, the Netherlands) and “more straight forward” (Taro, Japan) in the United States. Students from all three Asian focus groups emphasized the degree of academic freedom they found in the United States. Some of them felt “suffocated” (Abhay and Prajwala, India) in their home countries because they were not allowed to undertake the research they wanted, or were disappointed by conservative research approaches back home (Jun and Jiro, Japan). In addition, in the case of the Chinese, Indian, and Tanzanian focus groups, there was a belief that a degree from a US university would improve job prospects back home, and some of the Tanzanians had even been sponsored to come to the United States.

Finally, several reasons were given that were specific to individual circumstances and did not, therefore, correlate well with nationality. For instance, Sofia (the Netherlands) mentioned an American boyfriend as a motivating factor for returning to study for a degree after having participated in an international exchange programme in the United States, while Manca (Tanzania) noted that she was keen to improve her English language skills. Overall, professional reasons to come to the United States clearly predominated across the board. Specific conditions in certain countries, such as a stuffy academic atmosphere, acted as an additional incentive for those of some nationalities, however. For some individuals, circumstances specific to their personal situation were also influential.

## INTENTION TO RETURN

One of our main interests was whether international students initially saw their stay in the United States as temporary, or as a springboard toward a permanent stay from the outset. It has been argued that international students see a US degree as a necessary step toward finding employment in the United States and obtaining permanent immigration status (Rao, 1995), or even that foreigners come to the United States to study “precisely because a student visa buys them a ticket into the country” (Borjas, 2002; see also Li et al., 1996). We found that in most cases the situation was nowhere near as premeditated as this quotation implies. More than half of the students who participated in our study stated that they had originally intended to go back home when they first started their academic programmes in the United States. Maria (Greece) represents one extreme of this continuum: “The original intent was to go back, I still want to go back, and I will go back”. However, only a relatively small number of students

were sure that they would leave the United States *immediately* after the completion of their degrees; the vast majority instead expressing a desire to work in the United States for a few years before returning home. Work experience in the United States was seen as critical to job prospects back home for several students from Japan and China, while other students from low-income countries wanted to make some money in the United States to take home as a start-up fund or safety net. Some students had no clear intentions when they first arrived, and wanted to make up their minds once they had spent more time in the United States. Just three students were sure from the outset that they would try to stay permanently in the United States – a direct contradiction of the image of the typical international student arriving with the intent to immigrate permanently.

Irrespective of their original intentions, having now completed part of their programmes,<sup>4</sup> the vast majority of our participants felt torn between staying in the United States and returning to their home countries. "There are always two voices. One says to go back to China, and the other says to stay here" (Xiping, China). Of those students who had been living in the United States for several years, many expressed the view that they no longer really knew where they belonged: "When I'm here I miss home, and when I'm home I miss the things that go with being here" (Sofia, the Netherlands). For most, feelings about return had changed over time and fluctuated depending on circumstances, as expressed by Fun (China): "There are many factors that pull me back and forth. Sometimes I want to stay, and sometimes I want to go". Many students commented that the decision was not a simple one because so many factors had to be taken into account.

The factors that our participants reported can be broken down into three broad categories. We use the category "professional factors" to include any reasons concerned with wages, work conditions and facilities, and opportunities for professional advancement. We define "societal factors" very broadly as those connected to how comfortable the student feels in a particular social, political, and cultural environment. This includes how the student feels living in a society with different patterns of acceptable behaviour, gender relations, and expectations of young people. Finally, we understand "personal factors" as anything related to the personal circumstances of an individual, such as family status and friendship networks. It should be noted that it is not always possible to assign a specific factor to just one of these categories as they are not mutually exclusive and are in many cases interdependent. For example, personal circumstances and preferences are shaped to some degree by societal norms. However, this categorization system provides a starting point for generating some order from the array of responses received.

## Professional factors

Remarkably few informants cited any professional reasons for returning to their home countries. The main exceptions to this rule were among students in the Tanzanian and Chinese focus groups. The majority of the Tanzanian students had jobs waiting for them back home – two had even been sponsored to come to the United States on the understanding that they would go back to Tanzania – providing an obvious incentive to return. In addition, Tanzania was seen as providing a more level playing field for getting a job:

[The US] is a very competitive society, so in some situations we are competed out, and we think we can fairly compete back home, and even with more advantage, you know, an added advantage with the wealth of experience and exposures from this country. And so we see more opportunities if we go home to Tanzania than stay here (Babu, Tanzania).

The Chinese, by contrast, described government incentives to return, making professional opportunities in the home country more attractive. The participants explained that the Chinese Government offers incentives for US-educated people to return, as it is interested in gaining access to Western know-how. In particular, those with English skills are valued as being able to promote Westernization and globalization (Dao, China). The Government offers returnees salaries that can compete with those in Western countries, and provides attractive housing opportunities. According to our participants, some Chinese companies and universities actively contact Chinese students in the United States to try to persuade them to return to China. Despite these efforts, our informants stated that the vast majority of Chinese students still decide to stay in the United States after completing their degrees. This finding is backed by a study by Finn (2003), which found that, in 2001, 96 per cent of Chinese students stayed in the United States on completion of their degrees.

With the exception of the Chinese, none of the students knew of any government incentives for students to return and most reported that their governments were not concerned about “brain drain”, as far as they were aware. As Jiro from Japan explained: “The Japanese Government is more concerned about attracting foreigners than about losing Japanese.” The Dutch Government appeared similarly unconcerned, as described by Mies: “Are there incentives? I don’t even know if they [the Dutch Government] know that I am here!”

In short, we found that it is rare for international students to believe they would be better off professionally in their home countries. Consistent with this, our informants listed a number of professional and economic reasons to stay in the United States. Almost all students, irrespective of their discipline or nationality, agreed that despite the recent economic downturn it was generally easier to find

a US job than one in their home countries. Other reasons, however, varied by nationality and discipline. Unsurprisingly, students from low-wage nations such as India and China, considered the better wages and higher economic standard of living in the United States as important factors (although the Tanzanians provide a notable exception to this generalization). Marco, for example, remarked that he would soon be able to buy a car and a house in the United States, something he could not dream of doing if he returned to his native Serbia. The Chinese students, in particular, were also attracted by the higher degree of professional freedom that they could enjoy in the United States compared with in China, where research and work activities continue to be strictly controlled by the state. Positive feelings about the open work environment were also expressed in the Dutch, Indian, and Japanese focus groups. Some who wanted to stay in research also commented that state-of-the-art research facilities in the United States were a big incentive to stay (Marco, Serbia; Romi, India).

In addition to the attractions that the United States holds for professional development, several students noted that there would be actual obstacles to their return home. Some students in technical disciplines believed that they would not be able to apply what they have learned in the United States back home because their home countries were not as advanced in their fields (Lou and Cosmas, Greece; Romi, India). Concerns among social scientists typically revolved around not being able to apply their knowledge to a different social and cultural context (Charu, India; May, China). For those wanting to stay in academia, another concern was differences in the university system itself, as expressed by Mies (the Netherlands): "I don't know if I could go back to a European university system now that I am used to a different attitude. (...) You have a different approach to the way you want to teach and the university system works." Finally, the Japanese students listed bureaucratic obstacles to their return. Shimo and Ai stated that their US degrees would probably not be accepted in Japan, while Jiro pointed out that many jobs in Japan are only internally advertised and so the lack of Japanese networking opportunities in the United States may prove a critical blow. Finally, Shimo explained that it is hard to find a job in Japan once you are older than age 35, and so spending time in the US decreases students' opportunities to get into Japanese companies. Despite these potential obstacles, the vast majority of our participants from all countries believed that studying in the United States had been beneficial overall to their career prospects. For most, the greatest professional payback from this investment would be experienced by staying in the United States to work.

### **Societal factors**

While almost all of our study participants would stay in the United States for professional reasons, "feeling more comfortable in the country of origin" was

cited by every student without exception as a draw to return to the home country. Although there were some differences between nationalities, the commonalities among students were typically much stronger than the differences. It is worth noting that discussions of “societal” issues initiated some of the most emotionally charged statements from students as they explained the disadvantages of the United States. This may in part be because feelings of general dissatisfaction with the migration experience are being projected onto the host country. However, this assessment of a statement is hard to prove and so we report factors here in the way that they were expressed by our participants.

Many informants expressed how they felt that they had arrived in an alien culture with an alien lifestyle, as expressed by Babu (Tanzania): “It is a very different country, different culture, different lifestyle. (...) You know, your culture is part of you, and so sometimes it is difficult to completely leave part of you behind.” Even after several years in the United States, many students expressed dissatisfaction or frustration with American<sup>5</sup> values, such as individualism, materialism, and competitiveness, and students in all focus groups commented independently about how money and personal achievements are too commonly used as measures of success in the United States. As Michael (Greece) put it, “happiness is measured by what you have, not by who you are”. This concern with materialism was also expressed in the Tanzanian focus group, which described the American lifestyle as “not sustainable”, and portrayed the American Dream as a facade of affluence, only supported by debt and psychological stress. (This perhaps explains why the Tanzanian group stood out as the only group from a low-income country that did not consider a higher standard of living to be an attraction of the United States.) In several focus groups (China, Greece, India, and Tanzania) participants explained that individualism is in contrast to their native societies, as explained by Lou (Greece): “This is too materialistic a society for me – the values are different. In Greece we care about democracy – we don’t just advertise it. We care about the family; we care about a lot of things.” As a result, many students explained how they feel that they are evaluated by standards that they do not believe in, and that despite their professional success something important is missing in their lives. “There is a lack of family and community here. There’s an emptiness here that you don’t feel anywhere else in the world, a feeling of isolation” Charu (India). Even the western European students, who generally showed the lowest levels of alienation from American society, often described social relations differing from the situation in their home countries. As Sarah (UK) said, “in America people are more concerned about *standard of living* and working hard to acquire things – money, material goods..., whereas in Europe it’s *quality of life* that counts”. This difference in attitudes toward work and social life was animatedly expressed by Sofia (the Netherlands), who had committed to stay in the United States with her American husband:

My big pet peeve...and I still am not over this...is that I cannot get used to the idea that I will have to find a job here when I am done where I only get ten vacation days! And when I am sick, I have to be glad that I have *some* form of health insurance. And if I am pregnant I have to be glad if my job is still there when I go back. (...) I want to visit home too, so if I only have ten vacation days, I will always go to the Netherlands. But I like to travel too. How am I supposed to do that if I only have that limited amount of time? I always think it's very ironic that they call America the "Land of the Free" because for me it's definitely not the "Land of the Free"!

Despite such criticisms of US work conditions, few interpreted them as a critical factor in terms of professional decisions. In this context, "poor" work conditions were typically seen as an inconvenience that would be counterbalanced by the availability of well-paid jobs. Instead, expressing dissatisfaction with US working conditions appeared more often to be a way to validate more general feelings of discomfort related to not fitting into broader US society. Participants used the idea of the work-leisure balance as a way to provide a concrete example of differences in social structure and societal priorities between the United States and home. For instance, two students stated that, in their opinions, the long hours that Americans work did not leave sufficient time for family responsibilities and keeping up friendships in the same way as in their countries (Charu, India; Dao, China).

In a similar vein, in several of the focus groups students observed that Americans have a different understanding of friendship from their own. Several expressed that they simply do not have the same interests as Americans, or are used to communicating in different ways, as illustrated by Fun (China): "The topics Americans are interested in are sports, TV, things like that. For Chinese it's more comfortable to share personal feelings with one another. Americans are really friendly, but it is very hard to reach their hearts." These problems are often exacerbated by language barriers, which many students felt made expressing themselves difficult, particularly when discussing emotional issues (Xiping, China). Because of these social and linguistic differences, participants explained that they do not understand Americans, and that Americans do not understand them. As a consequence, many of the international students we interviewed stated that they mostly have other foreigners as friends – an important indication of a lack of integration into American society. For some groups (e.g. Chinese, Greeks, Indians, Tanzanians), active national student associations or cohesive national friendship groups evidenced the importance of having close friends from the home country, while for others it is not the nationality that matters, but a shared understanding of what friendship means with other foreigners: "I don't have many American friends. They often don't understand me. It's a different culture. I get along well with the other Europeans – they just understand me and I understand them. (...) I don't think I am assim-

ilated well, but thank God there are enough foreigners around here!” (Marco, Serbia). Taro (Japan) shared similar feelings: “I realize most people I hang out with are other international students. I hardly know any Americans to whom I am close. It’s much easier to become friends with other international students.”

Many of our focus group participants felt that they do not fully understand American culture, traditions, and norms of behaviour, and therefore feel more comfortable in their home countries, as explained by Ai (Japan): “In Japan I know the appropriate behaviours, what I am expected to say. In Japan I am able to handle everything. Here, in many situations I am not familiar with, I am not sure how to act. So I feel much more comfortable in Japan.” This idea of not really understanding or not belonging was expressed in many different ways. For instance, Dao (China) explained that “here I always feel alien – no matter how good my English is, no matter how long I have lived here, no matter what social status I have achieved”.

For some, feelings of alienation were reinforced by concerns with racism in the United States, which was mentioned on several occasions and in several contexts. Members of the Tanzanian focus group emphasized the role of racism in encouraging their return home to a greater degree than any other group. No specific racist attacks were mentioned; instead discussions were focused on the fact that students felt generally uncomfortable in the United States on account of their race, as summarized by Lelo: “I think, as a human being, the first thing I like in life is acceptance, and if you knock at your neighbor’s door you can see in his eyes if he really accepts you”. A number of other students, across all nationalities, expressed discomfort with the rising level of nationalism in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, and heightened security measures toward foreigners. Most students agreed that some discrimination and racism, especially toward students of colour, existed before September 11, but it had increased since then. While most white students had not experienced any incidences of racism, several of them did express that they were uncomfortable about the increased security measures and the direction that US politics is now taking. For instance, Jonas (the Netherlands) described how he gets “a nasty vibe from what’s going on right now, especially with getting my own personal bar code from Homeland Security. I think that’s all kind of eerie.” Others voiced concerns about the possibility of the US Government monitoring phone calls home (Johannes, Austria), being fingerprinted at the border, the questions being asked of men concerning their experiences with handling weapons (Markus, Germany), and whether they would be readmitted to the United States after a visit home (Hassan, Pakistan; Shivan, India).

On a lighter note, another issue that was very commonly brought up was food, which was specifically mentioned by members of all groups as an attraction of

home. The psychological importance attached to traditional foods seems to run far deeper than simply taste and nutrition; instead, food becomes almost a surrogate for the familiar culture that is missing. The Dutch, for instance, described how making Dutch food was often a focal point of their get togethers, while Stavros (Greece) explained that for him, "the quality of food is the quality of life".

Although societal factors typically operated as a draw to return to the home country, several students talked about social or cultural characteristics that actually make them feel more comfortable in the United States. For instance, positive ideas related to the multiculturalism of the United States were shared by several students. As Charu (India) stated:

The quality of life is definitely better here, and I am not just talking about the money, but also about the people you meet here. You can choose among quality people, because the best from around the world come here. It's great to have all these experiences and meet people from all over the world, to work through your prejudices and limitations and try to be a true citizen of the world rather than myopic.

For several female students from more traditional societies, particularly those from India, another appeal of US society was its greater gender equality, as illustrated by Romi (India): "Of course I enjoy the freedom here. If I don't want to cook, I can ask my husband to cook...or I can order pizza; in India that wouldn't work." Several of the women felt that they had become different people in the United States in response to the greater freedoms women enjoy here, and that they would have a hard time fitting in again in their native culture. Charu (India) went so far as to suggest that she would now feel more foreign in India than in the United States, explaining: "In the four years I have been here I feel that there is nothing to go back to. (...) To go back would be going back into the folds of the community. I think in India I live for my family. Here I live for me." Although such issues were largely described by women, one Japanese man (Juri) hinted at the opposite side of the coin – the stress that accompanies the loss of status he felt as a man coming to a more egalitarian society:

There is the sense of being a minority in the United States, and I think that may be stronger for men than for women, because I think that men in Japan have that ego, and you are expected to take leadership and people expect certain things. That sort of structure goes away when you come here. You have to speak up for yourself, and you have to show what you can do. Maybe women...feel more comfortable here.

For others, it was unfavourable political situations back home that were more influential and would actually discourage a return home (Dao, China; Marco, Serbia). For some of the Chinese, political uncertainty, lack of reform, and corruption were seen as troubles to be avoided by a life in the United States, as

explained by Dao (China): “[Despite recent improvements in China], the political environment is still unclear. Superficially, China is developing quickly, but there are many uncertainties. Nobody knows, some day there will be one spot that explodes and the whole country will shake. This is always a danger and you cannot ignore that”. Also on a political theme, Lou (Greece) mentioned that for some Greeks studying abroad could be used as a way to avoid military service or express disagreement with the Greek Government.

Societal factors were described and expressed by our participants in a wide variety of ways: different understandings of friendship, the importance assigned to work and play, and even the role of food in day-to-day life. Whereas professional influences were typically tangible facts that the students could consciously weigh, societal factors were more often expressed in emotional terms: feelings of comfort, feelings of stress, and feelings of alienation. Assessing the role of these sorts of intangible factors is challenging but essential to uncovering the whole picture.

### **Personal factors**

Personal factors were mentioned by all participants in making their decision. These factors, or the importance given to them, were often closely intertwined with societal and cultural issues. For example, while family ties were mentioned by all nationalities, the importance accorded to them was heavily influenced by broader cultural attitudes toward family and notions of obligations toward family and community.

Three students in our study were married to Americans (one Dutch, one Greek, and one Japanese), and so in these cases family ties actually worked to keep them in the United States. These students all expressed concerns over how their respective partners would fare with the language and cultural challenges of living in their home society. Jun (Japan) explained that the main issue was not unwillingness to move on the part of his wife, but rather his anticipation of the cultural and professional challenges that she would face. When there are children in the family a return often becomes yet more difficult, even when both parents are of the same nationality. Many of our participants (even those who do not currently have children) expressed concern that their children would not want to leave the United States once they had spent some time there, and that they themselves would think twice before pulling their children out of their schools. For others, children were seen as a reason to return to the home country. Several students expressed concerns over bringing children up in the United States, often because of less disciplined styles of child-rearing, as expressed in the following quotation: “I hear children here saying ‘I want this’ or ‘I hate

you'; Oh man, you can never say that in India!" (Paranjape, India). Others feared that their children would experience the same sort of identity crisis that they themselves had suffered through living between cultures: "[I'm worried about] the kind of identity struggles that they will go through. By the time they are eight or nine they are already asking all sorts of strange questions when they come back from school" (Abhay, India).

For all students, however, family and friends in the home country acted as a strong force drawing them back, and several students expressed the idea that family and friends become more important once you are away from them. For those with partners and even children living in their home country the desire to return home was, unsurprisingly, particularly strong. There were clear differences between students from different countries concerning how much family ties in their home countries would influence their decisions, however, the Indians, Greeks, and Tanzanians focused particularly strongly on matters of family. For instance, Babu (Tanzania) said: "[Back home] I know who is my uncle, who is my aunt, who is my niece, who is my everybody. We live in extended relations, we participate in everybody's events, they come to our events, and so we have each other's memories. That's the thing we miss in coming to this country." For some students, Asians in particular, the desire to be close to family members was not only a societal value, but also a moral obligation. For instance, the Japanese students reported that it is the first born son's obligation to take care of his parents, and it would reflect very poorly on him if he did not fulfil this obligation.

Irrespective of the strength of family ties, many international students were concerned about not being able to be with family members for important events. For example, Sabine (Germany) expressed her sadness at not being able to attend her best friend's wedding in Germany, and never even having had the chance to meet her friend's husband. Not being able to go home on short notice becomes an even greater problem when an emergency occurs back home. "If your parents are sick, you feel terrible that you can't do anything. One time when my father had a heart attack, I could only call every six hours and ask how he was. I couldn't do anything else, but if I was in India, I could have gone there" (Romi, India). Participants worried about events they miss now, but even more so about the future when their own parents may need help. As Jun (Japan) explained: "My grandmother died last week and I couldn't go. It made me feel so bad because everybody else in the family went to the funeral. It made me think what will happen when my parents are in their 70s. I feel a bit uneasy about being that far away. I never thought distance was such a big deal until the death of my grandmother." Some students brought up the topic of having their parents come to the United States to be with them, but most were convinced

that their parents would not feel comfortable migrating due to lack of language proficiency and other family connections in the home country. Being among family and old friends was also seen as important when the students themselves had problems, as explained by Manca (Tanzania): “People here are telling you that you are sad and that you should go and see the...what is that called?...the psychiatrist. But back home people will sit with me. (...) I mean at home you don’t even have to call people, they just say ‘hey, are you OK?’”.

For some, it was not just a feeling of responsibility to family that encouraged a return home, but also responsibility to the home society and a desire to reverse the brain drain or promote “development” in the home country (Pom, India; Dao and Xiping, China; Ladi, Tanzania). As Ladi said: “If you finish your PhD here, there are a lot of people like that here – you would just be adding a small amount of salt in an ocean, but if you go your presence there [Tanzania] is very significant and you will make a much bigger difference there than here”. This turned out to be a contentious issue in one of the Indian focus groups, which spent some time discussing whether the home society could best be helped by a student’s return, or by the students working abroad, thereby alleviating unemployment, and sending remittances back home. Broader feelings of patriotism and the wish to give something back to the home country were also expressed in the Chinese focus group, as shown by May: “I love my country very much. China is like a mother to me. Maybe she is not very beautiful, maybe not very healthy, but I feel deeply for her.” Despite such feelings of responsibility to the home society, students generally agreed that their having had the opportunity to study abroad was beneficial to the home country. As Romi (India) succinctly summarized, “People think brain drain is better than brain in a drain”.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Deciding whether to return to their home countries or to stay in the host country is a dilemma for most international students, and it seems that many find the decision becomes increasingly complex as their stay in the host country lengthens. This has certainly been our personal experience. We both came to the United States with the definite intention of returning to our respective home countries after the completion of our degrees, but have now both postponed our return as we have formed personal and professional ties in the United States. Like many of the participants, we feel that we do not fully belong here, but also feel that there are distinct advantages to staying in the United States, and that we would not fully fit in at home any more.

International students are a distinct group among professional migrants because most have considerable experience in the host country before they have to

decide whether to take the plunge as immigrants. They are, therefore, already familiar with the host society and have professional and personal connections in the host country before deciding to adjust their status from visitors to permanent residents. Instead of relying on hearsay and media portrayals, they can authoritatively weigh the factors speaking in favour of living in each country based on known facts and actual experiences. To a certain degree this experience complicates the issue, increasing the number of factors that must be evaluated in making the decision of whether to stay in the United States or return home. We summarized these many factors as professional, societal, and personal. Depending on individual circumstances, each of these groups of factors can function as either an incentive to stay or to return. However, irrespective of nationality, it appears that professional factors typically form the strongest arguments to stay in the United States, while personal and societal factors often speak strongly in favour of returning to the home country.

Across the board, all individuals react to a similar set of stimuli in trying to decide whether to stay in the United States or return home on completion of a degree (e.g. the desire to be near family, the desire to have a fulfilling career, the need for friends with whom they feel they have something in common). So, what leads individuals to make different choices? First, the particulars of the individual's situation influence which of the above stimuli act toward encouraging a return home, and which to a stay in the United States (e.g. Is the immediate family with the student in the United States or in the home country? How flexible is the chosen career in terms of where the student chooses to live? Does the individual have a large group of people with a similar cultural background and language living nearby in the United States from whom to draw friends?).

The second issue that appears to have a profound effect on the final decision is the relative weight assigned to these different groups of factors. It was here that differences among nationalities appeared to play a strong role. For instance, even though the Greeks in our study agreed that they would be better off professionally in the United States, the importance they attached to social and personal values appeared to outweigh professional concerns, and the majority favoured a return to Greece, even if that meant accepting a poorer job than they could get in the United States. Similarly, the Tanzanian focus group strongly emphasized the importance of family and their preference for their home culture, and all students expressed a desire to return home relatively quickly. The Chinese in our study, by contrast, considered social and personal reasons important, but for them constraints on a wider level, such as the insecure political situation in China and the economic and environmental problems in the country, seemed to override personal and societal pressures to return to some degree. In other words, the degree to which personal and societal factors can

be taken into account is constrained by other factors that tend to be specific to the country of origin rather than individual circumstances.

In summary, there are some factors that hold true for practically all international students regardless of their personal characteristics or the political, economic, and social characteristics of their home countries. These factors are related to the physical distance from one's home country and living in a different cultural environment. There are other factors that are clearly dependent on the home country, such as the perceived lack of freedom in some countries or political and economic instability, which influence the opportunity structures students would encounter upon returning to these countries. Under these circumstances, individual preferences may have to be subordinated to wider concerns. By contrast, for those students from countries with stable democracies, decent economies, and high levels of personal freedom (i.e. where there are no overarching deterrents to their return), the decision is typically more strongly influenced by individual preferences. For these individuals the question about whether to return or stay in the United States becomes determined by the strength of the links they have in each country, and whether they ultimately consider professional or personal/cultural factors more important to their lives.

The findings from this study suggest that return migration intentions are not only determined by a wide variety of factors, but also by wider contexts that constrain the degrees to which personal preferences can actually be taken into account. To some degree the relative weight assigned to these different factors is due simply to personal differences between individuals, such as their family connections or professional skills. Others, however, are circumscribed by culturally determined attitudes and traditions, as well as by conditions in the home country. We, therefore, argue that any discussion of return migration intentions cannot be limited to the microlevel of personal decisions, but also has to examine the macrolevel of constraints imposed by political and economic characteristics of both countries, and how these two interact in shaping migrants' decisions.

## NOTES

1. We would like to thank all the international students who participated in our focus groups, or shared their experiences, worries, and hopes with us in a more informal way. We would also like to express our gratitude to Cosmas and Manca for coordinating the Greek and Tanzanian focus groups and to Janice Monk, Ioannis Nompelis, and Sula Sarkar for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Finally, we would like to thank our families for supporting us in our

- decision to stay in the United States and our many international friends in the United States who have become our families away from home.
2. All names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.
  3. In our sample, all the students who initially came to the United States as exchange students were from high-income countries.
  4. Our participants had been in the United States as international students for between three weeks and ten years, with an average of three to four years.
  5. Few students made a distinction between American culture and that of the Midwest, or between Americans and Midwesterners.

## REFERENCES

- Baker, J.G., and M.G Finn  
2003 "Stay rates of foreign national doctoral students in US economics programs", [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=398640](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=398640).
- Balaz, V., and A.M. Williams  
2004 "‘Been there, done that’: international student migration and human capital transfers from the UK to Slovakia", *Population, Space and Place*, 10: 217-237.
- Baum, J.  
1994 "Home sweet home: returning expatriates fuel Taiwan’s hi-tech growth", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 157: 66-67.
- Borjas, G.J.  
2002 "Rethinking foreign students", *National Review*, 17 June.
- Bystydzienski, J.M., and E.P. Resnik  
1994 *Women in Cross-cultural Transitions*, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington.
- Cheng, L., and P. Yang  
1998 "Global interaction, global inequality, and migration of the highly trained to the United States", *International Migration Review*, 32(3): 626-653.
- Finn, M.G.  
2003 "Stay rates of foreign doctoral recipients from US universities, 2001", <http://www.orau.gov/orise/pubs/stayrate03.pdf>.
- Fischer, P., et al.  
1997 "Should I stay or should I go?", in T. Hammar et al. (Eds), *International Migration, Immobility and Development*, Berg, Oxford and New York: 49-90.
- Gaillard, J., and A.M. Gaillard  
1997 "The international mobility of brains: exodus or circulation?", *Science, Technology & Society*, 2(2): 195-228.
- Ghosh, S., and L. Wang  
2003 "Transnationalism and identity: a tale of two faces and multiple lives", *The Canadian Geographer*, 47(3): 269-282.

- Goss, J.D., and T.R. Leinbach  
 1996 "Focus group as alternative research practice: experience with trans-migrants in Indonesia", *Area*, 28(2): 115-123.
- Iredale, R.  
 2001 "The migration of professionals: theories and typologies", *International Migration*, 39(5): 7-24.
- Johnson, J., and M. Regets  
 1998 *International Mobility of Scientists and Engineers to the United States: Brain Drain or Brain Circulation?*, National Science Foundation, Issue Brief 98-316, <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/issuebrf/sib98316.htm>.
- King, R., and E. Ruiz-Galices  
 2003 "International student migration and the European 'year abroad': effects on European identity and subsequent migration behaviour", *International Journal of Population Geography*, 9: 229-252.
- Li, F.L.N., et al.  
 1996 "Migrating to learn and learning to migrate: a study of the experiences and intentions of international student migrants", *International Journal of Population Geography*, 2: 51-67.
- McNamara, D., and R. Harris  
 1997 *Overseas Students in Higher Education*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Morgan, D.L.  
 1996 "Focus groups", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22: 129-152.  
 1998 *The Focus Group Guidebook*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Ong, P., and J. Liu  
 1994 "US immigration policies and Asian migration", in P. Ong, et al. (Eds), *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia: 45-73.
- Open Doors  
 2004 Open Doors Data Annual Census of Foreign Students 2003-2004, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus.
- Ouaked, S.  
 2002 "Transatlantic roundtable on high-skilled migration and sending countries issues", *International Migration*, 40(4): 153-166.
- Rao, G.L.  
 1979 *Brain Drain and Foreign Students*, St. Martin's Press, New York.
- Rao, M.  
 1995 "Foreign students and graduate economic education in the United States", *Journal of Economic Education*, 26: 274-281.
- Yatsko, P.  
 1997 "Comeback kids: China's prodigals come home to prosper in Shanghai", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160: 70.
- Zweig, D., and C. Changgui  
 1995 *China's Brain Drain to the United States: Views of Overseas Chinese Students and Scholars in the 1990s*, China Research Monograph, University of California, Berkeley.

## LES ÉTUDIANTS INTERNATIONAUX SONT TOUJOURS PARTAGÉS ENTRE LE DÉSIR DE RESTER AUX ETATS-UNIS ET CELUI DE REGAGNER LEUR PAYS D'ORIGINE

L'ampleur des mouvements d'étudiants internationaux a considérablement augmenté dans la période de l'après-guerre, les Etats-Unis apparaissant comme le principal pays de destination, en partie du fait de la qualité de son système d'éducation et de sa politique généreuse de financement des études post-universitaires. Officiellement, l'immigration d'étudiants étrangers est censée n'avoir qu'un caractère temporaire et les restrictions de visas s'appliquent en conséquence. En réalité, bon nombre d'étudiants internationaux ne regagnent jamais leur pays d'origine. En dépit du grand nombre d'étudiants internationaux résidant aux Etats-Unis, peu de recherches ont été faites sur ce groupe de migrants qualifiés. Sur la base d'interviews ciblées sur des groupes, nous avons enquêté sur les facteurs qui motivent les étudiants à rester aux Etats-Unis ou à retourner dans leur pays d'origine dès l'obtention de leur diplôme. Nous avons recensé trois catégories de facteurs: des facteurs à caractère professionnel, sociétal ou personnel. Parmi les participants de notre enquête, les facteurs professionnels ont généralement été cités comme incitant les étudiants à rester aux Etats-Unis, tandis que les facteurs à caractère sociétal ou personnel étaient davantage susceptibles de les pousser à rentrer au pays, malgré les motivations très diverses citées par les personnes concernées. Certains comportements caractérisant plus particulièrement différents groupes nationaux se détachent de cette enquête. Ils se vérifient essentiellement de deux façons. Premièrement, les caractéristiques spécifiques du pays d'origine (telles que des circonstances politiques difficiles) pèsent d'un poids particulier sur la décision des étudiants se trouvant dans cette situation. Deuxièmement, l'influence relative qu'exerce chacun de ces trois groupes de facteurs varie selon les groupes nationaux.

“LA MONEDA SIEMPRE TIENE DOS CARAS ...”:  
INTENCIONES DE LOS ESTUDIANTES INTERNACIONALES  
DE PERMANECER A LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS  
O DE RETORNAR A SUS PAÍSES DE ORIGEN

La magnitud de los movimientos de estudiantes internacionales aumentó raudamente en el periodo consecutivo a la guerra, siendo los Estados Unidos el lugar de destino preferido, debido a un buen sistema educativo y al generoso financiamiento de estudios de posgrado. Oficialmente, estas migraciones son temporales y sujetas a una serie de restricciones de visado; en realidad, muchos de los estudiantes internacionales nunca regresan a sus países de origen. A pesar de la gran cantidad de estudiantes internacionales en los Estados Unidos, son muy pocos los estudios realizados sobre este grupo de migrantes profesionales. Recurriendo a entrevistas de grupos, hemos investigado los factores que, una vez terminados los estudios, determinan que los estudiantes permanezcan en los Estados Unidos o retornen a su país de origen. Hemos identificado tres categorías de factores determinantes: profesionales, de sociedad y personales. En general, los participantes en este estudio dijeron que los factores profesionales alentaban a los estudiantes a permanecer en los Estados Unidos, mientras que los factores de sociedad les incitaban, más bien, a retornar a su país de origen, aunque se observaron grandes diferencias entre las personas. Los resultados del presente estudio apuntan a la existencia de ciertos patrones entre los grupos nacionales. Éstos funcionan de dos maneras: primero, las características específicas del país de origen inciden en el proceso de toma de decisiones (por ejemplo, circunstancias políticas difíciles); y segundo, el peso relativo de cada uno de los tres grupos de factores difiere de un grupo nacional a otro.