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International student security: a view from Beijing
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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. We discuss Beck’s theorisation of the ‘risk society’ and Clements’ notion of balancing risk with opportunity. 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 that 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, utilise a range of strategies to keep students secure and believe host governments and institutions have primary responsibility for student well-being.

Keywords: international education; security; risk and opportunity; China; students; parents

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 claimed that Australian officials were failing to adequately provide for the safety and well-being of international students and the number of Chinese students studying in Australian subsequently declined markedly. Research concerning international student security and the role this issue plays in the study location decision have tended to be quantitative and focused on students’ perceptions once they are in the host country. This paper is unique in that we draw on interviews conducted with both students and parents in Beijing prior to the intended sojourn, to clarify how these actors address the risk to personal security posed by overseas study. Drawing on Clement’s

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(1990) observation that security is a balance between risk and opportunity and Beck’s (1992) notion of the ‘risk society’ we argue Chinese parents play a critical but previously undocumented role in international study location decisions. Generally, Chinese parents accord the perceived risks associated with international education a higher priority than that accorded by students. However, because relatively few Chinese parents have experienced overseas education they commonly have little personal knowledge of the possible threats to international student security. Nonetheless, they embrace a diverse range of means to minimise the risks they envisage. In seeking to provide further understanding as to why parents and students decide to engage with international education we identify as a major influences the desire to increase lifetime security. This influence was common in cases when students had not achieved the desired academic success at home or when parents believed an international education would provide life experience that would encourage independence and enrich individual character.

**Previous studies**

The literature pertaining to international student security has focused primarily on study-location destination decisions and been motivated by a wish to inform education suppliers on how best to increase their share of the lucrative education market (Mazzarol and Hosie 1996; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Yi, Lin and Kishimoto 2003; Olivas and Li 2008; Cubillo-Pinilla et al. 2009). Based overwhelmingly on quantitative measures, the literature has collectively revealed that the processes associated with the study-location decision involve the balancing of multiple costs and benefits – the most important influence being the reputation of education institutions and personal security. Marketing-oriented researchers tend to narrowly define the notion of security. Mazzarol and Souter (2002), for example, equate student 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 securitisation is a ‘social process (with some instinctive spontaneous properties) aimed at achieving relatively safe social, political and economic (spaces) communities’ (6).

Clements (1990) rightly observes that without security ‘social life would be both meaningless and relatively dangerous’ (2) 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 benefits of having a child, international students and their parents must balance the benefits of an international education against the risks associated with living and studying in a foreign country. 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). It is Beck (1999), however, who
explores in depth the notion of ‘new risks’ associated with economic and
social development in his influential concept of ‘the risk society’.

Beck’s (1992) argument that economic and social development leads indi-
viduals to face new risks has salience in relation to higher education. Clayton,
Crozier and Reay (2009) have utilised his insights to frame how British working-
class students adapt to new socio-cultural environments and negotiate the
terms of their emergent identities in a context where they seldom have familial
experiences and traditions to draw upon. Their analysis leads them to conclude
that class matters because it creates unequal possibilities both for flourishing
and suffering. China’s embracing of the global economy and universal educa-
tion has created many analogous situations. In the last three decades economic
and social development has enabled over half a billion men and women to
escape the insecurity associated with a pre-modern society. In the context
created, a vast body of students and their families choose to undertake the risks
associated with their higher education endeavours without the ability to draw
on the past experiences of parents or siblings. This practice is in accordance
with the Clayton et al. (2009) study focusing on individual working-class
students. Clayton et al. note that when making major education choices
students seldom act solely as individuals. Rather, they calculate the risks and
benefits together with others and in the light of the support they can draw from
others, most notably the state and the family.

Beck’s (1999) discussion of risk in terms of ‘becoming cosmopolitan’ is
recaptured by Rizvi (2008, 17). Rizvi (2008) discusses cosmopolitan learn-
ing and the internationalisation of education to highlight the importance of
global understandings that are neither ‘grounded in the traditions of western
moral philosophy’ nor based on ‘the unexamined assumption that one’s own
preferences and ways are natural and normal’ (23–24). He addresses the
contemporary context where cross-cultural encounters are experienced on an
everyday basis under the new global economic conditions (Rizvi 2008). It is
these new global conditions that have introduced international students to
the risks to security associated with the current international concern relat-
ing to the ‘war on terror’. This dimension of security inevitably impacts
upon specific groups and individual ‘others’ including international students
who are deemed, often without justification, to present a threat (Fletcher
2005; Preston 2007/2009). These and similar risks have attracted little
research attention with one important exception being a contribution that
analysed student security within a framework of ‘neo-racism’ (Lee and Rice
2007). In this study the authors discuss the negative stereotyping of and
difficulties encountered by international students in the USA. Attributing
‘some of the worst hardships in negotiating university life as due to the
foreign national status’ they identify difficulties that vary from: ‘students
being ignored to verbal insults and confrontation … in a range of contexts,
both in and outside the classroom, by peers, faculty, and members of the local community’ (405).

In 2010 the very limited but pioneering contributions to the analysis of the risk to security posed by international education were extended in a monograph titled *International student security* (Marginson et al. 2010) that:

... draws on a close study of international students in Australia, and exposes opportunity, difficulty, danger and courage on a massive scale in the global student market. It works through many unresolved issues confronting students and their families, including personal safety, language proficiency, finances, abuses at work, sub-standard housing, dealings with immigration authorities and universities, student networks and personal support, and issues of loneliness, racism and segregation. (i)

The authors call for closer and more student-centred forms of regulation and support and for forms of education that bring domestic and international students together. The underlying purpose of their work is:

... nothing less that to extend liberal humanism beyond national borders to globally mobile populations, and to support and cosmopolitan international education that facilitates intercultural exchange on equal terms between the West, emerging Asia and the developing world, foreshadowing the future global society. (i)

In the current paper we build on the latter foundation studies by turning the focus from students to their families. That there exists a prima facie case to justify this concentration is provided by two actualities present within the extant literature. First is the fact that it has been shown that in China that the making of decisions relating to the highest level of education students are expected to strive for and the majors they take are normally joint endeavours involving both students and parents (Xia et al. 2005). Second, researchers have found consistently that Chinese international students tend to maintain strong links with their parents because of filial commitment and need and/or because they are financially dependent on their parents (Rosenthal, Russell and Thom-son 2006; Marginson et al. 2010). We also note that 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 both induced a high level of protective-ness within families and enabled relatively well-resourced parenting (Ross 2009). The latter point has particular relevance to minimising risk for Chinese international students 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 students are commonly able to live ‘in better housing, in safer parts of town and [have] less need to work or travel’ than for example their counterparts from South Asia or Africa (Ross 2009, n.p.). This point is also stressed by Clayton, Crozier and Reay (2009) who examined ‘the security
of locality … in relation to dealing with risky and often alien educational environments’ (157). 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 well-being 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 the data was taken on face value unless it was felt necessary to do otherwise. Generally, the interviews were of 30 minutes duration, however, some extended well over the time allocated. The responses to questions asked by the Australian-born interviewers were lengthier than were the answers provided to the Mandarin speaker. It is possible that participants thought more detailed explanations were necessary when speaking to foreigners. In some instances the lengthier transcripts were associated with the fact that parents in particular wished to use the opportunity to obtain more knowledge of Australia and international education in general. When the interview was conducted in Mandarin, the Chinese-born interviewer was often requested to ‘ask her (or him)’ (the Australian-born interviewers) about various aspects of international education in Australia. Despite the Mandarin speaker being a former international student with good knowledge about Australia, the participants indicated that they afforded greater credence to the perspective of the Australian-born interviewers. This observation questions the assumption in other recent work that suggests that same-culture interviewer-interviewee
circumstances are more conducive to feelings of trust and hence generate higher quality data (Marginson et al. 2010). Regardless, it should be noted that our willingness to answer questions from parents and students was not a formal part of the study but rather a courtesy to those willing to participate.

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 1; S2 = student transcript 2; M3 = mother transcript 3, F5 = father transcript 5; G2 = guardian transcript 2; and so on. The research approach outlined above underpins the presentation of the data in the following 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 risks 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)

Fears for the safety of their sons and daughters were clearly manifest in parents’ assessment of the perceived risks associated with prospective host country study destinations. There was, for example, universal agreement that the USA 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 those who had chosen to study in the USA or the UK. Students, however, tended to be unconcerned by the risks associated with these countries or simply refused to allow the perceived risk 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 [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 that racism is widespread in the UK (Merrick 2007; CUBO 2008). Our finding challenges education institutions and regulators who are tempted to offer but not necessarily 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. In other words, he was viewing risk from a different social and cultural lens than that of a parent (Lupton 2006). The contribution of one father, however, suggests parents do not always prioritise 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 learned from the media and friends who have been there. 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 immediately preempted ‘exposures and warnings’ issued by China’s Government (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, and Marginson 2010, 95). 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 risks to security in Australia. It should be noted at this point that participants were aware that we
Interviewers were from Australia and this may have influenced their answers. Nonetheless, they indicated in many instances that their views on the risks of particular countries were constructed via the media, often through the Internet, newspapers and through conversations with those who had experienced life in the host country. The following response was typical as to the modes of obtaining host country information:

We learned from the Internet when making preparations. Then it’s from the media, like newspapers. Then, it’s from friends and relatives who have been there. (M18)

Many responses varied only in terms of order of the modes of constructing their views and all included media and informal communication with family and/or friends.

While fear of crime dominated concerns relating to all countries, other worries were identified. The findings indicate a gendered element in that 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)

Parents indicated much less concern about their daughters, whom were generally believed to be sufficiently independent to be given the opportunity to gain experiences outside the family and home country. The following response was representative:

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

While less gendered than perceived levels of independence, the issue of language was a concern more commonly associated with male students. One father commented of his son who was already studying overseas, ‘he could not understand what was said. His mind is empty’ (F44), while other students yet to leave China and their parents feared the language difficulties they might encounter. A male student commented:

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. Again a
gendered element arose with most concern being expressed in relation to prospective male students:

It’s only safety and health issues, such as going to hospital, and things like that.
…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? Organisations 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 many queries relating to health, indicating a deep concern and lack of adequate knowledge of healthcare and insurance in the host country. Though parents were assured by the recruitment agent that health insurance would be dealt with upon arrival, many were ardent in wanting more information on this topic prior to the students’ sojourn. There was a strong belief that being able to obtain insurance would alleviate much of the risk associated with illness.

Who decides?

Clements (1990, 4) advises that the ‘search for safety is a balancing act’ – an activity that entails weighing security against opportunity and balancing stakeholder views. This situation was repeatedly manifest in the responses of both parents and students:

Mostly it is because of my wife. She wants to send our son abroad very much. I also think it’s 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)

The collaborative discussion explained above seemed less than democratic given the following elaboration by the mother who explained that more weight was given to the views of the parents and that 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 observation suggests that Xia et al.’s (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 rather 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 perceived risks to undermine the study decision. 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, to build character and a wish to improve English language skills. A surprising number of parents (25%) also candidly admitted the main reason they had decided on overseas study for their sons and daughters was because their offspring had not secured a place at a high quality Chinese university. Consequently, there was a perceived risk they would not gain the qualifications needed to underpin their future career:

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 and the risk extant in the home country may be equally important as are those offered by hosts internationally.

For some parents the importance of an international education was enhanced by a belief that the experience would be character building and enable the student to more effectively seize the opportunities and confront the risks associated with the competitiveness of modern China:
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)

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 et al. (1991) who report that contemporary Chinese families encourage both individualism and strong family connections.

Who has responsibility for minimising risk and furthering 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. Apportionment varied markedly but most participants believed responsibility lay primarily with the host country university and government:

… 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 managing risks associated with security, they did not accept that once the student was resident in a host country their own governments were without responsibility. Many parents believed that if the security of an international student was at serious risk the student should be able to turn to their consulate and the latter should act to preserve the student’s well-being:

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 limit risks to security in accordance to parents’ expectations 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, this point 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 that 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 China’s state officials listen to the concerns of Chinese parents by advising that his 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 inadequate care was being taken to minimise the risks confronting Chinese students and insisting these students ‘deserve better’ from their hosts (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. In brief, both parents and students emphasised 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 reduce risk 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 that 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 [be] 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 perceived unfamiliarity with the host country was troubling for many. They feared risk to person and property. It was widely believed a greater knowledge of the host country would contribute to student security and there was concern students had not been provided with sufficient knowledge to ensure they remained safe.
Conclusion

Beck’s (1992) insight that the transition from a pre-modern to a modern society induces individuals to make decisions that invariably carry risks travels well when applied to the dynamics of international student security. His work is particularly relevant to the role of parents in the decision-making process and subsequent engagement of an international education experience for students. Increased wealth and the desire to gain a competitive advantage has induced an ever increasing number of Chinese parents to take on board the risks entailed in sending students to study outside China. Prior to China’s re-emergence these risks were rarely undertaken because few citizens were permitted to travel internationally, few could afford to travel and few had a need to purchase an international education given a domestic higher education qualification could provide a sound foundation on which to build a career.

Having attained the capacity to consider the advantages offered by an international education, Chinese parents and students must address the dilemma highlighted by Clements (1990). That is, when seeking security they must balance opportunity against risk and determine what strategies will enable them to ‘get more of the good and less of the bad’ (4). Though often lacking a detailed understanding of the risks to security associated with an international education, a great many parents in China have concluded the expected benefits outweigh the risks. In this study we have built on earlier quantitative studies of student motivators by interviewing both parents and students who believe the hoped for benefits are worth the associated risks. The depth of insight into the processes entailed in the study location decision made possible by embracing a qualitative approach revealed Chinese parents play a critical but previously undocumented role. It has also shown the preferences of parents are not consistent with the overwhelming emphasis on reputation of education institution 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 the risk to student security – an emphasis not necessarily captured through asking students what was important to them when deciding where to study. The interviews have shown that when seeking security through balancing risk and opportunity, Chinese families tend to choose outcomes based on preferences of both students and parents. This finding suggests that there is a significant level of collaborative discussion within the Chinese family that both those seeking to promote international student security and international exports should heed.

Understanding why parents who are concerned for the well-being of their sons and daughters would choose to support and encourage study outside China has revealed that Chinese parents balance risk against opportunity for the purposes of student security. 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.

Finally, both parent and student groups accepted they have a responsibility to provide the means that will reduce the risks students must address while studying in a foreign land. However, both groups were adamant that host governments and universities must share this responsibility as must their own government. The strength of this conviction and the fact that it is shared by Chinese state officials explains why China’s government has intervened in New Zealand and Australia. In 2009 the international education sector became fixated on the way 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 this clamour 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 would be wise to take note of this development and remain aware the parents of Chinese international students have influence within China.

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