

Individual Rationales for Study Abroad: A Retrospective Tracer Study Examining US Students in Japan from 1963 to 2010

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海外留学に対する個人の期待に関する研究
—1963年から2010年までの日本における米国人留学生の追跡調査—

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Abstract

What is the appeal of Japan for US study abroad students? Since Open Doors began collecting data in 1949, Japan has remained one of the top non-traditional destination countries for US study abroad students. While student mobility is not a new phenomenon, the number of students crossing borders for higher education is exponentially increasing as nations, higher education institutions, and individuals recognize the importance of having an international experience. This international experience for US students is often provided by study abroad programs, which are viewed by many as an effective strategy of the internationalization of higher education to cultivate intercultural competent and internationally-minded individuals for a globally competitive society. This study takes a historical look at the individual rationales for US study abroad participants choosing Japan as a destination country over a nearly fifty-year timespan. The sample for this retrospective study includes approximately 530 former study abroad participants who studied abroad in Japan from the US on a select study abroad program for one year or a semester from 1963 to 2010. A quantitative survey provides overall trends for Japan as a destination. The qualitative interviews provide an enriched understanding and linkage to the socio-economic and geo-political contexts that caused shifts in individual rationales over the 48-year timeframe. The overall finding is that Japan remained a top non-traditional destination due to its socio-cultural and linguistic difference from the US, geographical location in Asia, and economic power.

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1. Introduction

More than 5 million individuals were enrolled in higher education institutions outside of their country of citizenship in 2014 (OECD, 2015). Governments and higher education institutions are implementing policies to increase the number of international students they receive. Additionally, higher education institutions are keen to increase study abroad participation rates as study abroad is being integrated into the academic curriculum more so than at any previous time (Fry et al., 2009). However, there is a lack of literature examining the individual motivations for study abroad (Nyaupane, Paris, & Teye, 2010). The importance of understanding the motivations held by students is highlighted by Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008). As the global education marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive, it is vital for universities to understand what motivates a student to study abroad and the factors students identify as important in their decision making process.

2. Study Abroad and the US

In the US, the internationalization of higher education has been an important element of higher education since the 19th century (Altbach, 2005; De Witt and Rumbley, 2008). Since the 20th century, study abroad programs have become an integral part of the higher education landscape to provide students with international experiences. Post World War II, exchanges of student and scholars to and from the US have been vigorously promoted by the Fulbright Program as the US sought to increase international understanding. More recently, policy makers, researchers, and practitioners across fields have called on US higher education to realize its role in facilitating the international experience and skills building of more American students (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Even with the growing focus on the federal level on raising awareness and increasing participation in study abroad, as illustrated in the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act in 2009 and the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program in 2011, the ongoing effort to promote the institution of a formal national policy for international education at the national level has largely failed (de Wit, H. & Rumbley, L. 2008).

The dynamics of student mobility through study abroad programs versus individual student mobility differ, and therefore it is important to understand the role study abroad programs play in student mobility. Individual student mobility usually refers to individuals who enroll directly into higher education institutions outside of their country of citizenship for the purpose of receiving a degree. It typically does not include students who study abroad for a semester or year that transfer their credit to their home institution and graduate from their home institution. Compared to individual student mobility, study abroad programs provide students with an organizational and educational infrastructure to facilitate their mobility to the host institution as well as integration into the host culture to increase the success of their study abroad experience. Study abroad programs also “aim to provide institutional study support in order to ease the organizational as well as possibly the financial burdens and to assure a certain quality of the educational experience abroad”

(Teichler and Steube, 1991, pp. 326). In the US, most universities and colleges offer a multitude of study abroad programs with a wide range of countries throughout the world that provide students the opportunities to earn credits towards completing their degrees, to experience a new country and build intercultural and language competencies, and prepare themselves to compete in a global workforce (Altbach and Teichler, 2001).

Although there is not a formal national policy to promote and increase participation rates in study abroad, the number of US students studying abroad reached a record high of 304,467 in the 2013-2014 academic year, a 5.2% increase over the previous year. (Institute of International Education, 2015). According to Bhandari and Chow (2009), the increasing number of US students studying abroad reflects “the growing recognition by students and educators that an international experience is not only personally enriching but also valuable in the increasingly competitive job market, where language and cultural skills can help an applicant stand out to prospective employers” (p. 18). Students and educators have recognized the importance of the skills and values participants gain from a study abroad experience and how it can help individuals be more competitive in an increasingly global workforce.

The number of US study abroad students has increased significantly since the 1950s. The last decade in particular has experienced exponential growth (see Figure 1). With the increased study abroad participation rates also comes a diversification of host regions. Non-traditional destinations in non-English speaking countries are becoming more attractive than traditional destinations in Europe and English-speaking countries for US study abroad students. As the overall percentage of US study abroad students going to Europe declined from 62.9% in 2001-02 to 53.3% in 2013-14, the percentage of US study abroad students going to Asia increased from 6.8% in 2001-02 to 11.9% in 2013-14 (Institute of International Education 2010; Institute of International Education, 2015). The

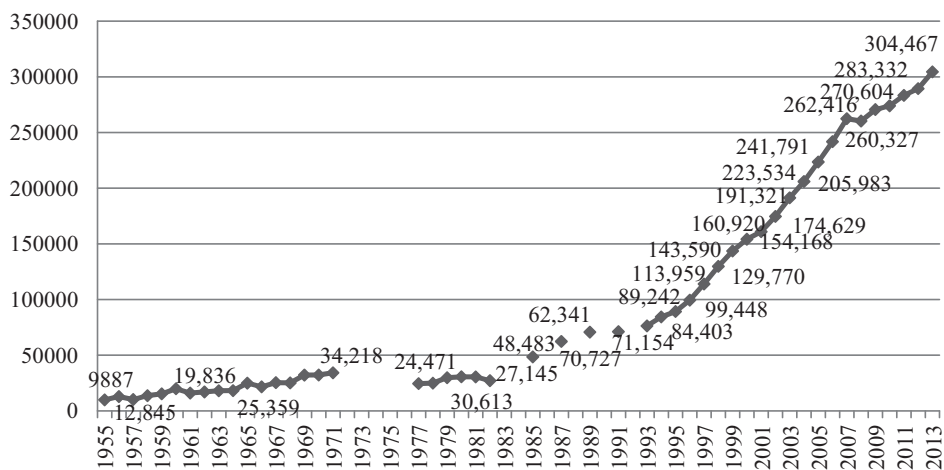


Figure 1. Number of US Study Abroad Students, 1955-1956 to 2013-14

Note: Developed by author.

Source: Institute of International Education 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.

increase in the number of US study abroad students choosing Asia signifies the growing importance of Asia as a host region for these students. Yet, even with this diversification, US study abroad students in non-traditional countries remains underexamined.

Japan and China, the top two destinations in Asia, have experienced a significant inflow of US study abroad students from the 1990s. The number of US study abroad students going to China steadily began to rise when US-China educational exchanges resumed in the late 1970s and subsequently overtook Japan in the late 1990s. Meanwhile, the number of US study abroad students choosing Japan as their host country continues to increase. The US and Japan have a long history of mutual academic exchange. Historically, Japan has been the top non-traditional destination for US study abroad students since the 1950s. In addition, the US is the one country from outside of Asia in the top sending countries to Japan (JASSO, 2015). In 2001-02, 3,168 US study abroad student went to Japan, and this number almost doubled to 5,978 in 2013-14. If we look at the overall total of US study abroad students during the same timeframe, the number also almost doubled from 160,920 in 2001-02 to 304,467 in 2013-14. The rate of increase in the number of US study abroad students in Japan corresponds to the overall rate of increase in the total of US study abroad students throughout the world.

Japan remains a hot destination not only because of its economic, political, social, and geographic ties to the US and Asia but also national policies of both countries highlight the significance of educational exchange to foster and promote mutual understanding. In the last decade, there was no strong commitment to educational exchange between the two countries. However, in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, we witnessed a renewed commitment to mutual educational exchange between Japan and the US. This manifested into new educational exchange programs to cultivate a new generation of Japanese and American leaders who will act as bridges

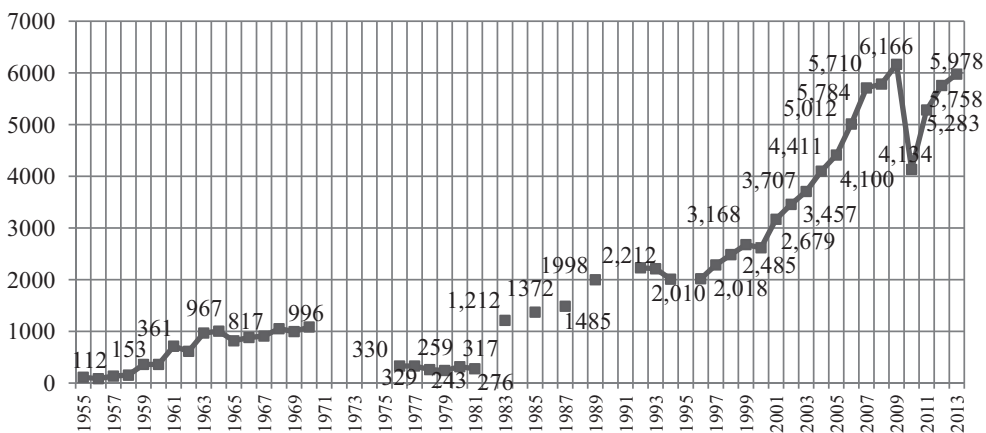


Figure 2. Number of US Study Abroad Students in Japan, 1955-1956 to 2013-14

Note: Developed by author.

Source: Institute of International Education 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015.

between the two countries and the world. Some of the new educational exchange programs are spearheaded by both the Japanese and American governments under the Tomodachi Initiative, a joint public-private partnership between the US-Japan Council and the US Embassy in Tokyo.

3. Individual Rationales for Study Abroad

The number of US students studying abroad is rapidly increasing. The global education market place is becoming more competitive. Meanwhile, nations as well as institutions worldwide are implementing policies to attract international students as well as to send their students abroad. Within this context, it is vital for nations and universities to understand what motivates a student to study abroad and the factors students identify as important in their decision making process (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe, 2008). Several traditional rationales identified by Nyaupane, Paris, and Teye (2010) include promoting world-mindedness and international understanding, educational goals of foreign language proficiency, increasing competitiveness and career opportunities, and exploring classes and subject areas not available at home institutions. Additional rationales include greater understanding about the host country, view of their home country from a comparative perspective, cultural enrichment, cultural skills, personal development, and desire to travel (Teichler & Steube, 1991). According to Nyaupane, Paris, and Teye (2010), the results of studies conducted by Kitsantas (2004) and Weirs-Jennsen (2003) can be assigned four categories: cross-cultural experiences, academics, future careers, and family heritage.

4. Research Framework

The findings presented in this paper are part of a larger research project that examines the long-term impacts of US study abroad students in Japan from 1963 to 2010. The research project focuses on Japan as a destination country, the role of the study abroad experience in US-Japan public diplomacy and the potential of Japan as a study abroad destination to act as a gateway to the region of Asia and stepping stone to the world. Hence, the individual rationales for study abroad used in this study focus primarily on key elements that may attract US students to Japan as an Asian country as seen in table 1 below. In addition, rationales related to Japan as a host country as well as study abroad program elements are also incorporated. The rationales used in this study were informed by previous research.

Table 1. Individual Rationales for Study Abroad

Individual Rationales for Study Abroad
Experience living in a foreign country
Prior interest in Japan
Major requirement
Availability of classes at host institution not available at home institution
Homestay experience
Improve future professional and financial potential
Learn Japanese language
Prior interest in traditional Japanese culture
Prior interest in Japanese pop culture
Interest in studying abroad somewhere in Asia
Desire to study abroad in another Asian country but was unable to so chose Japan
Hope to work in Japan in the future
Hope to work in Asia in the future
Hope to work in non-Asian countries in the future
Explore own heritage

Source: Developed by author.

5. Research Design and Methodology

Mixed-method research strategies were employed to complete the research objectives of examining the individual rationales for US study abroad students in Japan covering nearly 50 years. The study population includes approximately 1,400 participants who have studied abroad for one academic year or one semester for academic credit in Japan from the US during the period of 1963-2010. After attempting to contact all program alumni, 530 individuals were successfully contacted resulting in a final study population of 530. A sequential mixed methods design, consisting of two phases, is employed with an explanatory strategy.

Phase one consists of a single, cross-sectional, online survey instrument administered to 530 individuals and aims to yield a baseline dataset of the individual rationales for Japan as a study abroad destination for US students. The online survey response rate was 48.9% with almost equal representation of each cohort of study participants from the 48 year timespan. Phase two consists of 25 qualitative in-depth interviews with selected individuals that focus on individual experiences to provide informative insights and enriched understanding from selected respondents. Purposive sampling was utilized. Respondents who volunteered to be interviewed during the survey were selected because they experienced the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009).

This study acknowledges the following limitations inherent to the research methodology and design. There is selective participation in the survey and self-reporting of participants' rationales

for study abroad. One limitation to note is that this study is a cross-sectional sample to study the long-term impact of study abroad experiences and a retrospective tracer study rather than genuine longitudinal tracer study. In attempt to address these limitations, the general flow of both the survey and interview guideline aimed to bring the respondent back to their study abroad experience by asking key questions and then asking questions about specific experiences. Finally, there is a lack of a control group of those who did not study abroad.

6. Tracer Study Profile

Japan Study was established in 1963 and is one of oldest and most comprehensive programs in educational exchange and development linking colleges and universities in the US and Japan through student and faculty mobility. Japan Study is based at Earlham College (Indiana, US) and links member colleges of the Great Lakes Colleges Association, Inc. (GLCA) and the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) with those of Waseda University in Japan. Each year about 25 to 35 students from GLCA/ACM colleges study abroad at Waseda University. To date, about 1,500 students from American colleges and about 1,400 students from Waseda University, along with over 200 professors from Waseda and GLCA/ACM colleges have participated on the program. Japan Study was chosen as a case study for this research due to its long history of promoting educational exchange programs linking Japan and the U.S., depth of study abroad experience, and accessibility to data.

7. Findings

This section reports the findings from the quantitative survey as well as findings from the qualitative in-depth interviews. Descriptive statistics are used to provide an overview of the individual rationales for Japan as a destination for US study abroad students. Narratives from the qualitative interview findings provide additional insight into salient themes and provide understanding of the influence of socio-economic and geo-political factors over the 48-year timeframe.

7.1 Quantitative Findings

A total of 15 indicators were used to identify the individual rationales for the selection of Japan as a study abroad destination for US students. The survey findings are listed in Table 2 below. The top two rationales, learning Japanese and prior interest in Japan, relate directly to Japan as the host country. 98.9% of respondents indicated that learning Japanese was a reason to study abroad in Japan with 62.2% to a large degree, 27.8% to some degree, and 8.9% very little. 98.1% of respondents indicated that prior interest in Japan was a reason to study abroad in Japan, with a breakdown of 52.5% to a large degree, 34.4% to some degree, and 11.2% very little. Other attractive features of Japan as a host country include its pop and traditional culture. Respondents also reported that the experience of living in a foreign country was important (97.7% total with 71% to a large degree, 23.6% to some degree, and 3.1% very little).

A key component of the study abroad program was the opportunity to live with a host family.

85.7% expressed that the opportunity to live with a host family influenced their host country and program selection. 45.2% of respondents also expressed that they hoped to enroll in courses at the host institution that were not available at their home institution. In addition, 32.8% of the respondents' major required them to study abroad in order to receive their undergraduate degree.

The rationales guiding respondents' decision to study abroad in Japan were also influenced by their future career goals. 59.1% stated that their study abroad experience could improve future professional and financial potential. Furthermore, respondents expressed the desire to work outside of the US during their career with 69.1% interested in working in Japan, 60.3% interested in working in Asia, and 41.3% interested in working in non-Asian countries.

Table 2. Individual Rationales for US Study Abroad Students in Japan, 1963-2010

Individual Rationales for Study Abroad	Not at all	Very Little	To some degree	To a large degree
Experience living in a foreign country	2.3%	3.1%	23.6%	71.0%
Prior interest in Japan	1.0%	1.5%	18.9%	78.4%
Major requirement	67.2%	8.1%	10.8%	13.9%
Availability of classes at host institution not available at home institution	54.8%	18.9%	14.3%	12.0%
Homestay experience	14.3%	15.1%	29.3%	41.3%
Improve future professional and financial potential	40.9%	19.7%	27.4%	12.0%
Learn Japanese language	1.1%	8.9%	27.8%	62.2%
Prior interest in traditional Japanese culture	1.9%	11.2%	34.4%	52.5%
Prior interest in Japanese pop culture	25.1%	28.6%	30.1%	16.2%
Interest in studying abroad somewhere in Asia	35.1%	20.5%	26.6%	17.8%
Desire to study abroad in another Asian country but was unable to so chose Japan	88.4%	5.0%	2.3%	4.3%
Hope to work in Japan in the future	30.9%	24.3%	30.1%	14.7%
Hope to work in Asia in the future	39.7%	31.3%	20.1%	8.9%
Hope to work in non-Asian countries in the future	58.7%	22.4%	13.9%	5.0%
Explore own heritage	84.6%	5.0%	3.1%	7.3%

Note: n=259

7.2 Qualitative Findings

The data from the qualitative in-depth interviews unveiled the following three salient themes that naturally emerged in the data analysis process: 1.) Allure of a non-traditional destination, 2.) Japan as an alternative to China and gateway to Asia, and 3.) Economic power of Japan. Within these themes, geo-political and socio-economic influences organically surface as a result of the respondents representing a 48-year timespan.

7.2.1 Allure of a Non-Traditional Destination

Many respondents' decision to study abroad in Japan and learn Japanese language was a result of their desire to study abroad somewhere different than the norm of European countries. A large portion of the respondents studied Japanese prior to their study abroad. In cases when respondents were not sure where they wanted to study abroad, it was the decision to study Japanese language at their home institution that sparked their interest in Japan as a destination. This is especially the case for respondents who did not have interest in studying abroad prior to entering their home institution. When respondents were choosing foreign language classes at their home institutions, often times Japanese stood out to them as something different and unique from the commonly studied languages in the US, such as Spanish, French, and German. Another attraction to Japanese language included the respondents' preconceptions of the language's difficulty. "The moment I saw people walking out of the class, it sort of made me more excited" (R15). They felt studying Japanese language presented a challenge and saw it as a means to be unique among their peers.

Japan represented a new and completely different country and culture for many of the respondents not only linguistically but also culturally and socially. Respondents recognize study abroad's power to reflect on one's own culture while discovering a new culture. In fact, it is the significant cultural differences between the US and Japan that drew many respondents to choose Japan as their study abroad destination.

R20: (Japan) interested me the most, but—but one of the deciding factors was I was planning to be a history teacher in high school and one of my friends who was a schoolteacher said, "You—you'll—um, be a better history teacher if you go outside your own culture to another culture that's very different and then you'll have a much better perspective on your own history." So, for me then, that decided: Japan. And also, I liked—I had taken a couple courses with Jackson Bailey and I really was fascinated by the—the whole thing, so.

Throughout the 48-year timespan of the respondents, Japan's linguistic, cultural, and social differences with the US played a significant role in their decision to study abroad in Japan. From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, Japan, and to a further extent Asia, remained veiled in mystique due to limited accessibility of information available. In this timeframe, Japan represented a true adventure into the unknown for respondents. From the mid-1980s onwards, globalization, entry into the Global Age, and the rise of the Internet allowed access to Japan and its culture and society from afar prior to their study abroad experiences. While Japan did not maintain its same allure as before, Japan still remained a non-traditional destination for respondents that desired to have a unique international experience that would set them apart from their peers.

7.2.2 Japan as an Alternative to China and Gateway to Asia

In addition to interest in Japan, interview respondents expressed interest in the Asian region in general. While the percentage of the survey respondents who selected “Desire to study abroad in another Asian country but was unable to so chose Japan” is low, the theme of studying abroad in Japan as an alternative to China and other Asian countries naturally emerged. More specifically, for some respondents Japan acted as a study abroad alternative to China. In the 1960s, Japan presented an accessible gateway to study abroad in Asian region. “Of course in those days one thing I think with Japan was that it—certainly the rest of Asia, a lot of Asia was kind of closed off. I mean, nobody went to China. Uh, Japan was perhaps the most visible, the most accessible” (R13).

In the 1970s, Japan represented an alternative to study abroad in China due to China’s closed doors. R10 expressed a deep desire to study abroad in China because he “didn’t understand how we could not have open communication with a quarter of the world’s population and there was this sort of quiet hostility between China and the US.” He knew he wanted to study abroad in Asia rather than Europe, so he chose Japan as the best alternative destination to China.

In the 1990s, China “was not considered a particularly attractive place to go, live, or study” (R14). Japan as a destination in this timeframe was perceived as a “safe choice” to study abroad in the Asian region. More recently in the 21st century, Japan was seen as an alternative choice when other Asian language and studies were not available at their home institutions. R21 was interested in Chinese culture and language. However, her home institution did not offer any Chinese courses, so she took Japanese instead and “learned to like it and love it.”

7.2.3 Economic Power of Japan

The economic power and its relation to the respondents’ decision to study abroad in Japan naturally emerged in interviews. From the 1960s to the 1980s, respondents expressed a direct connection between acquiring Japanese language proficiency and cultural awareness with future professional and financial potential. This is especially the case in the 1980s, as explained below by R3:

R3: I’ve always been interested in studying abroad and I, like I said, studied in France and I knew I wanted to learn another language. I’m like, “Okay, what language could be beneficial to me?” back—it was in the late eighties when I got out of high school so obviously a very strong economic time with Japan. So I said, “Okay, well, if I am able to speak Japanese, not only am I interested in it—in the culture, but it would probably be beneficial for me work-wise.” So that’s, you know, then, well, again, “Japanese—it seems interesting, it’s challenging, and it can help me down the road, so.”

From the 1990s to 2010s, Japan’s economic recession, commonly referred to as the “Lost 20 Years” or “Lost Two Decades,” shifted individual economic and professional rationales from

focusing on future career potential directly related to Japan to providing intercultural skills and values to navigate diverse professional situations.. Respondents who studied abroad during this timeframe identified the experiences and skills they would acquire in Japan, the world's 2nd largest economy until 2009 and afterwards 3rd, as a base to compete in a global workforce.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The survey and interview findings illuminate the individual rationales for US study abroad students' selection of Japan as a host destination from 1963 to 2010. The overall finding are that Japan, over a nearly 50-year timespan, remained a top non-traditional destination due to its socio-cultural and linguistic difference from the US, geographical location in Asia, and economic power. These three salient themes as well as their historical markers are outlined in figure 3 below. The appeal of Japan as a study abroad destination for US students lies not only in its linguistic, cultural, historical, and social features. It also attracts US study abroad students due to location within the Asian region. Japan as an Asian country holds particular appeal for US study abroad students as a way to experience a non-traditional study abroad destination and a culture and language different from their own.

The world in which study abroad programs and their participants exist within is dynamic and fluid. While the survey results provide an overview of the individual rationales for US study abroad students that choose Japan as their destination, the qualitative interview findings suggest the potential shift of individual rationales for study abroad over time based on external factors. One might expect the economic decline of Japan would lead to a decrease in the interest of Japan as a study abroad destination. However, Japan remains a top destination due to the depth of study abroad experience, its large socio-cultural and linguistic difference from the US, availability of well-established and reputable study abroad programs, reputation of Japan's overall safety, and location within Asia. Furthermore, in our global society, respondents expressed the hope of the skills they desired to gain during their study abroad experience transferring to future experiences not only in Japan, but also Asia and other global experiences.

Given the increasing focus on study abroad by higher education institutions and nations worldwide to produce individuals equipped with the skills to live and work in a global society, it is important to understand the participant rationales for study abroad in order to increase participation rates. Nations are also promoting study abroad as a strategy for public diplomacy and soft power (Atkinson, 2010; Nye, 2004). Due to the nature of this study's focus on the flow of US students to Japan as a study abroad destination, it has implications for US-Japan educational exchange. It provides an empirical foundation to consider the future promotion and recruitment of US study abroad students to Japan. This is particularly significant in our current times as the two countries have reaffirmed their dedication to study abroad as a strategy to create future leaders and mutual understanding following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

Moving forward, the landscape of study abroad and its relation with creating mutual

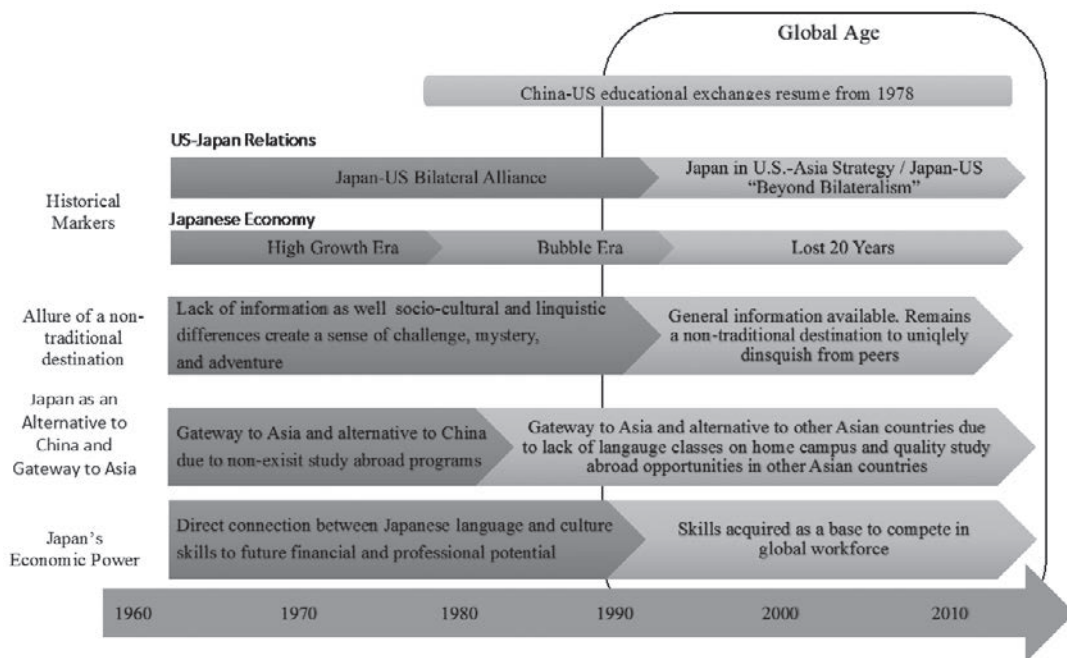


Figure 3. Individual Rationales for US Study Abroad in Japan and Contextual Factors, 1963-2010
Source: Author.

understanding between countries and individuals equipped with intercultural skills for a globally competitive society will continue to evolve. At the same time, the number of study abroad programs as well as institutional and national policies will increase competition and diversification of study abroad destinations. Within this dynamic context, it is important for all stakeholders involved to understand the rationales and decision-making process of study abroad participants in order to attract future participants.

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