

China Equities: The Case for Long/Short Investing



Summary:

- We believe that China's markets are becoming a key source of alpha and China's transition from beta to alpha is one of the current 'mega-trends' in relative value investing.
- China is actively focused on reforming its financial sector, and we believe that is creating opportunities for relative value trading that haven't been available to investors in the past.
- QFII and RQFII reforms are likely to drive a significant increase in access to liquidity in China's A-share markets, thus increasing the potential opportunities for long/ short investors like ourselves to exploit inefficiencies in the market.
- We believe high retail participation, improving liquidity, reforms to allow shorting and margining, and low analyst coverage have combined to create a "golden age" for relative value investors

What's changed to allow investing in China on both a long and a short basis?

Historically, relative value investing in China was limited to exposure to dual-listed companies, or single names in the onshore A-share market hedged with indices or ETF products. Much of the performance was driven by beta from directional positions rather than alpha.

Today, China is actively focused on reforming its financial sector, and we believe that is creating opportunities for relative value trading that haven't been available to investors in the past. Recent changes to the Qualified Foreign Institutional Investor (QFII) and Renminbi Qualified Foreign Institutional Investor (RQFII) programs will enable an A-share borrow market to develop further, including both foreign and domestic banks and broker/dealers.

Tell us more about the QFII and RQFII programs

The QFII and RQFII programs were established in 2002 and 2011, respectively, to allow foreign investors to access mainland China securities using either Renminbi or a foreign currency. For equities, it allows specified licensed international investors to buy and sell local currency denominated A shares of companies listed on the stock exchanges in Shanghai and Shenzhen. Initially, the program started with quotas to control foreign access to these shares: the quota was increased to USD 80billion in April 2012, and eliminated entirely in September 2019. The most recent changes allow stock borrowing and lending as well as the hedging of long positions using futures. As a result, we expect the market's short borrowing capability to increase significantly in the next few years.

In addition to the QFII and RQFII schemes, foreign investors also have access to 'Stock Connect' since 2014, a mutual market access program between Hong Kong and the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock markets. This program allows foreign investors to trade in eligible China A shares via the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.

How have these reforms changed the investment landscape for hedge fund investors in China?

Historically China's A-share markets have had relatively few hedge fund participants relative to markets of similar size. These latest regulatory reforms will fundamentally change the operating characteristics of the China A-share market by allowing hedge fund investors to short with domestic brokers and secure margin on a range of securities that were not available in the past. We believe these latest changes will allow hedge funds to more effectively capture long and short alpha while dynamically managing beta, sector, factor, thematic and idiosyncratic risks.

What are the other benefits of the opening up of China's A share market?

We believe the A-share market is likely to experience a significant increase in liquidity as well as significant efficiency gains as true relative value investment disciplines will be possible and markets balance more between domestic retail and international institutional investors.

What are the other characteristics of the China A share market that make it attractive to hedge fund investors?

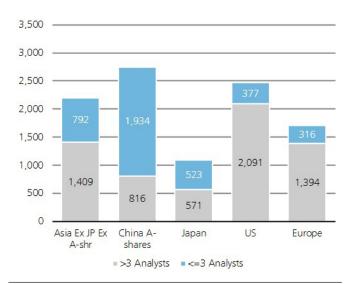
In addition to reforms allowing shorting and margining, we believe there are three other features that make the China onshore market attractive to relative value investors like O'Connor:

- High retail participation: unlike mature markets in the West,
 Chinese retail investors represent a majority of equity trading
 volume: there are around 165m registered retail investor
 accounts and approximately 55m active every day. The
 dominance of retail investors creates dramatic swings in
 momentum and valuation skews which can present unique
 alpha opportunities for relative value investors on both the
 long and short side of portfolios.
- Improving liquidity: the onshore market turnover is large and increasing. One goal of the recent reforms is to increase turnover on China's exchanges an important metric that should allow Chinese markets to attract flow from institutional investors. Over the past few quarters we've seen a steady increase in turnover in China, to the extent that it already exceeds turnover levels in both the rest of the Asia-Pacific region and Europe combined.

– Low analyst coverage: China's markets are under-researched. Compared to the US, Europe or even much of Asia, there's not a lot of analyst coverage of the China A-share market, particularly of mid/small cap companies. According to Reuters, almost 70% of companies greater than USD 500m market capitalization are covered by three analysts or less (see chart below). Additionally, only about 300 to 400 companies have English language research coverage, a small percentage of the overall market – which means the visible opportunity set for global investors remains small.

We believe that these dynamics will be prevalent over the long term; we foresee very little substantive change to them in the next three-to-five years. A good example is retail dominance in the market: while the influence of institutional investment capital is growing, we believe it will likely take years for it to overtake retail investors as a key driver of the market. We believe that there is a compelling window of opportunity to exploit this imbalance over the longer term.

Listed company equity analyst coverage: China's equity universe is under-researched



Source: Reuters Eikon; UBS HFS, as of April 2021. Universe is based on companies with >=\$500m market cap and >=\$0.5m average daily turnover. Universe is based on stocks listed in Japan, China, United States, countries within MSCI AC Asia, countries within MSCI AC Europe.

"China is still relatively untapped for investors seeking alpha"

What is O'Connor's approach to investing in China on a long/short basis?

We seek to generate attractive risk-adjusted returns with a low correlation to China equity markets by employing a low net exposure, relative value strategy focused on Greater China securities. Our approach is similar to traditional equity long/short strategies in the US and Europe, but customized for the uniqueness of Chinese market:

- Our focus is on Greater China equities, essentially China A shares as well as offshore listed China equities in Hong Kong, US, Taiwan and London (H shares, Red Chips, P chips, ADRs and GDRs). In terms of derivatives we are able to access index options, index futures, large cap single stock options, both listed and over-the-counter (OTC).
- In terms of sectors, our core focus is on sectors where we see the most opportunity. Currently these sectors are Financials, Cyclicals, Healthcare, Consumer and Technology/Media/ Telecoms (TMT). We plan to expand coverage to other areas as opportunities unfold.

- Our stand-alone strategy is a carve out of a strategy running within O'Connor's flagship multi strategy approach for the past two years.
- Our strategies benefit from UBS's institutional governance oversight including independent risk control
- Unlike many of our competitors, we have analysts on the ground in mainland China, based in Shanghai:
- Looking back on when long/short funds opened in Japan, we saw many portfolio managers stay based in London or New York. We felt those managers were at a disadvantage particularly when understanding the small- and mid-cap side of the market because they lacked real relationships with management teams and industry leaders in the local markets.
- O'Connor has 'boots on the ground' in Shanghai, the intention being that the team captures valuable insights into the local markets. UBS Asset Management has a separate large, established presence and network in mainland China that we can also leverage to support our relative value strategy.

"Our approach is similar to traditional equity long/short strategies in the US and Europe, but customized for the uniqueness of Chinese market"

About O'Connor

O'Connor is a global single-manager hedge fund platform within UBS Asset Management, with complete independence in regard to investment decision-making, offering industry-leading multi-strategy and standalone capabilities.

We have over 40 years of institutional experience in trading and market making and 20 years' experience as a hedge fund manager with a strong focus on relative value investing and risk management.

O'Connor's capabilities cover a wide range of investment programs and we manage over USD 11.0bn¹ in assets on behalf of institutional and high net worth clients. The firm has a global operating platform with offices located in New York, Chicago, Stamford, London, Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai.

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¹ As of 1 January 2022

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