



Push-Pull Factors Shaping Chinese Students' Post-Exchange Decisions in Malaysia

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the globalization of higher education, the phenomenon of “reverse study”, which means studying in developing-country, has become increasingly salient, yet empirical research remains limited. This study employs the push-pull framework and qualitative methods to conduct in-depth interviews with three Chinese students who completed exchange programs in Malaysia, investigating the push and pull factors present in their exchange experiences and the influence of those factors on subsequent decisions about further education. Findings indicate that Malaysia’s primary pull factors include geographic and cultural proximity, student-centered pedagogical approaches, and lower living costs. Predominant push factors comprise limited recognition of academic credentials, inadequate professional practical training, and an overly relaxed learning pace. A given factor may exert opposite pull and push effects across different students. Exchange experiences are observed to facilitate a shift from affective preferences to more rational decision making, producing three distinct decision pathways, including pursuing further study abroad, returning to China to prepare for postgraduate entrance examinations, and regarding the exchange as a contingency option. By extending the push-pull framework to post-exchange decision contexts, this study reveals a push-pull duality mechanism and offers evidence to inform developing countries’ international student recruitment strategies and Chinese universities’ design of reverse exchange programs.

Keywords: Reverse Study Abroad, Push-Pull Framework, Exchange Program, Malaysia, Further Study Decisions.

1 Introduction

Against the background of the globalization of higher education and the deepening of education opening up to the outside world, the number of people studying abroad in China has continued to increase. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China on studying abroad in 2019, the number was about 712,000, with an increase of 6.25% over the previous year [1]. At the same time, the Chinese government attaches great importance to students’ international exchanges and provides financial support through multiple channels. The main way is various schol-

arship programs established by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), covering undergraduates, graduate students and postdoctoral visits. According to the official information of CSC, the study abroad program sent by the state can cover tuition fees, accommodation fees, living expenses, etc. [2]. The amount of funding varies according to the study stage and project category, generally ranging from tens of thousands of yuan per year.

Among these outbound students, the vast majority choose developed countries as their study destination. According to official statistics in 2019, about 88% to 93% (about 620,000-650,000 out of 703,500) of Chinese overseas students chose developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Japan and Western European countries [3]. In contrast, only a small number of people, i.e., 6% to 10% (40,000-70,000 students) considered study in developing countries, mainly in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. Correspondingly, research attention to exchanges involving developing-country destinations has been relatively limited, and further investigation is warranted into which programs and practices effectively enhance students' cultural sensitivity.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the impact of reverse study-abroad exchanges and the cultivation of cultural sensitivity through targeted practices. Employing the push-pull framework as an analytical lens, this qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews with three Chinese students from different universities and academic disciplines who completed exchange programs in Malaysia. The research systematically examines the push and pull factors shaping their exchange experiences and analyzes how these factors influence students' subsequent decisions regarding further education. The study contributes to the literature by extending push-pull theory from the domain of destination selection for initial overseas study to the context of post-exchange decisions about further education. It elucidates how short-term exchange experiences can reshape students' perceptions of alternative education systems and thereby influence long-term educational planning. Moreover, the findings yield targeted recommendations for Malaysia and other developing countries in South Asia to enhance international student recruitment strategies, curriculum design and employment support systems, and offer a decision-making basis for Chinese universities seeking to design more effective reverse exchange programs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research on Push-Pull Factors in International Student Mobility

The push-pull framework, originally developed in migration studies by Lee (1966), has been widely applied to explain motivations and decision-making processes in international student mobility [4]. Within the context of study abroad, factors influencing mobility are typically categorized as push factors and pull factors. Push factors denote adverse conditions in the home country that motivate students to leave, such as limited higher education resources, intense competition for admission, and dissatisfaction with the domestic education system [5]. Pull factors denote favorable attributes of potential destination countries that attract students, such as lower tuition fees, cultural proximity,

and accommodating immigration policies [6]. Existing studies identify economic cost, academic reputation, cultural distance, and employment prospects as core considerations in destination selection [6]. For Chinese students, the configuration of push and pull factors exhibits particular characteristics. Push forces include intense competition within the domestic higher education system, relative scarcity of high-quality educational resources, and social demand for recognized graduate credentials; pull factors for target countries typically comprise academic reputation, degree recognition, cost of living, safety, and postgraduation employment opportunities [7].

However, the extant literature largely concentrates on the initial stage of destination selection for study abroad and pays comparatively little attention to how students reassess push and pull factors after actual exchange experiences and subsequently adjust their decisions regarding further education. This study extends the application of push-pull theory to post-exchange decision contexts in order to address this gap.

2.2 The Value and Limitations of International Exchange Programs

International exchange programs function as important platforms for cross-cultural communication and the integration of educational resources. Knowledge transfer perspectives emphasize multidirectional interactive sharing rather than unidirectional transmission [8]. Within exchange programs, students exchange academic, cultural, and practical knowledge, thereby enhancing academic competencies and global perspectives. Empirical evidence indicates that participation in exchange programs can substantially improve students' overall capacities at both professional and nonprofessional levels [9]. Regarding soft skills, exchange participation enhances communication, teamwork, situational adaptability, and openness to cultural difference. At the academic level, exposure to diverse learning environments broadens scholarly perspectives and strengthens critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. In terms of cultural adaptation, students demonstrate increased openness and inclusivity toward foreign cultures, reduced cultural stereotyping, improved practical cross-cultural communication skills, greater attention to international affairs, and a tendency to analyze issues from multiple perspectives. Research focusing on Asian students further shows that exchange experiences improve their practical problem-solving abilities in daily life and emergency situations, bolster cultural confidence, and contribute to positive self-identity [7].

Nevertheless, exchange programs also present several limitations. Common challenges include misalignment between host and home curricula, difficulties in credit transfer, added academic pressure, and reduced practical relevance of some programs. Some exchanges are overly formalized, lack clear learning objectives and evaluation mechanisms, and thereby impede comprehensive assessment of student outcomes. Risk communication is also a salient concern, encompassing safety, health, and intercultural misunderstanding risks; effective risk communication can mitigate anxiety and enhance program stability [10]. It is noteworthy that much of the existing research adopts the perspective of program organizers or host institutions rather than the students themselves. To gain a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences and decision-making rationales, this study employs qualitative interview methods to address that gap.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the push-pull framework as its central analytical lens. Push and pull factors defined in this paper are as follows. Pull factors denote attributes of Malaysia that enhance its attractiveness as a study destination, including geographic proximity, cultural affinity, student-centered pedagogies, and lower living costs that encourage students to pursue further study in Malaysia. Push factors denote conditions that motivate students to leave Malaysia, select alternative destinations, or return to their home country for further education, such as limited academic recognition, insufficient professional practical training, a relatively relaxed learning pace, and constrained employment competitiveness. A schematic representation appears in Figure 1 [11].

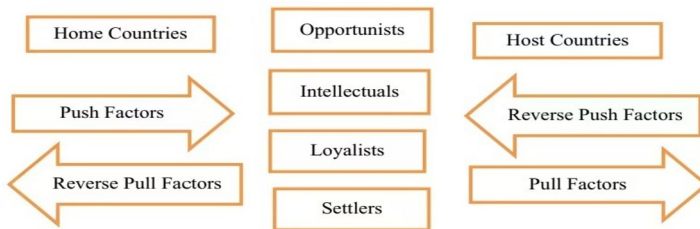


Fig. 1. Illustration of push factors and pull factors.

3.2 Research Method

This research employs a qualitative approach and collects data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Qualitative methods are appropriate for exploratory studies because they permit deep exploration of participants' subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and decision-making logics, which aligns with the objectives of this study [12].

3.3 Participants

The respondents of this study participated in an exchange program at the same university in Malaysia but came from different Chinese universities and majored in different disciplines. These home institutions select five to six undergraduate students each semester to participate in exchange programs in developing countries based on their academic performance, cross-cultural communication competence, and practical willingness. The study selects three interviewees, designated as Student A, Student B, and Student C. Their basic information and exchange backgrounds are shown in Table 1. This purposeful sampling strategy is adopted, with "information richness" serving as the core criterion. The heterogeneous backgrounds and shared exchange experiences of the three respondents ensure contextual consistency while extending the coverage of factor identification.

Table 1. Respondents’ information.

Name	Year of study	Major	Gender
Student A	Fourth year	Chinese Language and Literature	Female
Student B	Second year	Special Education	Female
Student C	Third year	Geographic Information Science	Male

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide was organized around four core domains: (1) integration into campus life, including acceptance by faculty, peers, and administrative staff; (2) classroom experience, including instructor tolerance for oral errors and interaction in group discussions; (3) the impact of exchange experiences on broadening horizons; and (4) intentions regarding further education and associated push and pull considerations (for example, reasons for staying in Malaysia, returning to China, or regarding Malaysia as a fallback option).

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke [13]. Coding was conducted independently by the researchers, and coding reliability and consistency were enhanced through repeated readings of the transcripts.

4 Findings

The research results show that students’ choice of postgraduate destination is not influenced by a single factor, but is the result of geographical location, economic pressure, teaching model, social culture, college recognition and future employment prospects. Exchange experience significantly improves students’ language ability, independent learning ability and cross-cultural adaptability. At the same time, it makes them form a more realistic understanding of the learning rhythm and lifestyle of different regions, so that they can make more rational decisions about going to school. Overall, the push-pull model can effectively explain the further study selection behavior of changing students. Their decision-making integrates personal future development, family economic conditions pressure and domestic employment market orientation, reflecting that contemporary college students are able to make cross-border study decisions that better align with their own realities.

In terms of pull factors, Malaysia has many attractions for exchange students. A is satisfied with the study and life in Malaysia, and also expressed the idea of continuing to study in Malaysia. She mentioned that Malaysia is geographically close to China and have no time difference. The local climate and diet are similar to her home town. She could communicate with others in Chinese and had a strong sense of belonging. As she said, *“I have fully adapted to the rhythm of life, learning style and campus environment here, and I don’t have to adapt to a new country, a new language environment or a new teaching model.”* However, she also mentioned the low signaling effect of studying in

Malaysia: *"To be honest, Malaysia's local internship opportunities and part-time resources are indeed not as many as those in the first-tier cities in China. In the future, if you return to China to find a job, those companies in China may not value your degree obtained from Malaysian institutions compared with degrees obtained from European and American schools."* Yet, for student A, she would still choose to study in Malaysia because its simpler life style and student-centered environment. *"The pace of life in Malaysia is really slow. Everyone is very relaxed every day. It is easy to get along with, and there is no complicated human nature. However, in China people tend to know each other's business, and I always try to please other people. Whereas, in Malaysia, I have less acquaintances and more privacy. I do not need to take into account the feelings of many people like I was in China, and the psychological burden is less."* Student A also expressed her preference for the Malaysian teaching style, in which students are positioned as the main agents of the classroom, and teachers encourage them to actively explore and engage in collaborative group inquiry. She argued that *"This approach can continuously cultivate students' classroom speaking skills and critical thinking. China is different. Chinese classrooms are more teacher-centered and they pay more attention to classroom discipline. The teaching is more rigorous, and students' active expression and independent thinking exercise are relatively rare."*

B also finds studying in Malaysia attractive. She likes the relaxed classroom atmosphere, the low cost of studying; however, for her, the professional development and employment opportunity are the more important factors, hence, she regards China more attractive. For student B, she considers the student-centered approach in Malaysia a push factors. As a student major in special education, she has noticed the different teaching philosophy between China and Malaysia. *"Malaysia's special education teaching emphasizes inclusiveness, companionship and relaxed atmosphere, while China's special education institutions emphasize structured training and high-intensity intervention. For example, Malaysian special education focuses on warm companionship and easy integration, but Chinese institutions carry out special training such as language pronunciation, limb coordination, social behavior, etc. according to a fixed schedule, and intensive training to improve children's abilities according to the standard process."* This means that what she learned in Malaysia is difficult to use directly after returning to China, and she has to re-adapt to the domestic system. Furthermore, employment prospective is another reason that push her to study in China. She said: *"China recognizes academic qualifications from Europe, the United States, Australia, and Hong Kong more readily, while diplomas from Malaysia are not as highly recognized. In fact, the special education models in the US, Europe, and Australia are relatively consistent with that of Malaysia. However, due to their high international recognition, these qualifications remain a viable choice even if they do not perfectly align with the Chinese context. In contrast, Malaysia's low recognition makes it a less attractive option at present."* However, these developed countries are not considered by B due to the high prices. B explained: *"It is too expensive to study in Europe, the United States, Hong Kong and Singapore; the economic pressure is high. Hence, I choose to study for a master's degree in China."* Yet, B believes that pursuing a master's degree can not only helped her to broaden her horizons and learn professional knowledge, but also accumulate more practical research experience, improve academic literacy and

comprehensive ability, broaden her future career development path, and make herself more stable and further in the field of special education. According to the statistics of *jobui* based on the public position data of the national recruitment platform, the average monthly salary of undergraduate graduates majoring in special education in 2023 is about 1162 USD, while the average monthly salary of master's graduate students is about 1,824 USD [14].

Relaxed atmosphere is a pull factor for A; yet, it becomes a push factor for C. C believes that Malaysia's environment is too relaxed. *"It is easy for people to lack motivation, which is not conducive to future development. The teaching pace is slow and relaxed, the learning progress is slow, and the efficiency of knowledge accumulation is not high. It is difficult to quickly improve my professional comprehensive level."* At the same time, domestic postgraduate study is more recognized by domestic enterprises, and the connection between connections, resources and employment is more direct. These factors have pushed him to give priority to China. Malaysia is only a guarantee and will not take the initiative to study for a long time. He prefers Wuhan's environment with fireworks and moderate pace, and is also more adapted to the state of domestic students working hard together. For student C, the biggest attractions of Malaysia are convenience and low cost. The application process is not difficult, and admission is stable, making it a reliable option after failing the domestic postgraduate entrance examination. Moreover, Malaysia is close to China, allowing for quick adaptation, and the overall cost is much lower than that of the United Kingdom, Australia, and Hong Kong, which reduces the financial pressure on his family. C mentioned in the interview: *"I will choose Malaysia as a guaranteed choice, especially the University of Malaya, which is a very safe retreat for me."* These practical advantages make Malaysia obviously attractive to him.

Overall, Malaysian exchange students show a stable structure of "domestic priority, high-recognition regions, and Malaysia as a bottom guarantee choice" in their selection of postgraduate destinations. Their decision-making revolves consistently around personal development, family economic conditions, and the reality of domestic employment, achieving a balance driven by push and pull factors. The exchange experience not only improves students' comprehensive abilities but also enables them to have a clearer judgment of their own needs and the external environment, making their decisions more suitable for their future development.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

This study, grounded in push-pull theory, elucidates the complex interplay of push and pull mechanisms in reverse study-abroad experiences through in-depth interviews with three Chinese students who completed exchanges in Malaysia. The findings both corroborate and extend existing literature. First, with respect to pull factors, the study confirms the attractiveness of geographic and cultural proximity, lower cost, and student-centered pedagogies, while demonstrating substantial individual variation in their effect. Student A reported strong attraction to these factors, prioritizing quality of life and psychological comfort. Students B and C acknowledged these attributes but rated them

as less salient when weighed against professional development and career prospects. These results indicate that the salience of pull factors is contingent not only on the intrinsic properties of the factors but also on individual value hierarchies and career objectives.

Second, regarding push factors, the study identifies dimensions that have received limited attention in prior research on study abroad in developing-country contexts. In addition to documented issues such as lower academic recognition and constrained academic resources, novel push factors emerge: diminished motivation resulting from an overly relaxed learning pace, and a misalignment between professional practical training and the demands of the domestic labor market. The case of Student B, who studied special education, is illustrative: Malaysia's emphasis on an inclusive, companionship-oriented pedagogical philosophy contrasts with China's focus on structured intervention, producing a structural mismatch at the professional level that constitutes a strong push factor. Third, concerning the duality of push and pull, a principal theoretical contribution of this study is the demonstration that a given factor may simultaneously exert both push and pull effects. The direction and magnitude of these effects depend on individual characteristics, disciplinary background, and career expectations. This observation extends the conventional binary formulation of push-pull theory and highlights the need for future research to attend to situational dependence and subject variability of influencing factors.

Policy and practice implications follow. For Malaysia and other developing countries in South Asia seeking to enhance attractiveness to Chinese students, the study suggests three strategies. First, adjust the overall learning rhythm while preserving distinctive educational features of inclusiveness and openness. This entails maintaining relaxed and harmonious teacher-student interactions while introducing appropriately structured professional tasks, classroom practice, and periodic assessments to sustain student engagement. Second, optimize curricula and strengthen practical employment support by aligning course content with international industry standards and the employment needs of major source countries such as China, increasing applied skills training, and forging institutional links to provide internships and apprenticeships. Implementing student-friendly employment policies and facilitating academic certification and career guidance for returnees can better connect academic learning to employment outcomes. Third, enhance living and pastoral support to address international students' emotional and daily-life needs. Leveraging geographic proximity to simplify travel logistics, and accommodating diverse lifestyles and dietary preferences on campus can alleviate homesickness and improve the overall study-abroad experience. For Chinese universities, the study offers practical recommendations, including promote short-term exchange projects that leverage proximity to neighboring countries; strengthen credit-transfer and curricular articulation mechanisms; and establish post-exchange tracking and support systems, such as information services and application guidance for students who wish to pursue further study in exchange destinations.

It must be acknowledged that this study has certain limitations. First, the sample size is small, and the generalizability of the research findings requires further testing with a larger sample. Second, all participants were drawn from the same Chinese university, and their background characteristics may be relatively homogeneous; future research

could extend to multiple universities. Finally, this study focuses solely on Malaysia as a single country; subsequent studies could expand to other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and Indonesia to conduct cross-national comparative analyses.

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