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International Graduates' Employment Outcomes after Studying in China: A Systematic Review of Career Pathways, Employability, and Contextual Factors

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Abstract

China has emerged as a major destination for international students, yet the employment outcomes of its international graduates remain insufficiently understood. This review synthesises existing evidence on the employment outcomes and influencing factors of international graduates from Chinese higher education institutions. Following the PRISMA guidelines, 30 Chinese and English language publications were included, and thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical method. It indicates that as a non-traditional immigrant country, China's institutional employment environment differs fundamentally from that of traditional Western destination countries. Graduates' employment outcomes are highly dependent on the economic and trade ties between China and their home countries, while the employment value of Chinese degrees is highly dependent on labour market context. The findings reveal important gaps in current research and point to directions for future studies on international graduate employment in China and other emerging destinations. This review also offers practical implications for policymakers, universities, employers, and international students.

Keywords: career outcomes, international graduates, study in China, systematic review.

Introduction

International student mobility has evolved into a pivotal force in shaping the global human capital landscape, fostering cultural integration, and facilitating knowledge transfer (Mohajeri Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Paige et al., 2009; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). Enhancing employment competitiveness and expanding global career prospects through cross-border education represent core concerns for international students (Blackmore et al., 2017; Coffey et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2017). However, the current academic discourse system on studying abroad and employment exhibits

significant limitations, characterised by a distinct Western-centric narrative (Tight, 2022). Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have long dominated the global international education market, attracting the vast majority of international students worldwide. Consequently, relevant research has mostly centred on these nations. (Blackmore et al., 2017; Hu & Wang, 2024; Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016). With the transformation of international education landscape, Global South countries and emerging destinations, exemplified by China, are rapidly rising. By virtue of its sustained and steady

economic growth, growing international influence, and abundant educational resources, China has gradually developed into a highly attractive global study destination (Deng, 2015; Wu & Chan, 2019). According to data released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of international students studying in China reached 492,185 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2019). China has become the largest study destination in Asia and the third largest in the world (Ministry of Education, 2017). The international students in China come from 196 countries and regions, characterised by its large scale, wide geographical spread, and diverse composition. Therefore, understanding the employment outcomes of international graduates from China has become an increasingly important research and policy concern.

Additionally, the labour market in China is fundamentally different from that in traditional Western destination countries. On one hand, as the world's most populous country, China possesses vast domestic labour resources and a large number of university graduates (Luo, 2022). International students face extremely fierce competition in China's job market. On the other hand, as a non-traditional immigration country, China lacks well-established immigration and settlement systems. Consequently, international graduates face an institutional environment and employment ecosystem upon graduation that are fundamentally different from those in immigrant-receiving countries (Li, 2024b; Lu & Wu, 2020; Tu, 2022). This implies that the employment experiences and outcomes of international graduates from China may follow a different logic, while also providing a unique context for examining and expanding existing theories.

Despite the growing number of studies on international graduates from China, a systematic understanding of this distinctive employment context remains limited. Some studies report positive employment outcomes while others highlight significant barriers. More importantly, the global value of a Chinese degree and the international competitiveness of graduates from Chinese universities remain poorly understood. For these reasons, conducting a systematic review and integration of existing related research is particularly necessary. The core objective of this study is threefold: first, to synthesise existing research on the employment outcomes of international graduates from China; second, to identify the key factors influencing employment outcomes across individual, institutional, market, and policy dimensions; finally, to analyse current research gaps and provide targeted insights for future academic research, educational enhancement, and policy-making.

Scope of the review

This review focuses on existing research on the employment experiences of international graduates from China. It aims to systematically map the realities of their employment, analyse the evolving logic of their individual career trajectories, and provide practical references for future research. To achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the diverse employment experiences of international students, all literature addressing employment and related themes (such as entrepreneurial practices, migration-oriented employment, etc.) is included in the analysis.

This review defines "international students" as students who travel from their home country to pursue a higher education degree in another nation (OECD, 2025). To gain an in-depth understanding of their employment experiences, this study includes only literature

that adopts the perspective of international students as the primary focus, presenting their lived experiences, subjective perceptions, and stated needs. Specifically, this study is guided by the following research questions:

Question 1: What do existing studies reveal about the employment outcomes and global competitiveness of international graduates from China?

Question 2: What factors shape their employment outcomes and career trajectories?

Methodology

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews 2020 (PRISMA 2020) (Page et al., 2021) is used as guidelines in this review. PRISMA 2020 offers clear, structured guidance for the design, implementation and reporting of systematic reviews. Its application ensures the transparency, reproducibility, and rigour of the literature screening process. It has already been deployed in systematic reviews focusing on international students' employment outcomes (Calonge et al., 2023; Han et al., 2022), which attests to its suitability for addressing multi-dimensional, cross-cultural issues in the field of employment.

Data source and search strategy

The retrieval was completed in May 2026. The search timeframe was limited to publications between 2000 and May 2026. To ensure comprehensiveness, publications from both English and Chinese databases were retrieved. Specifically, English literature was sourced from three major databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC, as they cover peer-reviewed research on international student employment. To ensure inclusivity of other publication types, the first 20 pages of Google Scholar results were also searched to capture studies not indexed in mainstream databases. For Chinese publications, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database was used, as it includes peer-reviewed articles. Furthermore, considering that doctoral dissertations often contain richer primary data and in-depth analysis, high-quality doctoral theses approved by degree-granting institutions were also included in the search.

A systematic search was conducted on article titles and full texts. The keywords used in the search primarily involved three groups of terms: (Group 1) overseas student, international student, international graduate, foreign student, global student, or incoming student; (Group 2) China, Chinese university, study in China, graduate from China; (Group 3) job, employ, occupation, career outcome, career development, labour market, profession*, education to work, university to work, or entrepreneurship. Various combinations of these keywords were used to ensure that no potentially relevant literature was overlooked. Additionally, the reference lists of publications selected for full-text review were examined to identify other studies omitted by the database search, though no additional articles were found in practice.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Based on the aforementioned keywords, a total of 2,301 records were initially identified, comprising 1,961 in English and 340 in Chinese. After removing 152 duplicate English records, researchers independently screened the titles and abstracts of the remaining literature. Following the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1, many articles were excluded due to irrelevant topics or research objects (e.g., foreign students in basic education,

Chinese students abroad, cross-cultural adaptation, medical research, etc.). This resulted in the exclusion of 2,059 records, leaving 90 for further assessment.

Subsequently, the researchers jointly developed the content screening criteria detailed in Table 2. Guided by these criteria, the

researchers independently conducted a full-text review of the 90 records to minimise bias. Ultimately, 30 articles were determined as the final sample for analysis, including 16 English and 14 Chinese (see Figure 1 for the article selection flow chart).

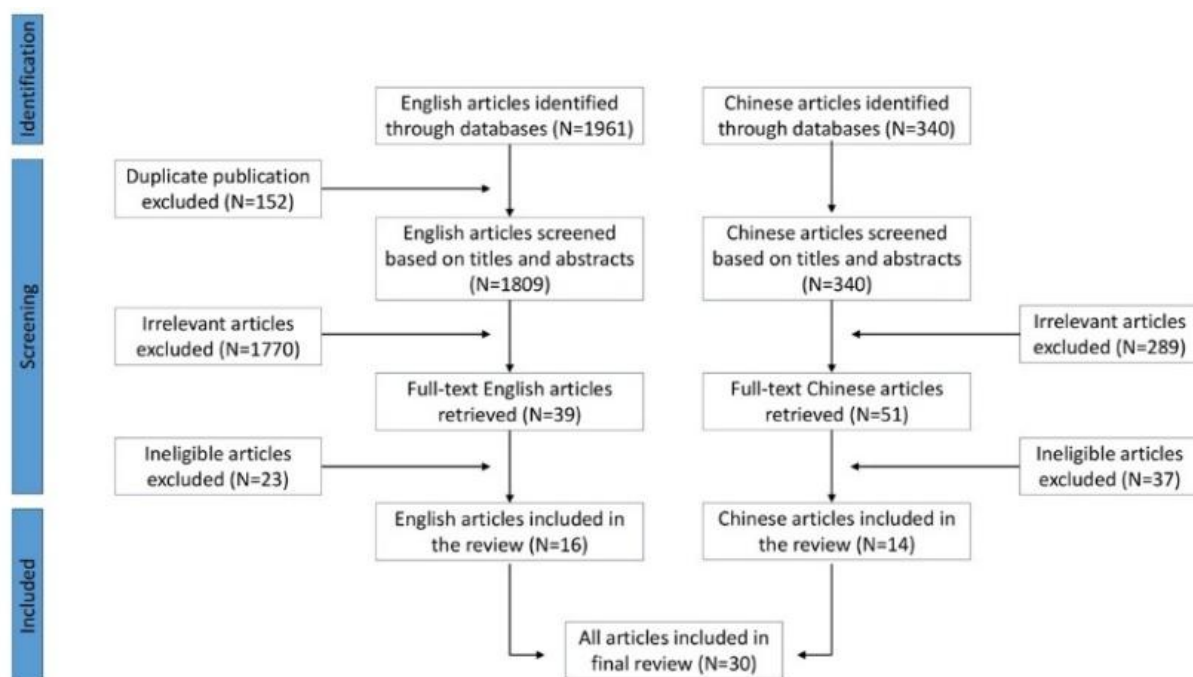
Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Title and Abstract Screening

Criteria	Definitions
Inclusion	
Focus on international student employment	Papers focusing on other experiences of international students in China, such as destination choice, cross-cultural adaptation, mental health, and interpersonal relationships were excluded.
Focus on degree-seeking international students	Papers must focus on degree-seeking international students (i.e., those pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in China). Short-term programs (e.g., one-year or one-semester exchange programs in China) and non-degree programs (e.g., vocational education) were excluded.
Exclusion	
Irrelevant research objects	Papers focusing on Chinese local students, non-degree-seeking international students, non-student foreigners employed in China, or Chinese students employed abroad were excluded.
Irrelevant research content	Papers related to foreign language education, medicine and public health, teacher development, Sino-foreign higher education cooperation, or the internationalisation of Chinese higher education were excluded.
Non-mainland China study experiences	Papers focusing on students studying in Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan regions (due to differences in educational systems from mainland China) were excluded.
Non-English/Chinese articles	Papers in other languages such as Korean or Japanese were excluded.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Full-Text Screening

Criteria	Definitions
Inclusion	
Focus on actual employment experiences	Papers must, to some extent, discuss the perspectives and experiences of international students regarding employment after studying in China (e.g., treating employment as an independent research object or a sub-research question).
Focus on graduates or final-year students	Papers focuses on graduates (who have completed their degrees and entered the job market) or final-year students (those approaching graduation, having initiated job preparation or job-seeking activities). Papers focusing solely on lower-year students' employment intentions or post-graduation destination choices were excluded.
Empirical research	Papers must be empirical studies. Descriptive papers and theoretical research were excluded.
Exclusion	
Employment policies	Papers focusing solely on policy text analysis without involving the actual employment experiences of students were excluded.
Institutional services	Papers discussing only on the supply of employment services by Chinese universities or other institutions, without addressing international graduates' subjective experiences, were excluded.
Teaching arrangements	Papers related to teaching curricula for career planning, employment, or entrepreneurship were excluded.

Figure 1. Flow chart of article selection process



Data

Extraction, Synthesis, and Analysis

Microsoft Excel was used as the primary analysis tool. An iterative coding process was employed to extract various elements from each article. The following information was extracted: (1) publication year; (2) publication type; (3) sample size; (4) sample demographic information; (5) research method; (6) theoretical background; (7) data collection and analysis methods; (8) research findings; (9) discussion; (10) suggestions for future research. For a small number of missing data points, they were marked as blank in Excel, and the specific dimensions of missing data were noted in the results analysis to ensure transparency.

A hybrid thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted for coding and categorising the data. Specifically, deductive thematic analysis was used to address Research Question 2 (factors influencing employment). To answer this question, this review referenced a multi-level analytical framework for

international student employment by Han et al. (2022). This framework systematically encompasses influencing factors at the individual, organisational, and societal levels, and its systematic and comprehensive nature aligns with this review's core aim of investigating influencing factors.

Inductive thematic analysis was also employed. On one hand, during the coding process, content emerged that was not covered by the original framework. Meanwhile, researchers adapted the classification of some factors by incorporating the unique context of post-study employment for international students from China, making the analytical framework more suited to this study's research context and data characteristics. On the other hand, the framework by Han et al. (2022) did not address content related to Research Question 1 (employment status of international graduates). Therefore, inductive thematic analysis was used to derive themes related to employment status from the literature. This process yielded a thematic structure consisting of 4 main themes and 11 sub-themes, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Classification of Themes, Subthemes, Coding and Corresponding Number of Included Studies

Theme	Subtheme (Number of studies)	Coding
Integrated Employment Profile	Geographical Mobility and Regional Employment Disparities [13]	Employment in China
		Return to home country
		Employment in a third country
		Educational level
		Employment location
	Employment Quality, Challenges and the impacts [15]	Overseas Chinese enterprises
		Companies with business ties to China
		Higher education & training institutions
		Home country government departments
		Industry distribution

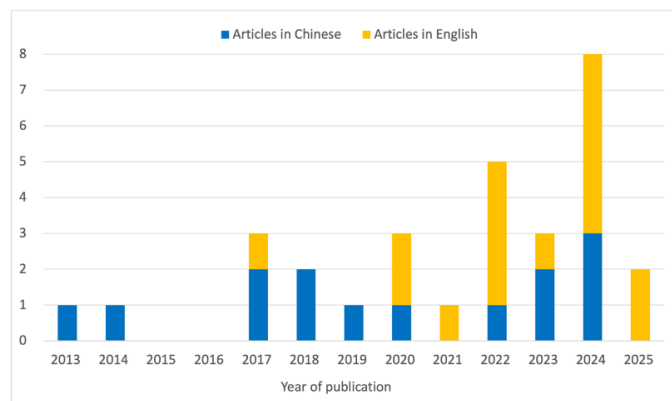
		Job type
		Salary level
		Job satisfaction
Individual Preparation and Expectations	Skills [23]	Professional knowledge & hard skills
		Practical experience
		Educational credentials
		Chinese proficiency
		Multilingual abilities
		Insufficient language skills
	Social network [16]	Access to job information
		Securing job opportunities
		Long-term career advancement
		Narrow social networks
		Lack of connections in home country
	Cultural capital [11]	Integration into the workplace
		Cultural adaptation barriers
	Personal career expectations [13]	Salary expectations
		Career growth opportunities
		Stable employment
Institutional, Market, and Familial Ecosystems	Institutional support [11]	Career development education
		Employment guidance
		Reasons for insufficient university support
		Consequences of insufficient support
	Bilateral labour markets [14]	Information barriers
		Employer hesitations
		Discrimination & bias
		Advantages & disadvantages of the home country market
	Familial and emotional factors [8]	Emotional considerations
		Family responsibilities
		Socio-cultural influences
International Employment Contexts	Policy background [17]	Policy barriers
		Return agreement clauses
		Pandemic control policies
	Macro-economic environment [5]	Bilateral economic & trade relations
		Host country's societal development

Study Characteristics

Though the search period commenced in 2000, the earliest eligible article was published in 2013. Annual publication output remained low (2.31 articles per year) until 2022, after which it increased markedly, with 2024 seeing the highest number of articles (8), reflecting rising scholarly attention over the past three years (see

Figure 2). The literature consisted primarily of journal articles (28), with only 2 doctoral dissertations, with sample sizes ranging from 1 to 1,755.

Figure 2. Publications per year



In terms of authorship, 13 articles were single-authored and 17 were co-authored. Researchers affiliated with institutions in Mainland China contributed to the majority of publications (8 single-author and 13 co-author papers). Other contributing regions included Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand, Chile, Japan, Laos, and the United States.

The studied international student populations were diverse in terms of educational level and origin. While 21 studies covered students across multiple educational stages, only 4 focused specifically on undergraduates and 2 on master's students. Most research sampled graduates (16 articles) or final-year students (12 articles). Geographically, 40% of studies sampled participants from multiple global regions, 33.3% focused on African students, and 23.3% on Asian students. Among single-country studies, Thai and South Korean students were most frequently examined (see Figure 3). The institutions attended by international students are concentrated in East and North China (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai), alongside Sichuan, Guangdong, and other provinces (see Figure 4).

In terms of methodology, cross-sectional designs dominated (24 studies), and mixed-methods approaches were most common (43.3%). Interviews were the primary data collection tool (25 studies), followed by questionnaires (19 studies). Over 20 theories were applied, with the Push-Pull Model (7 articles) and Human Capital Theory (4 articles) being the most frequent, though some studies lacked clear theoretical grounding.

Figure 3. The distribution of home countries/territories

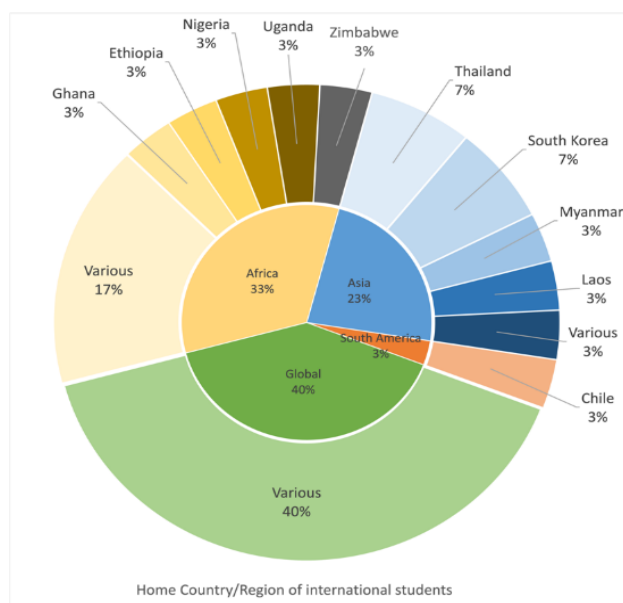
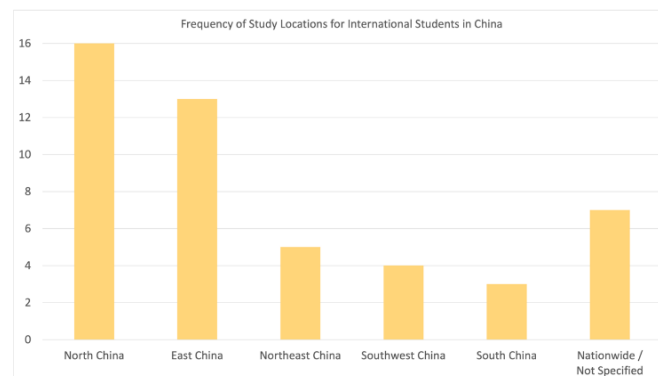


Figure 4. The distribution of institutions in East China



Integrated Employment Profile

Geographical Mobility and Regional Employment Disparities

The global mobility patterns of international students after graduation primarily feature returning to their home countries, with smaller proportions remaining in China or moving to third countries (Li, 2024a). Over 75% of international students perceive limited job opportunities for foreigners in China (Deng et al., 2018), and Chinese employers generally show reluctance to hire international graduates except for those with exceptional qualifications such as top-tier engineering talent (Song, 2018; Tang & Wei, 2023). Nevertheless, some students strategically utilise their Chinese educational experience as a stepping stone to transition to more developed regions like Europe and North America (Mulvey, 2022; Umennadi et al., 2025). Moreover, institutional employment remains the predominant trend among international students. However, some leverage their accumulated business knowledge and social networks in China to establish their own ventures (Li & Fang, 2025; Li & Zheng, 2023; Luo, 2022; Mulvey, 2022; Shen & Wang, 2017).

Employment outcomes vary significantly by academic qualifications and geographical regions. Doctoral graduates have the most distinct employment advantage, regardless of whether they are in China or their home countries, primarily employed within higher education and research institutions (Li, 2024a; Li & Wu, 2022). For master's and bachelor's graduates, regional differences are pronounced: in Africa, master's graduates have an employment rate exceeding 80%, while fewer than 50% of undergraduate graduates find employment, facing future uncertainty (Li, 2024a). In Southeast Asia, outcomes differ markedly: the advantage of a master's degree is diminishing in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia, where long-term career progression increasingly depends on a doctorate (Wang, 2022). Conversely, Lao graduates with only bachelor's or master's degrees are highly sought after locally, with most securing their first job within one month of returning home (Sisavath, 2021).

Employment Quality, Challenges and the impacts

The employment sectors of international students are diverse, encompassing education, finance, energy, information and communications technology, international trade, tourism, culture, entertainment, manufacturing, construction and real estate, transport and civil aviation, among others (Li, 2024a; Li & Wu, 2022; Lu & Wu, 2020; Song, 2018). However, the majority remain confined to roles that primarily leverage their Chinese language skills, such as translators, assistants, liaison officers, public relations staff, and language teachers (Li, 2023, 2024c; Li & Wu,

2022; Shen & Wang, 2017; Umennadi et al., 2025). A key reason for this concentration is that Chinese-invested enterprises overseas and local firms with business connections to China are predominant employers for these graduates (Li, 2024a; Li & Wu, 2022; Shen & Wang, 2017; Sisavath, 2021). For instance, renowned Chinese enterprises such as Huawei have been instrumental in providing employment opportunities for African students (Li, 2023), while many Lao returnees are employed by Chinese companies in Laos to serve the China-related market (Sisavath, 2021).

While Chinese proficiency enhances employment opportunities, it may also limit graduates' progression into technical or core positions, thereby hindering them from leveraging their specialised expertise in science and engineering disciplines (Li, 2023). This undermines both job quality and long-term career progression. This reinforces a central paradox in their career outcomes: broad industry distribution coupled with a narrow range of job roles (Dai & Pham, 2024; Deng et al., 2018; Li, 2023, 2024c, 2024a; Liu et al., 2024; Sisavath, 2021; Song, 2018; Tang & Wei, 2023). Another significant category of employer includes higher education institutions and training schools. Some graduates remaining in China capitalise on their multilingual competencies to work as English instructors (Deng et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2024; Umennadi et al., 2025). Additionally, some graduates find employment in public sector roles within their home governments or diplomatic missions, including their home countries' embassies and consulates in China (Li & Wu, 2022). The aforementioned challenges also impact international graduates' salary levels and job satisfaction. A global study of over 1,700 graduates revealed that approximately 67.3% earn less than 10,000 RMB per month, with only 17.5% surpassing 15,000 RMB (Liu et al., 2024). Notably, over 70% of Thai graduates express dissatisfaction with their actual monthly income, reporting that it falls at least 2,000 RMB short of their expectations (Song, 2018). Furthermore, those employed by multinational corporations in China typically receive compensation packages aligned with local Chinese staff, rather than enjoying the premium benefits accorded to expatriates assigned from the foreign parent companies (Li & Ma, 2013). Regarding job satisfaction, research indicates that international graduates who find employment quickly often report lower satisfaction levels. This may be due to the effects of compromising in employment decisions, where the actual role does not meet expectations (Darko et al., 2020). Conversely, relatively higher satisfaction is observed among those working in the public sector or state-owned enterprises, as well as those whose skills are well-matched to their job requirements (Liu et al., 2024; Song, 2018).

Individual Preparation and Expectations

Skills

Professional knowledge and hard skills represent the core competitive advantage for international students, particularly those in STEM programme (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li & Ma, 2013; Li, 2024a; Li & Wu, 2022; Umennadi et al., 2025; Wang, 2022). Those with strong technical capabilities are regarded as skilled labour, better meeting labour market demands (Darko et al., 2020). Beyond hard skills, practical experience and academic background are also crucial. Graduates with substantial practical experience are more attractive to employers (Li & Ma, 2013; Luo, 2022; Sisavath, 2021; Wang, 2022). Concurrently, Chinese academic credential and institutional reputation acts as a comparative advantage, especially in some Belt and Road countries (Wang, 2022; Zhang &

Wang, 2019), enhancing returnees' hiring prospects (Jeremie et al., 2024; Luo, 2022; Mulvey, 2022). Wang's (2022) research indicates that some employers in Southeast Asia exclusively recruit graduates from top-tier universities.

Language proficiency is a significant asset for international students. Stronger Chinese skills facilitate employment and career advancement (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li, 2023, 2024a; Li & Wu, 2022; Mulvey, 2022; Song, 2018; Wang, 2022). Particularly for those targeting jobs in China or with Chinese enterprises overseas, Chinese is a prioritised skill and a valuable commodity (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li & Fang, 2025; Li & Ma, 2013; Li, 2024b; Morales Valdés, 2024; Mulvey, 2022). Furthermore, in an era of extensive international exchange, graduates with multilingual competencies are better positioned to stand out in competitive environments (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li & Fang, 2025; Li & Zheng, 2023; Li, 2024b; Li & Wu, 2022; Mulvey, 2020; Song, 2018).

However, it should be noted that not all international students possess the skills required to meet the demands of labour market (Li, 2024a; Liu et al., 2024). Studies identify issues such as weak foundational knowledge and a mismatch between acquired knowledge and workplace application (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li, 2024c). A more prevalent issue is the lack of practical experience (Deng et al., 2018; Li, 2024b; Liu et al., 2024). This raises employers' recruitment concerns (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li, 2023). Additionally, while some studies indicate that most students study and live in China for several years (Liu et al., 2024; Song, 2018), not all of them possess fluency in academic or professional Chinese (Li & Wu, 2022; Tang & Wei, 2023). During initial recruitment, those with lower proficiency are often immediately screened out (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li, 2024a, 2024b; Luo, 2022; Sisavath, 2021). Subsequently, language barriers constrain students' work performance and integration into the workplace environment (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li, 2024b, 2024c; Song, 2018).

Social network

Skills alone do not guarantee employment. Social networks act as a bridge connecting graduates to employers. Specifically, during the initial job search, students share employment information and career experiences via social media groups (Luo, 2022; Wang, 2022), which transcends spatial and geographical constraints (Jeremie et al., 2024; Luo, 2022). Secondly, faculty, alumni, family, and friends play a crucial role in securing opportunities, such as obtaining jobs, securing Chinese work visas, choosing employment locations, and forming entrepreneurial teams (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li & Fang, 2025; Li & Ma, 2013; Li, 2024c; Liu et al., 2024; Lu & Wu, 2020; Luo, 2022; Mulvey, 2022; Tu, 2022; Umennadi et al., 2025). Moreover, the influence of social capital spans the entire career trajectory (Wang, 2022). For instance, maintaining strong ties with Chinese suppliers ensures product diversity for those in trade (Morales Valdés, 2024). However, social capital accumulation is uneven. Some students' social circles are limited to teachers and fellow international students, restricting their access to Chinese labour market information (Li, 2014; Li & Wu, 2022; Wei, 2017). Conversely, prolonged study in China may weaken their networks in home countries, leading to unfamiliarity with local labour markets (Li, 2014; Li & Ma, 2013).

Cultural capital

Furthermore, cultural capital acts as a deeper driver of career progression. Studies by Wang (2022) and Shen & Wang (2017) indicate that students with rich cultural capital can better

understand and adapt to the management styles and work pace of Chinese companies, while maintaining positive relationships with Chinese colleagues (Dai & Pham, 2024; Morales Valdés, 2024; Wang, 2022). However, workplace culture adaptation difficulties are common barrier among those with weak cultural capital (Tang & Wei, 2023; Wei, 2017; Zhang & Wang, 2019). For international graduates working in China, weak cultural capital is manifested in a number of ways, including unfamiliarity with Chinese corporate culture, communication barriers with colleagues, marginalisation, and even fear of the unfamiliar culture (Dai & Pham, 2024; Jeremie et al., 2024; Lu & Wu, 2020). For returnees, the main problem is a form of reverse culture shock (Darko et al., 2020; Sisavath, 2021; Wang, 2022).

Personal Career Expectations

While employability defines the resources graduates possess, their expectations guide employment choices. Salary and benefits are the primary factor influencing international students' decision to accept a job offer (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li, 2023, 2024a; Song, 2018). However, perceptions of salary are subjective. Some find salaries in China, especially in first-tier cities, attractive (Liu et al., 2024; Luo, 2022). Others argue that salaries offered often fail to cover the high cost of living (Li & Ma, 2013; Lin & Kingminghae, 2017; Tang & Wei, 2023; Wang, 2022). Graduates also value personal growth opportunities and career development space (Jeremie et al., 2024). They are not content with merely finding a job, but rather aspire to realise their self-worth by seizing opportunities amid China's economic development and technological progress (Li & Ma, 2013; Liu et al., 2024; Tang & Wei, 2023). In addition, long-term job stability is a key objective for many students, regardless of whether they seek employment in their home countries or in China (Li & Zheng, 2023; Li, 2023, 2024a, 2024c; Luo, 2022; Song, 2018; Tu, 2022). Consequently, stable positions with social status are particularly popular among them (Li, 2024a).

Institutional, Market, and Familial Ecosystems

Institutional support

University support for international students' employment in China encompasses career planning education and employment guidance services. However, existing research consistently indicates significant gaps in both areas, with many students reporting a lack of institutional support (Li, 2024c, 2024b; Li & Wu, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Lu & Wu, 2020; Song, 2018; Tang & Wei, 2023; Wang, 2022; Wei, 2017). The lack of university employment support directly exacerbates international students' employment difficulties. They often have a poor understanding of China's employment regulations and visa procedures (Liu et al., 2024; Tang & Wei, 2023; Tu, 2022; Wang, 2022; Wei, 2017). Besides, it leads to the absence of a clear professional trajectory. This, in turn, often leaves them in a state of confusion and passivity (Li & Ma, 2013; Li, 2024c; Lu & Wu, 2020; Song, 2018; Tang & Wei, 2023).

Bilateral labour markets

International students seeking employment in China face significant information barriers. Their access to effective recruitment information is extremely limited (Deng et al., 2018). Studies show that China lacks specialised employment platforms for foreigners (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024; Li & Ma, 2013; Tang & Wei, 2023; Wei, 2017). Employers' general unfamiliarity with the qualifications and competencies of international students

restricts engagement opportunities (Deng et al., 2018; Li, 2024c; Li & Wu, 2022). Additionally, employers hold numerous concerns about international students. A core concern is procedural and policy risks: employers frequently avoid hiring international students due to cumbersome administrative procedures and high visa costs (Li, 2024b; Tang & Wei, 2023). Another major concern is management challenges, including cultural adaptation and potential diplomatic disputes (Tang & Wei, 2023; Wei, 2017). Moreover, some employers tend to protect domestic employment opportunities (Jeremie et al., 2024; Tang & Wei, 2023). Discrimination and prejudice in the labour market further dissuade international students from seeking careers in China (Mulvey, 2022; Wang, 2022; Wei, 2017).

In contrast, Chinese enterprises operating overseas have a strong demand for international students. This is because graduates possess a unique combination of bilingual proficiency, an understanding of Chinese culture, and familiarity with their home countries' social environments (Li, 2023, 2024b; Li & Wu, 2022; Song, 2018). However, this does not mean that graduates' employment in their home countries is without obstacles. Firstly, their employment is influenced by labour market supply and demand (Jeremie et al., 2024). With the growing number of overseas returnees, credential inflation has emerged in some countries, such as Malaysia (Wang, 2022). Secondly, degrees from Chinese institutions may not be fully valued by local employers (Li et al., 2024; Li & Ma, 2013; Liu et al., 2024; Wang, 2022).

Familial and Emotional Factors

Homesickness and dependence on family members strongly motivate students to return to their home countries (Li & Ma, 2013; Li, 2023; Lin & Kingminghae, 2017; Wang, 2022; Zhang & Wang, 2019). In certain cultural contexts, international students may comply with their parents' opinions when selecting jobs (Li & Ma, 2013; Liu et al., 2024; Sisavath, 2021; Wang, 2022). Additionally, some graduates, particularly female students, bear financial responsibilities for supporting their families. Consequently, they are more inclined to prioritise high-income positions to fulfil their economic obligations (Li, 2024b; Wang, 2022).

International Employment Contexts

Policy background

Policies serve as key structural factors shaping the employment pathways of international students. As a non-immigrant country, China's policy orientation does not position international students as a primary means to address domestic skill gaps (Li, 2024b; Lu & Wu, 2020; Luo, 2022; Mulvey, 2022). Within this context, international students confront substantial practical hurdles related to visas and residency. Firstly, the post-graduation transition period is extremely short. Student visas expire shortly after graduation. Those unable to secure employment within a short period must depart China soon (Li, 2024b, 2024a; Sisavath, 2021; Tu, 2022). Secondly, securing a work permit often presents a greater challenge than obtaining a job offer itself. Students consistently report stringent visa approval criteria as the most significant barrier to entering the Chinese labour market (Deng et al., 2018; Jeremie et al., 2024; Li & Ma, 2013; Liu et al., 2024; Luo, 2022; Mulvey, 2022; Tang & Wei, 2023). The policy requires submitting proof of "two years of work experience in a relevant field" (Tu, 2022). Other criteria include major-job alignment, academic performance, and salary levels (Luo, 2022; Wang, 2022). Mandatory return agreements represent another institutional constraint. Students

arriving via specific programmes or scholarships sign agreements with relevant organisations prior to their arrival, binding them to return to home countries upon graduation (Li & Wu, 2022; Tu, 2022; Wang, 2022; Zhang & Wang, 2019). Additionally, the pandemic control measures introduced a complex dynamic. On one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified employment challenges, as travel bans hindered the mobility of many international students (Li & Zheng, 2023; Li, 2023, 2024a). Conversely, these disruptions created opportunities for some. In Malaysia, for example, travel restrictions preventing Chinese language teachers from arriving created vacancies filled by local international graduates (Luo, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Macro-economic Environment

The deepening bilateral economic and trade relations between China and the home countries of international students have significantly enhanced graduates' unique value in the human resource market. For instance, the flourishing China-ASEAN trade partnership has created substantial employment opportunities for ASEAN students proficient in both languages and cultures (Li, 2024a; Mulvey, 2020; Wang, 2022). Moreover, China's overall social development and quality of life serve as a form of macro-environmental pull, exerting a potential influence on graduates' choice of employment destination. Through extended periods of living and studying in China, students gradually adapt to its stable social order, welcoming community atmosphere, and highly convenient living infrastructure (Liu et al., 2024; Wang, 2022). In contrast, some of their home countries may face issues such as underdeveloped public services and lower levels of daily convenience (Luo, 2022).

Discussion

This systematic review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the emerging research field concerning the employment of international graduates from Chinese higher education institutions. The review reveals a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of international graduates' employment experiences in China. While existing studies have identified a range of factors influencing employment outcomes, several findings remain open to further interpretation and discussion. The following sections draw connections across individual studies, examine the distinctive features of the Chinese context, and highlight key directions for future research.

International Graduate Employability in a Non-Traditional Destination Country

Existing international graduate employability theories are largely developed in traditional immigrant destinations, such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. These studies often assume that international graduates seek to integrate into the host-country labour market after completing their studies. However, the Chinese case suggests that employment outcomes may be shaped by a different set of institutional and economic logics. Although China has rapidly emerged as a major global destination, its policies on international student and employment are not designed to attract foreign labour. As a non-immigrant country, China offers few policy provisions to facilitate the transition from study to work. The constraints and gaps of supportive policies at the top-level result in inadequate support at both the university and local labour market levels. On the one hand, Chinese universities show a clear lack of employment support systems for international

students. On the other hand, labour market access is further constrained by information asymmetry, employer concerns, and institutional barriers. Consequently, inadequate institutional infrastructure excludes the majority of international graduates from the domestic labour market in China.

The China-Linked Transnational Labour Markets

Although most graduates cannot secure employment within China, their employment opportunities are closely linked to China-related transnational economic networks. This pattern is closely associated with China's expanding economic engagement with many developing countries. Against the backdrop of China-ASEAN and China-Africa economic cooperation, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative, a large number of Chinese-invested enterprises are expanding globally. At the same time, many local firms with business ties to China have emerged in graduates' home countries. Some graduates are favoured by both Chinese and local employers owing to their bilingual competence and cross-cultural understanding. Some even participate directly in China-related international cooperation. This suggests that career opportunities for international graduates are shaped by individual qualifications, as well as the broader economic connections between China and their home countries.

The Context-Dependent Value of Chinese Degrees and Chinese Capital

This review reveals a paradox in the employment outcomes of international graduates from China. Although many graduates successfully secure employment after graduation, their employment is characterised by a paradoxical pattern: broad industry distribution but a narrow range of job roles. Chinese language ability plays a central role in shaping this pattern. Chinese language ability facilitates graduates' entry into the labour market, but it also concentrates them in a limited range of language-related occupations and restricts access to technical or core management positions. This phenomenon highlights the limited global reach of the Chinese language in the international labour market. In contrast to English, which enables graduates to pursue opportunities worldwide, Chinese language ability functions more as a "specialised asset", the value of which depends heavily on the global expansion of Chinese capital and markets.

In addition, labour markets in many graduates' home countries may not provide opportunities that fully utilise the professional knowledge acquired in China. As a result, graduates often accept positions that rely more on language and communication skills than on disciplinary expertise. Furthermore, employers determine the types of positions and responsibilities assigned to graduates. When employers reduce international graduates' core competitiveness to a combination of "Chinese language ability & cross-cultural communication skills", their professional knowledge and technical expertise are left underutilised. This concentration in a narrow range of occupations may contribute to relatively low salary levels and limited career progression opportunities. Taken together, these findings suggest that the employment value of Chinese educational and linguistic capital is highly dependent on labour market context.

The Institutional Production of Employability

International students' academic and living experiences in China shape their employability. Many of the employment challenges identified in the reviewed studies are closely related to the

knowledge, skills, and social resources developed during the study period. Human capital forms the foundation for graduates to secure employment opportunities. However, most studies report that international students commonly suffer from insufficient human capital or low transferable skills, including a disconnect between academic knowledge and workplace application, a lack of practical experience, and weak Chinese language proficiency. These issues undermine graduates' competitiveness and long-term career prospects in the labour market. Furthermore, this exposes a structural weakness in the current international student education system in China, which overemphasises theoretical learning at the expense of practical training. Feedback from the labour market indirectly confirms this problem. Multiple studies point out that Chinese degrees have relatively low recognition in some countries.

Variations in social capital and cultural capital also influence employment outcomes. Some international students have social networks confined to teachers and fellow international students and possess a weak understanding of Chinese culture. This restricts their employment prospects and long-term career development. University management and support practices are a major cause of these difficulties. Chinese universities implement a segregated management model for international and domestic students, which limits interaction between the two groups in terms of physical space and daily contact (Akram et al. 2020; Shen & Luo, 2025; Yasmin et al., 2021;). In terms of teaching, international students are placed in separate classes with few opportunities to attend courses together with their Chinese peers (Singh & Kaur, 2023; Wen et al., 2018;). For accommodation, most are assigned to international student dormitories (Li & Li, 2017; Shen & Luo, 2025). The lack of opportunities to communicate and interact with Chinese students prevents international students from integrating into local society and gaining a deep understanding of Chinese culture (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li & Li, 2013).

Implications for Stakeholders

Existing literature has proposed practical recommendations for improving the employment outcomes of international students. However, most studies remain at the level of general calls for action, lacking empirical analysis of the underlying mechanisms. For example, while many studies advocate for "strengthening university-industry collaboration", few have examined in depth the decision-making logic, cost and benefits, and talent needs of employers (particularly overseas Chinese-invested enterprises), as well as the practical constraints faced by university career service departments. As a result, many policy suggestions remain superficial. This study offers practical implications from four perspectives: policymakers, universities, employers and international graduates.

For policymakers in China, we suggest relevant authorities to optimise the policy and institutional environment (Lu & Wu, 2020). Specific measures include: establishing English-language policy information channels for international students; compiling employment guidelines covering employment prospects and career opportunities in major industries in China (Jeremie et al., 2024); creating a talent market for international students, regularly organising job fairs in cities with large international student populations (Deng et al., 2018; Tang & Wei, 2023); simplifying the work visa application process for highly skilled international graduates (Deng et al., 2018); promoting the bilateral educational recognition mechanisms to enhance the international credibility of Chinese degrees (Lu & Wu, 2020); and utilising social media to

share success cases and experiences of international graduates, providing inspiration for others (Jeremie et al., 2024).

For Chinese universities, it is necessary to establish a career support system that covers the entire international student lifecycle. At the talent cultivation level, universities should proactively align with enterprise market demands, conducting targeted teaching based on industry-specific essential skills (Tang & Wei, 2023). They should collaborate with Chinese enterprises (both domestic and those operating in students' home countries) to establish internship bases, thereby helping companies identify potential human resources (Li, 2023). At the career service level, universities should establish career guidance centres for international students with professional teams (Tang & Wei, 2023); offer cross-cultural communication courses to avoid weakened employability due to cultural disconnection (Darko et al., 2020); systematically teach Chinese resume writing, interview skills, and communication techniques (Li, 2024c); publish lists of commonly used job search platforms, relevant enterprises, and HR contact information on university websites; liaise with Chinese embassies/consulates abroad, foreign diplomatic missions in China, foreign-invested enterprises in China, and overseas Chinese-invested companies to collect and disseminate job information (Deng et al., 2018; Li, 2023; Zhang & Wang, 2019); and establish alumni associations for international students to expand networking resources (Lu & Wu, 2020).

For enterprises, international graduates should be regarded as a bridge for both internationalisation and localisation and integrated into strategic talent planning. To recruit and develop such talent, firms can partner with universities to organise industry seminars. These events provide international students with key insights into local labour market dynamics, legal frameworks, and professional pathways (Jeremie et al., 2024). Capitalising on their linguistic proficiency and intercultural competencies, dedicated roles can be designed. At the managerial level, organisations should enhance diversity training to foster cultural understanding and respect among employees, thereby cultivating an inclusive workplace for international recruits. Training should also be provided to address potential challenges such as cultural adaptation and language application faced by international students, to reduce management costs and staff turnover risks.

For international students, it is crucial to exercise personal agency and actively prepare for employment (Dai & Pham, 2024). During the program selection stage, students should investigate the demands of the Chinese job market and relevant policy restrictions to avoid employment difficulties arising from information asymmetry (Li & Zheng, 2023; Tang & Wei, 2023). During their studies, international students should formulate career plans as early as possible. Specially, they need to proactively seek internships or part-time positions to accumulate essential soft skills such as problem-solving, adaptability and self-directed learning. As recent studies indicate, relying solely on an overseas degree is no longer a guarantee for employment or career development (Jeremie et al., 2024; Li, 2023; Sisavath, 2021). In addition to professional knowledge, students should consciously enhance multilingual abilities, actively integrate into Chinese society and cultural environments, and simultaneously pay attention to the workplace culture and social networks in their home countries. Given that Chinese universities cannot conduct in-depth research on the labour market of every source country, students' own understanding of and connections to their home markets are vital.

Limitations and future research

This review is not without limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, despite covering core Chinese and English academic databases, including CNKI, Web of Science, and Scopus, potential omissions of grey literature remain inevitable. Second, constrained by the overall volume and thematic distribution of the existing literature, the analysis lacks depth for certain sub-groups, such as graduates from specific disciplines or countries. Finally, this review only includes literature from the graduates' perspective and does not address the needs and considerations of employers. Nevertheless, this review synthesises current empirical evidence and establishes a knowledge framework for research on the employment of international graduates from China, providing an important foundation for future research and practice.

Future research could expand the current knowledge base in the following three directions: 1) Introduce more diverse theories to explain the complexity of employment issues; 2) Adopt longitudinal tracking designs or cross-national comparative studies to assess the unique competitiveness and value of the Chinese study experience in the global labour market; 3) Existing studies have predominantly focused on employment barriers and difficulties, creating a problem-centred narrative. Future research should pay greater attention to exploring "success cases". Through in-depth case studies and the analysis of key success factors, researchers can identify effective job-seeking strategies, approaches to resource integration, and career planning insights, thereby offering practical guidance for a broader population of international students.

Conclusion

Although China has become an important player in the global education market, research on the employment outcomes of international graduates from China remains relatively limited. This review provides a systematic synthesis of existing evidence and highlights the distinctive employment patterns associated with studying in China. The review suggests that the employment experiences of international graduates from China differ from those reported in traditional immigrant destination countries. As a non-traditional destination country, China provides limited pathways for study-to-work transitions, while graduates' career opportunities are closely connected to China-related economic networks. The findings further indicate that the employment value of Chinese educational and linguistic capital is highly dependent on labour market context. As the number of international students in China continues to grow and research in this field deepens, it is expected that more high-quality empirical studies will emerge to enrich understanding of this complex issue. The Chinese case highlights the need to move beyond conventional host-country integration frameworks and pay more attention to the role of transnational labour markets and context-specific forms of educational capital in shaping international graduates' career outcomes.

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Appendix Details of Papers included in the Systematic Review

Authors	Sample characteristics	Theoretical framework	Research design	Research paradigm	Data analysis methods
Li & Ma (2013) (in Chinese)	South Korean international students in Beijing. N=81	Push-pull model; Maslow's hierarchy of needs	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis; cross-tabulation analysis
Li (2014) (in Chinese)	South Korean international students in China. N=668	Social capital theory	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Descriptive analysis; binary logistic regression
Shen & Wang (2017) (in Chinese)	Ethiopian international students in Tianjin. N=20	None	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Wei (2017) (in Chinese)	International students in Suzhou. N=65	None	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Descriptive analysis
Lin & Kingminghae (2017)	Thai international students in Beijing and Shanghai. N=328	Push-pull model ; Acculturation theory	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Interaction term; logistic regression; descriptive statistics; quadratic term
Song (2018) (in Chinese)	Thai international students in China. N=200	Push-pull model; career development theory; Labour market segmentation theory;	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis; factor analysis

		Neoclassical economic migration theory			
Deng et al. (2018) (in Chinese)	International students in Beijing. N=98	Maslow's hierarchy of needs	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Zhang & Wang (2019) (in Chinese)	International students in Shanghai. N=319	Push-pull model	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Descriptive analysis; factor analysis; correlation analysis; anova; t-test
Mulvey (2020)	Ugandan international students in China. N=12	Soft power theory; Public diplomacy theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
Lu & Wu (2020) (in Chinese)	International students in Beijing. N=104	Human capital theory; Push-pull model	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Descriptive analysis;
Darko et al. (2020)	Ghana international students in Sichuan. N=708	None	Cross-sectional	Quantitative	Structural equation modeling; confirmatory factor analysis
Li & Zheng (2023)	Myanmar international students in Yunnan. N=4	Linguistic entrepreneurship theory ; Bourdieu's theory of capital; neoliberalism theory	Longitudinal	Qualitative	Inductive analysis; content analysis
Sisavath (2021)	Lao international students in China. N=17	Human capital theory ; Signaling theory	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Thematic analysis
Wang (2022)	Asian international students in Beijing. N=16	Human capital theory ; Neo racism theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Narrative inquiry
Mulvey (2022)	African is in China. N=45	Regimes of mobility theory; Theory of practice	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Thematic analysis
Tu (2022)	International students in shanghai surroundings and Guangzhou. N=38	Migration infrastructure theory; Life course theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Thematic analysis; content analysis
Li & Wu (2022) (in Chinese)	International students in Beijing. N=55	None	Longitudinal	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Luo (2022)	African international students in Beijing. N=5	Push-pull model; Theory framework of career development	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
Li (2023) (in Chinese)	African international students in Beijing. N=63	None	Longitudinal	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Tang & Wei (2023) (in Chinese)	International students in the Yangtze River delta. N=35	None	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Grounded theory
Li et al. (2024)	International students in eastern China. N=20	Cognitive information processing	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Directed qualitative content analysis
Li (2024a) (in Chinese)	African international students in Beijing. N=60	None	Longitudinal	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Liu et al. (2024) (in Chinese)	International students in China. N=1755	None	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Jeremie et al. (2024)	International students in China. N=154	Push-pull theory ; Acculturation theory	Cross-sectional	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis; thematic analysis

Dai & Pham (2024)	International students in China. N=15	Graduate capital model; Employability agency framework	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
Li (2024b) (in Chinese)	International students in Beijing, Shanghai, Dalian. N=235	Human capital theory; Agency theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Grounded theory
Li (2024c)	African international students in China. N=63	None	Longitudinal	Mixed methods	Descriptive analysis
Morales Valdés (2024)	Chilean international students in China. N=13	Internationalization of higher education theory; Soft power theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Content analysis
Umennadi et al. (2025)	Nigerian international students in north China and northeast China. N=6	Mobility as becoming theory	Cross-sectional	Qualitative	Narrative inquiry
Li & Fang (2025)	Zimbabwean international students in eastern coastal provinces. N=1	Intercultural entrepreneurship theory; Social capital theory	Longitudinal	Mixed methods	Thematic analysis; social network analysis; triangulation