

CHINA AS A DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A “PULL AND REPEL” FACTORS ANALYSIS IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract: *International student mobility is a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors. This study examines the prospect of China as a destination country for international students in the post-COVID-19 era. With qualitative data from 30 frontline international educators (support staff in international student recruitment and services) from 30 Chinese universities, this study has determined a set of “pull” factors that serve to attract international students to study in China and a set of “repel” factors that discourage students from going. On the basis of both the “pull” and “repel” factors identified, the participants anticipate important challenges for China’s international enrollment in the short term, but stay optimistic about the long-term prospect. The “pull and repel” factors analysis is found to be a useful approach to examining the attractiveness of a host country to international students in a focused manner.*

Keywords: *China, international students, mobility, challenges, opportunities*

Introduction

China has aimed to be a key destination country for international students in the new century. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China achieved much success in international student enrollment, becoming the top destination country in Asia and the third in the world in 2018 (Liu & Liu, 2021). But what does the future hold for China as an emerging destination country for international students? The strict COVID-19 measures in China have seriously reduced the momentum of international student enrollment. China’s post-COVID-19 economy is not rebounding as strongly and quickly as expected, and the new geopolitical situation of the world today, particularly the trade war, the tech war, and the decoupling discourse between the US and China, has created much uncertainty for student mobility. Will China be able to continue its success in attracting more international students to its door? What challenges does China face and what opportunities does China have? These are the questions we hope to answer in this study with 30 Chinese international educators from 30 Chinese institutions. The ultimate goal of this study is to gain a glimpse into the future outlook of China as a destination country in the new global context.

To answer the above questions, this study has adopted an innovative framework, namely, the “pull and repel” factors analysis. The “pull” factors are conditions of a country that attract international students to go there. The “repel” factors are conditions of the same country that prevent students from going. The traditional “push and pull” factors analysis (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), a demand-side analysis of international student mobility, is used to compare the conditions of a home country and a host country of international students. The goal is to understand students’ decision-making process. The new “pull and repel” factors analysis, a supply-side analysis of international student mobility, focuses on the conditions of one particular host country only. The goal is to examine the attractiveness of the host country to international students. Previous studies on China

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as a destination country for international students tend to focus either on the advantages (e.g. Ma, 2016; Lee, 2019) or the disadvantages (e.g., Ding, 2016; Ma & Wen, 2018), while this study aims to determine the advantages alongside disadvantages in the new post-COVID-19 global context. In addition to gleaning the future outlook of China as a host country for international students based on the “pull and repel” factors identified, this study also aims to evaluate this new approach to understanding the global mobility of students.

Chinese History of International Education

For the longest time, as the center of the Confucian cultural circle, China took so much pride in being the “Central Kingdom” that it closed its northern border with a “Great Wall” and restricted trade on its southern coast, for fear of potential ill influence from “barbarian states” (Liu, 2010). However, after China’s defeats in the two Opium Wars (1840-1842 and 1856-1860), the Qing government (1644–1912) was forced to stop its “closed door” policy and started to engage in a self-strengthening effort through Western learning from the 1860s (Liu 2010, p.21). Foreign language education was started for the first time in China to allow Chinese citizens to access Western technology. Chinese students and scholars were also sponsored by the Qing government to study science and technology in the US and Europe. After losing the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, there was a further realization among the Chinese elites that China should also reference Western governance models in order to fundamentally change its backwardness and weakness (Liu, 2010). After the 1911 Revolution that ended China’s 2000 years of imperial rule, an important nation-building task during the Republican period (1911-1949) was believed to be an even deeper cultural change in China, as the traditional Confucian culture came under scrutiny (Yuan, 2010). The Western traditions of democracy and science were important cultural imports of this period.

In the first three decades of the P.R. China (1949 to 1976), Chairman Mao attempted to transition China into a classical Socialist country with a planned economy, envisioned by Karl Marx. The attempt failed to bring prosperity to China. From the 1980s, China once again turned to the West and borrowed into China the Capitalist market-driven model of economic development (Tian & Liu, 2010). After fast economic growth for two decades in the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to the new economic model, the number of Chinese students studying abroad grew quickly since 2000, increasing about 25% each year, and over 90% of the growth was driven by self-sponsored students (Liu, 2021). China has become a top source country of international students in all major host countries in the West in the first two decades of the 21st century. The huge tide of Chinese students flowing overseas for higher education, particularly self-financed undergraduate students, has been much appreciated by universities in the West, many of whom rely on international tuition as a major revenue source (Liu, 2021).

The above historical review indicates that for over a century from the 1860s, the Chinese international education effort was strongly characterized by an outbound mobility of Chinese students and scholars to access Western technology, culture, governance ideas, and economic models (Liu & Huang, 2023). The Chinese students’ outbound mobility also fits into the larger picture of the global inequality in higher education with international students mostly flowing from the developing Global South to the developed Global North (Altbach, 2002).

International Student Education in China

The economic rise and increasing international influence of China under the leadership of a Communist government have caused some unease, suspicion and concern among Western liberal democratic countries. China is perceived by some countries in the West as a danger and a threat to the existing world order led by the USA (Broomfield, 2003). It is believed by the Chinese government that the world’s adverse impression of China is a result of a lack of knowledge about the country and a lack of experience in the country, and thus the best way to increase the world’s understanding

of China is to attract more international students to study in Chinese universities (Liu & Lin, 2016). Chinese universities are supposed to help international students develop a good understanding of the country, with the hope that they are able to serve as China’s “para-diplomats” (Mulvey & Lo, 2021). International higher education in major Anglo countries has been pursued both as an export industry to obtain economic profit and as an immigrant recruitment platform to obtain top talents (Findlay 2011, pp. 164-165; Liu, 2023, pp.950-951). However, the Chinese objective in international student education is to serve China’s international diplomacy by educating a large number of international talents who are China-savvy and China-friendly (Liu & Lin, 2016).

In order to achieve its diplomatic goal, China rolled out a “Study in China Plan” in 2010, aiming to attract half a million international students to Chinese universities in ten years. The goal was almost achieved two years ahead of schedule before the COVID-19 Pandemic. In 2018, there were 492,200 international students recorded in China (Liu & Liu, 2021). This is a major event in the world’s international education industry, given the fact that China was a non-traditional destination for international students in the Global South. The bottom line in Figure 1 shows the steady growth of international students studying in China since 2004. To gain a positive international environment and to improve the brand of Chinese higher education, China is not making money out of international education, but spending money on scholarships to attract more international students to China (Liu, 2021). About 12% of international students in China are supported by national government scholarships in 2018 (Liu & Liu, 2021). In addition to national government funding, local governments and institutions also provide their own scholarship opportunities. A higher enrollment of international students is seen by China as an indicator of “World-Class” universities which China hopes to have more of (Jokila, 2015). Given this understanding, Chinese institutions are also motivated to recruit and retain more international students.

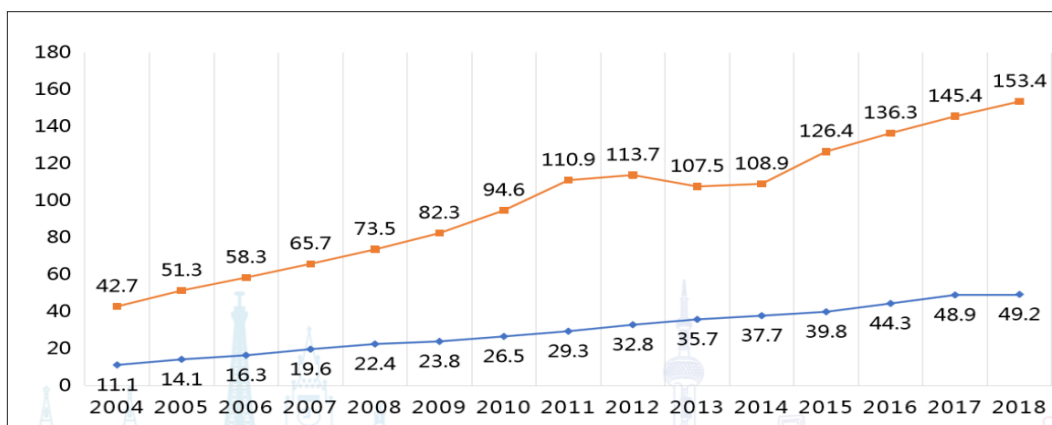


Figure 1. The numbers (in 10,000) of Chinese Students Studying Overseas (orange line) and Overseas Students Studying in China (blue line) (source: Miao & Qu, 2022)

Despite the fast growth, China as a destination for international students is still a recent development, and China is still only an emerging market for international students. As Figure 1 shows, there is still a huge “trade deficit” between the number of Chinese students studying overseas (top line) and the number of overseas students studying in China (bottom line). In 2018, over 1.5 million Chinese students were studying overseas, but the number of international students studying in China was less than 0.5 million. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of international students in China was only 1.20% of total enrollment, much lower than the proportion of international students in more mature host countries of international students, such as Australia (28%), Canada (21.40%) and the UK (20.90%). The US is the largest destination for international students, but the percentage (5.50%) is low due to the large domestic student base. In a national meeting on education in 2018,

Chinese President Xi Jinping called on the international education community in China to make Chinese higher education more competitive globally and to turn China into a major destination of education abroad desired by outstanding youths around the world (Cheng & Zhang, 2020). This is an ambitious goal for China as an emerging destination country, a non-English speaking country in the Global South. It is no small task if China hopes to catch up with more established host countries in the proportion of international enrollment. Is the Chinese international education community confident about achieving the national goal of turning China into a top destination for international students, particularly in the new post-COVID-19 global context with complex geopolitical tension and a sluggish global economy? This is a question we hope to answer in this study.

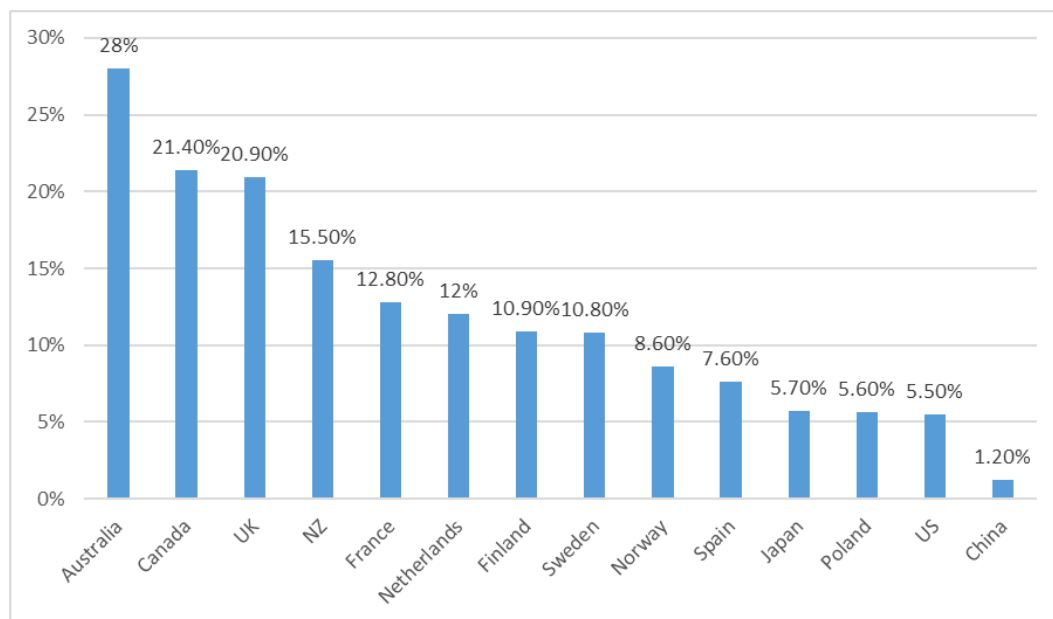


Figure 2. Proportion of International Students in Major Host Countries in 2019 (source: Miao & Qu, 2022)

The “Pull and Repel” Factors Analysis

The most foundational theory in understanding students’ and scholars’ international mobility has been Bourdieu’s theory of social capital reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986). International mobility happens when privileged families and individuals aim to convert their advantages in social capitals across national borders. Based on this fundamental understanding, international education scholars have been analyzing the “push” and “pull” factors to predict the patterns of international student mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The “push” factors are conditions existing in students’ home country that motivate them to pursue higher education abroad. There can be negative factors, such as poor quality of higher education at home, but also positive factors, such as strong economic growth and increasing household income. The “pull” factors refer to conditions existing in a host country of international students that serve to attract international students to study there, such as perceived better quality of education, rich intercultural learning environment, and post-graduation immigration opportunities. The push-pull factors analysis basically compares conditions in two countries, the home country and the host country, and analyzes what makes students want to move from their home country and go to the host country to study. The push-pull factors analysis has been used to analyze Chinese students’ outbound mobility (e.g. Yu, et al, 2023).

The push and pull factors analysis actually focuses on individual students’ decision-making process, considering and contrasting conditions at home and host countries. It is an analysis of the

demand side of international student mobility. International student mobility is seen as a result of individual students and their families seeking better education opportunities (often delivered in the medium of a desirable language that is not available in their home countries) and better work/living conditions beyond national borders. The motivations of mobile students and their parents (the demand) are important, but it is also important to analyze the supply side of the international education enterprise, that is, why countries and universities in major host countries are interested in recruiting and educating international students from other countries. From the perspective of the supply side, student migration, as a form of knowledge migration, is no longer a neutral process (Findlay, 2011). As was mentioned above, major Anglo countries, such as the US, the UK, Australia and Canada, pursue international student education as an export industry and a talent recruitment platform, and China, as a non-Western and non-English-speaking host country of international students, pursues an international diplomatic goal instead to educate China savvy and China-friendly students (Liu & Lin, 2016). The design of this study is a unique one. It focuses on China as a host country for international students, so it is a supply-side study. But the goal is not to study why China recruits international students, which is a well-established area of study (e.g. Liu & Lin, 2016; Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023). Instead, the goal of this study is to examine China’s conditions as a destination country for international students, both favorable conditions that “pull” international students to go and unfavorable conditions that “repel” students from going. So it is not a “push and pull” analysis, but a “pull and repel” analysis that focuses on the attractiveness of China as a host country for international students in the new global context. Table 1 summarizes the differences between a traditional “pull and push” analysis and the “pull and repel” analysis conducted in this study:

Table 1. “Pull and Push” Analysis vs. “Pull and Repel” Analysis

	“Pull and Push” Analysis	“Pull and Repel” Analysis
Typology	Demand-side analysis	Supply-side analysis
Focus	Advantages of a host country and disadvantages of a source country	Both advantages and disadvantages of a host country
Perspective	International student mobility as a politically neutral event with individual students and parents pursuing better educational opportunities	International student mobility as a purposeful national competitive strategy with countries pursuing national interests based on needs
Goal	To determine the potential volume of student mobility from one particular country to another	To determine the attractiveness of a particular host country for students from different source countries

Source: Constructed by author

A review of current literature has shown a limited number of studies in this area. On the “pull” side, China’s rapid economic development and future prospects are found to be a key factor that attracts international students to China (Ma, 2016). Studying in China is thus a good investment in linguistic and cultural capital conducive to a better career prospect (Lee, 2019). The quickly improving quality of higher education in China is another factor that attracts international students to China (Wen & Hu, 2018). On the “repel” side, the quality of education and other services in China is still lower than international benchmarks (Ding, 2016), and the in-class learning experiences of international students in China still have much room for improvement (Ma & Wen, 2018). The frontline international educators in China are the key stakeholders of China’s international student education. How do they perceive China’s advantages and disadvantages as an emerging destination for international education? After some quick quantitative growth, China’s international student education is experiencing some growing pains and system transitions (Liu & Liu, 2021). The new

geopolitical situation of the world today, particularly the “decoupling” tensions with China, also poses challenges to China’s international student education. How do Chinese international educators view the future prospects of China’s international education as industry insiders? Is China able to attract more international students to Chinese universities in the new global context? This is what this study hopes to find out.

Methodology

The participants of this qualitative study are 30 frontline international educators from 30 different Chinese universities. Most of them work as international student recruiters and international student advisors. They were invited to participate in this study while they were studying in a leadership development program in Canada from an international comparative approach. They were all given the following open-ended written interview questions:

“China is aiming to be a top destination country for international students in the new century. After the last decade’s fast growth, how would you assess China’s challenges and opportunities in international student education in the next decade? Please help make a list of challenges and a list of opportunities that you perceive as frontline international educators in Chinese universities. In addition, please share with us whether you feel confident about the future of China as a destination country of international students and why.”

This study hopes to collect qualitative data from an emic perspective (Creswell, 2006) that are Chinese international educators’ own perceptions of China’s challenges, opportunities, and future prospects in international student education. The participants were allowed time to think and the freedom to write in either Chinese or English. Most of them opted to respond in Chinese for a fuller expression of meaning. The 30 participants’ responses were anonymously coded N1-30. Based on the interview questions, the data were organized into three general areas first: challenges, opportunities and future prospects. In each area, the 30 responses from 30 participants were subjected to a thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with three layers of coding. During the first layer of coding, salient statements in relation to the interview question were highlighted. The second layer of coding allocated highlighted statements into thematic categories. During the third layer of coding, the thematic categories derived from the second layer of coding were clustered into fewer and more general categories for presentation. The number of mentions of each theme by the 30 participants is recorded and reported to show the weight of the theme ($n/30=n$ out of 30). Apart from a thick description of the data collection and data analysis process, member checking through prolonged engagement with the participants (3 months) is a major strategy to secure the trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To demonstrate trustworthiness in the presentation, some direct quotes are translated by the author (the author is fully bilingual with the first language being Chinese) and used to support key thematic areas.

Findings

When presenting the findings of this study, we will balance both the frequency and saliency of themes. A more frequently appearing theme is considered significant. A theme that does not appear as often, but is considered salient in relation to the research question, is also presented. The frequency of appearance for each theme is provided.

The “Repelling” Challenges

China as a destination country suffers from bad press globally due to the geopolitical tension between China and the US-led Western world (17/30). China is often portrayed as a sinister country in the

Western media, and thus it may scare off many international students. This is considered a major challenge for China's international student education, receiving 17 mentions:

The geopolitical factor is a big factor. China's rise and global influence have not been accepted well. The global image of China, painted in the Western media, has a very negative impact on China's ability to attract international students, particularly from the West. There is fear toward China. (n4)

Many of the Chinese international educators in this study admit that Chinese higher education's quality and international recognition are still low in comparison to more established systems in the West (11/30). The quality of student services in China, both on campus and off campus, is also low, which results in poorer student experiences (13/30):

The English competence of staff in non-international offices is poor, and there are no English services for banking, housing, retail, etc. in English off campus. The international student service center is often understaffed. (n15)

Most international students in China are from Asia and Africa. It is a challenge for China to diversify the source countries of international students (4/30). In particular, it is hard to recruit from the West, such as Western Europe, North America and Australia. In addition, the quality of international students recruited to China is lower than domestic Chinese students. Some faculties and departments in Chinese universities take them as a liability (6/30). The leadership of some universities may not emphasize internationalization as a central institutional activity (3/30) if the quality is poor:

Some departments don't want to take more international students, as they find it hard to educate them. It is also hard to find professors to work as supervisors for graduate students, also due to the poorer quality. The poorer quality may be due to the poor K-12 education students received in their home countries. Some of our courses, for example, Chemistry and Physics, are at a much higher level than their home countries. (n24)

International enrollment in China is too dependent on scholarship spending, with a limited number of self-financed students (6/30). The small number of self-financed students from Asia and Africa is also declining due to the economic challenges of these countries during and after the pandemic. This is another major challenge, as China's post-COVID-19 economic recovery is slower than expected, which may mean reduced government scholarship opportunities (10/30). As we mentioned in the literature review, the Chinese goal in international student education is international diplomacy, and thus the economic motivation is weak, as there are limited opportunities for international students to work in China after graduation given the current national policy framework (6/30):

International student education does not seem to be relevant to the Chinese economy. We don't make money from their tuition. We don't want to retain them to work after graduation. Many Chinese people don't understand why we are doing it. (n20)

There is some public pushback on the government's scholarship spending on international students (7/30), not understanding why China spends so much money on foreign students while there are still so many poor people in China. Chinese domestic students sometimes do not understand why international students' dorm conditions are better than theirs. Some international educators also mentioned that some Chinese people still hold racism toward international students of darker color (4/30) who are the majority of the international student population in China.

Chinese as a medium of instruction for most programs (despite some English-taught programs specially designed to attract international students) is another major barrier to international

enrollment in China (14/30). For students with no or weak Chinese competence, it takes time for them to become proficient enough to excel in Chinese-taught programs. The English-taught programs and courses may be of poorer quality due to hardships in finding qualified instructors.

The language barrier is a big challenge. Chinese is hard to learn. It takes time. Sometimes students may have HSK5 (which is the Chinese language requirement to enter into a Chinese-taught program), but they still struggle academically. (n22)

The strict quarantine measures during the Pandemic in China broke the momentum of international mobility of students, and the recovery of the momentum will take time (5/30). There is still fear of international travel for both Chinese students and students who want to study in China. Table 2 is a summary of the major “repel” factors for China and their times of mention:

Table 2. “Repel” Factors of International Student Education in China

“Repel” Factors	Frequency Count
Bad press of China	17/30
Chinese as a medium of instruction	14/30
Quality and reputation of Chinese higher education	13/30
Slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery	10/30
Lack of public support	7/30
Weak economic motivation	7/30
Over-dependence on scholarship	6/30
Poor quality of students	6/30
COVID-19 broke momentum	5/30
Singular sources (Asia and Africa)	4/30

The “Pulling” Opportunities

More than half of the Chinese international educators in this study mentioned that the Chinese national government’s support for international student education in China will continue to be strong, due to the need for international education as a tool for China’s international diplomacy (16/30). Given the adverse geopolitical environment for China, the government’s support for international education might even further strengthen. The government policy support, according to the participants, might include more opportunities for international students to work while studying in China, more incentives for them to start their businesses, and more opportunities to work in Chinese companies upon graduation. Some preferable policies are provided by local Chinese governments as well. The Chinese economy will continue to grow, even if not as fast as in pre-COVID-19 years, which will create good career opportunities for international graduates both in China and in students’ home countries, and both in industries and governments (13/30). Many international educators mentioned specifically the “Belt and Road Initiative or BRI”, China’s global infrastructure development strategy to link China with other Global South countries (Smith, 2021). Chinese companies’ global operations are creating a big demand for talents with Chinese knowledge in different parts of the world. Chinese universities have been involved in BRI through collaborative education programs in partnership with governments and industries to train technical and managerial talents for key infrastructure projects (Liu, et al, 2024). The involvement of Chinese universities in BRI has helped attract numerous international students from Global South countries to China (8/30):

With China's fast economic growth, some Chinese companies' investments and operations overseas will grow. While overseas, they will have a greater and greater demand for overseas talents who understand Chinese culture and economy. For example, the desire for students in "Belt and Road" countries to study in China is very strong (n2).

The number and proportion of international enrollment are taken as an indicator of a university's quality and global standing, often tied to government funding, and thus universities in China are in general motivated to recruit and educate international students (6/30). One participant mentioned that having more international students on campus creates opportunities for Chinese domestic students' international exposure and intercultural learning. Another participant wrote:

Most, if not all, Chinese universities emphasize internationalization work. Many universities have made internationalization an important benchmark in evaluating the work of different academic units. More staff and departments are willing and motivated to engage in international work now. (n16)

Though China has challenges in recruiting students from the Western world, there is an increasing interest from developing countries to learn about the Chinese model of economic development (9/30). Two Chinese colleagues believe that the past ten years of work in international education have also helped improve the world's understanding of China, particularly people from the Global South. Often this happens through word of mouth:

As China gets stronger, and the Chinese people get richer, it may create a curiosity among other countries, developing countries in the Third World in particular, about the Chinese path of modernity. They will want to come to learn what is happening. How did China pull so many people out of poverty? (n4)

The quality of Chinese higher education will get better, creating better global recognition (6/30). This is another opportunity. Similarly, the quality of management and services in international student education will also get better (6/30). Some participants mentioned that China is working right now to raise the academic threshold in international recruitment with the aim of improving the quality and reputation of international education in China.

Some countries in the poorer regions of the world have invited Chinese universities to establish branch campuses there, hoping to introduce the Chinese model of higher education. We are supposed to offer courses in Chinese, taught by Chinese academic staff. They will provide venues and take care of recruitment. (n24)

As one of the oldest cultures and civilizations in the world, China is believed to have some cultural appeal to international students (6/30). International students in China share a common curiosity about Chinese culture and society, according to many participants.

The world needs both the Yin and the Yang side. Though the Yang side, the masculine side represented by the Western culture, is often considered desirable, the Yin side, the gentle side represented by Eastern culture, is indispensable. Global development needs a force different from the Western Yang culture in order to achieve sustainability. Thus there is a necessity for Eastern cultures to exist and to spread. (n19)

Low living costs and ample scholarship opportunities are mentioned by seven participants as a pull factor (7/30). Safety in China, with strict gun control and drug control, is also mentioned as a positive condition (4/30). Some believe that Mandarin Chinese will become a more popular and more mainstream language in the future (3/30). One person mentioned that the English proficiency level

of professors in China is improving too, making more English-taught programs with better quality possible (n14). Finally, two participants mentioned that, with the declining Chinese population, Chinese university seats might need to be filled by more international students down the road (n5 and n23). Table 3 is a summary of all “pull” factors and their weight for international education in China:

Table 3. “Pull” Factors of International Student Education in China

“Pull” Factors	Frequency Count
Government support	16/30
Economic growth	13/30
Appeal to Global South	9/30
Institutional motivation	6/30
Low cost and scholarship	7/30
Improving quality of Chinese higher education	6/30
Appeal of Chinese culture	6/30
Safety	4/30
Chinese becoming more popular	3/30
Declining Chinese population	2/30

The Future Prospect

This group of Chinese international educators are “mildly optimistic” (n22) about the prospect of the next ten years. It will be a difficult task to improve the quality of students recruited, while not sacrificing the number of enrollment (16/30). International student education in China is mandated by the government to improve the integration of international students on campus, but it will be a difficult process and it will take some time to achieve (7/30). Due to the slower-than-expected recovery of the Chinese economy, there might be an emphasis on the recruitment and education of tuition-paying international students in the next while, which is not easy to achieve (4/30). One participant wrote that “a more self-supported student population will be one of the KPIs of internationalization” (n29).

In the next decade, the number of international students is expected to recover, as it has gone down due to the impact of the Pandemic. I reckon that it won't go back to the pre-pandemic level very soon because of the economic, political and a few other factors. (n26)

Despite the challenges in the short term, Chinese international educators in this study feel more confident in the long term. The group believes that the Chinese government’s support for international student education will be consistent in general (11/30), and the future demand for international and intercultural learning around the world will be strong (7/30):

In the post-COVID era, Chinese universities and universities in other countries alike are searching for new opportunities for international collaboration. Taking my university as an example, in 2023 alone, the volume of delegations going out and coming in, the new collaborative agreements and academic exchanges are 2-3 times the pre-pandemic level. There is an earnest need for international exchanges from the governments, universities as well as individual professors and students. (n17)

Though it is hard to grow enrollment from Western countries, international enrollment from non-Western cultures is likely to continue to grow, given China’s active involvement with these regions (6/30).

For some regions and countries, such as the countries along the “Belt and Road Initiative”, there will be strong scholarship support and the enrollment will grow to support Chinese companies’ operations in these regions. For some other countries, improving bilateral relations with China will drive student mobility to China. For example, the Saudi government scholarship programs encourage more Saudi students to study in China. We saw an increase in Saudi students. (n7)

The participants are also positive that the Chinese image, together with the quality and recognition of Chinese higher education, will improve in the future (5/30). Table 4 is a summary of the short-term challenges and the reasons for long-term confidence:

Table 4. Short-Term Challenges and Reasons for Long-Term Confidence

Challenges in the Short Term	Frequency Count	Reasons for Confidence in the Long Term	Frequency Count
The need to improve quality of recruitment and education	16/30	Consistent Chinese government support	11/30
The need to change the service model and improve integration	7/30	Future demand for international education	7/30
The need to recruit from Western countries	5/30	Strong interest and demand from developing countries	6/30
The need to increase number of self-financed students	4/30	Improvement of Chinese higher education	5/30

Discussion

The “pull and repel” factors analysis conducted in this study is a supply-side analysis, focusing on both the advantages and disadvantages of China as a host country of international students. Different from the conventional “pull and push” analysis which sees international student mobility more as a politically neutral event (Findlay, 2011), the “pull and repel” analysis fully recognizes that international student mobility is a purposeful national strategy of the host country to pursue desired national interests. The “pull and repel” analysis focuses on, not individual students’ choices and decision-making process, but host countries’ national policies with regard to international student education, i.e. what goals they want to achieve and how they go about achieving them. Different from traditional host countries of international students, such as the US, the UK, Australia and Canada, who pursue international education as an export industry and as a platform for talent acquisition (Liu, 2023), international student education is pursued in China as part of its international diplomacy (Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023). The “bad press of China” is identified in this study as the number one “repel” factor for the country’s international recruitment. International student education in China is in the business of winning the hearts and minds of people from around the world. Improving the global image and global understanding of China, by reducing the “bad press of China”, is the ultimate goal (Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023).

International educators in this study have identified “government support” (16/30) as the number one “pull” factor. To achieve its international diplomacy goal, the Chinese government has been providing scholarships to attract international students. For this reason, China’s “economic growth” (13/30) is considered the second most important “pull” factor and the “slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery” (10/30) is considered the fourth biggest “repel” factor. A better economic

situation would enable more scholarship spending on international recruitment. Indirectly, a strong Chinese economy would mean that students' knowledge of the Chinese language and culture can translate into better employment opportunities. A strong Chinese economy would also mean more Chinese investment in its higher education system, resulting in better quality and reputation. The Chinese economic prospect will continue to be the biggest factor in determining China's success in attracting more international students. Though China may not repeat the double-digit economic growth in the post-pandemic era, its economy will most probably continue to grow. Despite many predictions of China's collapse over the past decades (e.g. Tyler, 2001), the Chinese system has shown much resilience, being able to transform itself and solve pressing issues. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that China will contribute 22.6% of the world's economic growth from 2023 to 2028, followed by India's 12.9% (Tanzi, 2023). Confidence in China's long-term economic outlook gives international educators in this study confidence about the long-term prospects for China's international enrollment.

When evaluating the success of international education in China, as part of its international diplomacy, it is important to distinguish two tracks – one track being China's success in engaging the developing world, and the other being China's success in engaging the developed West. International student education in China will continue its success as a mechanism for China to engage the Global South countries, through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Smith, 2021). The pronounced goal is to build a community of common destiny in the Global South (Wang, et al, 2021), representing over 80% of the world's population (Mahbubani, 2018). Several members of the group in this study mentioned that their universities are involved in joint education programs in China to train students from the Global South to work on key infrastructure projects in major industries (e.g. Liu, et al., 2024). In the second track, China's effort in international diplomacy with the Global North by attracting Western students to study in China has been challenging and will continue to be challenging. The decoupling policy adopted by the US and its allies in the West toward China, due to geopolitical tensions, economic competition, and national security concerns, has had a huge impact on academic collaboration and student mobility (see e.g. Mok et al, 2024). To counter such negative impacts and continue to pursue its international diplomatic goal, China may actually step up efforts to attract and entice more students from the West to go study in China. As for Western countries, the best way to address security concerns in interactions with China is not to reduce collaboration, but to increase understanding and expertise on China. Capacities for mutual understanding and cooperative problem-solving should be increased, not reduced (Cai, 2023). For this reason, it is advisable for Western countries to maintain their flow of students to study in China.

This study has served to show that the “pull and repel” analysis can be a useful approach to identify, compare and contrast the “pull” and “repel” factors of a particular host country. One obvious policy implication of a “pull and repel” analysis is for the host country to amplify “pull” factors and control “repel” factors. In the case of China, the “pull” factors that need to be amplified include China's appeal to Global South students, low cost and scholarship availability, and safety. The “repel” factors that need to be controlled include the lack of public support, poor quality of international recruits, and weak economic motivation. The “pull and repel” analysis helps us understand where our future effort should be allocated. One interesting finding in this study is that some factors appear on both the “pull” list and the “repel” list. We have already mentioned above that the prospect of China's continued economic growth is considered an important “pull” factor, but the slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery is a “repel” factor, at least for the short term. The quickly improving quality of Chinese higher education is a “pull” factor, particularly for students from Global South countries, but the reputation of Chinese higher education becomes a “repel” factor when it comes to recruiting students from the Global North. Chinese as a medium of instruction in higher education in China is identified as the second most important “repel” factor, as Chinese is not a *Lingua Franca* like English and learners of Chinese as a second language are few, but the increasing popularity of Chinese, due to the rise of Chinese economy, is also seen as a “pull” factor for students who aim to

have careers in relation to China. These factors, appearing on both lists, are the most impactful but also the most uncertain factors that can tilt both ways.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study that need to be acknowledged. In the first place, the participants of this study represent a single stakeholder group who are support staff in international education. Other stakeholder groups, such as faculty members, senior administrators, students (both international and domestic students), and the general public outside campus, are not included. Secondly, the data for this study are drawn solely from participants’ written interviews. Without other possible sources of data, such as policy documents and on-site observations, triangulation is hard to achieve. Thirdly, this study provides a snapshot of international student education in China as it stood at the end of 2023, which limits its ability to capture changes or trends over time. A promising direction for future research is to conduct a longitudinal study examining how China will manage its “repel” factors and enhance its “pull” factors through policy initiatives. This should ideally involve data from multiple stakeholder groups and be collected in diverse ways.

Conclusion

This study was conducted among 30 Chinese university administrators in international education to investigate the future outlook of China as a designation of international students in the post-COVID-19 era. To this end, the “pull and repel” analysis has served as a rigorous tool in this study to glean the strengths and weaknesses of China as a host country. The most important “pull” factors for China include strong government support, economic growth prospects, and China’s appeal to Global South students. The most important “repel” factors for China include the bad press of China, Chinese as a medium of instruction, and the quality/reputation of Chinese higher education. Participants of this study anticipate some challenges in international recruitment for China in the short term but remain confident for the long term. One obvious policy implication of the “pull and repel” analysis for host countries is to amplify “pull” factors and control “repel” factors. There awaits future research to study what policy initiatives will be adopted in China to manage the “repel” factors and how the dynamics between the “pull” and “repel” factors in China shall change in the next decade.

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