

## **Meteoric Rise of China as a Host Country for Studies: Exploring the Choice of International Students' Perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The number of countries engaged in providing international education has grown consistently over the years. Traditionally, European countries and the US have been regarded as the only dominant destinations for overseas students. However, recent studies indicated that several new countries have emerged as study destinations. China, one of them, is on the rise in hosting international students. Through a systematic document analysis method, this paper sought to figure out the trend and primary reasons why international students choose China for their study destination. Long-time considered the world's largest sending country, China counts today among the top largest welcoming countries worldwide. In contrast to the recent studies conducted in some reputed higher education institutions in China claiming Chinese universities' reputation as the most pulling factor, this study reveals that, apart from other non-negligible factors, economic reason remains the major pulling factor of international students.

*Keywords:* China, inbound students, international education, international student mobility, pull factors

### **INTRODUCTION**

The internationalization of education has become a topic of great interest to many scholars and educational stakeholders. Student mobility, with its tremendous growth in the past few decades, has been particularly caught attention. The number of mobile students rose from 2 million in 1999 to 5 million in 2016 (OECD, 2018), and it was estimated to reach 8 million in 2020 (UNESCO, 2019). New emerging economies, formerly considered as peripheral world's side, share a significant part in receiving those internationally mobile students. To the theoretical discourses painting the trend of student mobility from 'developing countries' toward 'developed countries', from the 'South' to the 'North', and from the 'periphery' to the 'center,' meaning that there is a center of knowledge consumers and a center of knowledge providers, today, the destination pattern does not necessarily obey that conception (Wen & Hu, 2019; Jiani, 2016). The composition of international mobile students has significantly changed over the last two decades, with student mobility shifting from a mostly unidirectional East-West flow to a multidirectional movement comprising non-traditional sending and receiving countries (Jon et al., 2014; Jiani, 2016). In fact, this is a

limitation to the dependency theory, underpinned by the push-pull theory. The dependency theory stands for the premise that the world is unequal; there is a center for knowledge (North) and a center for knowledge consumers (South) (Altbach 2003). Similarly, the push-pull model explains that international student mobility follows the same direction. People from less developed countries (the South) migrate to developed countries (the Nord) due to the challenges, such as lack of educational and employment opportunities, political instability, and natural disasters in the home country (Wen & Hu, 2019). Thus, like dependency theory, the push-pull theory overlooked the reverse direction.

However, it is worth noting that although the "North" still controls the process (Altbach & Knight 2007), many "southern countries" have become study destination hubs. International higher education can be provided by western developed countries as well as less developed countries, such as China and several other emerging countries.

Since internationalization of education is perceived more as a commercial purpose than merely educational, new emergent countries are in intense competition with traditional receiving countries. There is no more separation of knowledge consumers and knowledge providers. Altbach and Knight (2007) note that earning money is a key motive for all internationalization projects in the for-profit sector and some traditional non-profit higher education institutions with financial incapacities. In this respect, the rise of competition for providing education and welcoming international students is quite understandable. Providers have developed and put in place strategies and opportunities, either by exporting institutions and curricula abroad or attracting students, scholars, and academic members to the home country's institutions (CampusFrance, 2018). Seekers, such as students, from their side, choose their destination according to conditions and opportunities that each receiving country offers. Among these conditions and opportunities, factors such as regional proximity and cultural resemblance have been remarkably contributed to student mobility trends in recent years (Ward et al., 2001; Jon et al., 2014; Wen et al., 2017). This is mainly encouraged by nationalism rise and security restrictions that have been noticed in recent years in some host countries. The literature also informs that the shift from unidirectional to the multidirectional movement of international students is driven by many factors, such as the rapid economic growth of some emerging countries (Huang, 2007; Jon et al., 2014). Some countries' commitment to reverse mobility patterns by improving their higher education system and a deliberate willing to become destination countries are, among others, the major reasons (Pan, 2013).

Inner-regional mobility particularly has been noticed to be at a higher rate than global mobility (UNESCO, 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019). Europe and Asia are the most significant regions in this regard, with the United Kingdom and France in Europe, China and Japan in Asia, the most prominent hosting countries. In China, for instance, 36% out of the 1.3 million international students came from the East Asia-Pacific region in 2016 (UNESCO, 2018). However, for both inner-regional patterns and global attractiveness, this study aims to address the following questions: What did the recent trend of students' inflows to China tell us? What are the most influential reasons that pull international students to China?

### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: CASE OF CHINA**

China has been the biggest sending country of international students for a long time (Wen & Hu, 2019), with over 860 000 international students in OECD countries in 2017 (OECD 2019). It is still recognized as the largest supplier of knowledge consumers. However, thanks to its multiple reforms both in education and economic sectors, China has also joined the ranks of destination countries: the largest host

country in Asia and the third worldwide (Jiani, 2016; Lu *et al.*, 2019). Figures from the Ministry of Education website of the People's Republic of China reveal that 'in 2018 there were a total of 492,185 international students (of which 48% non-degree students) from 196 countries pursuing their studies in China, marking an increase of 3,013 students or 0.62% compared to 2017' (MoE, 2019). The number of inflow students in China has been more than that of outflow for some years. From 2007 to 2008, for instance, the number of outgoing Chinese students increased from 144,000 to 179,800; in 2009 and 2010, the number was 229,300 and 284,700, respectively. 'At the same time, the number of incoming international students reached 195,503 in 2007 before rising to 223,499 in 2008, 238,184 in 2009, and 265,090 in 2010 (Pan, 2013). As stated above, China plays a crucial role in inner-regional education in Asia. The majority (59.95%) of its international mobile students in 2018 are from Asia. Only 16.57% are from Africa and 14.96% from Europe (MoE, 2019).

The reinforcement of the 1970s opening-up reform, coupled with the implementation of international policy in 2000, has remarkably increased the number of international students in China (MoE, 2003). The policy gave the Ministry of Education the right to select colleges and universities to provide degree courses and non-degree courses to international students (Xiaozhou & Meihui, 2009). In 2018, 1,004 higher education institutions in China provided international education (MoE 2019). For Pan (2013), China's efforts to shape international students and scholars' inflow through various policies and strategies have enabled China to become a key competitor of internationally mobile students. Its international politics and academic relations largely determine its attractiveness (Pan, 2013).

### **Historical Evolution and Development of International Education in China**

The internationalization of education in China can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century (Cao, 2008). Its historical development can be divided into two phases (Huang, 2003). The first phase, from 1978 to 1992, concerned the policies and regulations dealing with dispatching students, scholars, and academic members for further studies abroad. It also concerned the invitation of foreign scholars and experts to come to China.

As for the second phase, much more in line with this study, it seeks to make China an attractive country for international students. Policies and reforms have focused on constructing international higher education institutions, followed by developing an international curriculum system and a substantial expansion of international students in those institutions. It also involved international students' exchange, foreign lecturers' recruitment, and the enhancement of international frame support (Xiaozhou & Meihui, 2009).

### ***Policies and Institutions' Reforms***

The construction of international HEIs was underpinned by the '*211 and 985 Projects*'. The '*211 Project*' was initiated in 1995. Although its aims and scope focused more on the national standard for building about one hundred universities and eight hundred critical disciplines, some programs have approached the international level (Xiaozhou & Meihui, 2009). Higher education institutions have doubled from 1045 in 1995 to 2491 in 2013 (Liu & Morgan, 2016). As for the '*985 Project*' issued in 1999, it intended to build several world-class universities and world-famous high standard research institutions to attract overseas students across the world. These projects have brought tremendous progress in internationalizing higher education in China. According to Huang (2003), before the initiation of these projects, in 1989, for instance, there were only two universities in China that legally undertook transnational education: The John-Hopkins Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies and the Goethe

Institute in Beijing. Under the '985 Project', the Chinese government, through the Ministry of Education, allowed and even encouraged some universities and HEIs to provide international education. From 1999, there were already about 70 HEIs granted to undertake some transnational education with foreign partners; among them, about 30 programs were offered by 27 higher education institutions in China in partnership with 25 foreign countries (Huang, 2003).

### ***Curriculum Development***

Concerning the development of curricula and programs to meet international students' expectations, critical programs for an internationally competitive market have been initiated. To implement these programs, textbooks have been imported from western universities (Huang, 2006). The Ministry of Education encouraged universities that provided international education to use English Language and bilingual instruction to attract more international students to those universities (Huang, 2003; Kuroda, 2014).

Given these initiatives mentioned so far, mainly when including the brain drain era in play, the internationalization of education in China is not a new phenomenon. Efforts of its today's meteoric rise as a host country for international students have started a long time back.

### **METHOD**

The main purpose of this study was to understand the reasons for China's meteoric rise as a destination country where the choice of international students is more and more oriented. To meet the above goal, this study employs a systematic and rigorous document review method. Both qualitative and quantitative data generated from policy documents and recent academic studies have been critically analyzed. Many previous studies on students' motivation for choosing China as their destination have revealed different main factors. So far, every single study investigating the motivation of international students for choosing China as a study destination included in its scope, either only one university or some few institutions.

Moreover, studies have been mostly conducted in high-ranking HEIs. Their results showing Chinese universities' reputation as the primary pulling factor do not reflect the shared motivation of most international students in other higher education institutions across China. There is no comprehensive investigation that reveals students' motivation in China. China has not implemented a national survey to study international students' motivation for selecting China and Chinese higher education institutions (Ding, 2016). Therefore, there is a limitation in getting an inclusive rationale on the topic. The particularity of this study is to systematically explore related reliable documents in order to come out with common dominant factors. It aims to fill the gap in the literature regarding major comprehensive motivation of international students in China because there are few previous studies in getting nationwide perspective (Ding, 2016). As mentioned, the study focuses on two significant sources of documents, namely China's government official documents (policies and legislations and released data from the Ministry of Education) and credible academic research and reports. The selection of documents reviewed in this study was based on an extensive and rigorous search, screening, inclusion, and exclusion strategy regarding both sources and contents.

The first source of documents helps to present a macro picture of the legislative cadre regarding the internationalization of education in China. It also depicts some official statistics about international students in China. The second source of information allows us to understand the global trends of student

mobility across the world. It informs on China's role in the play of internationalization of higher education, such as its inbound mobility and global trend compared with other countries.

## RESULTS

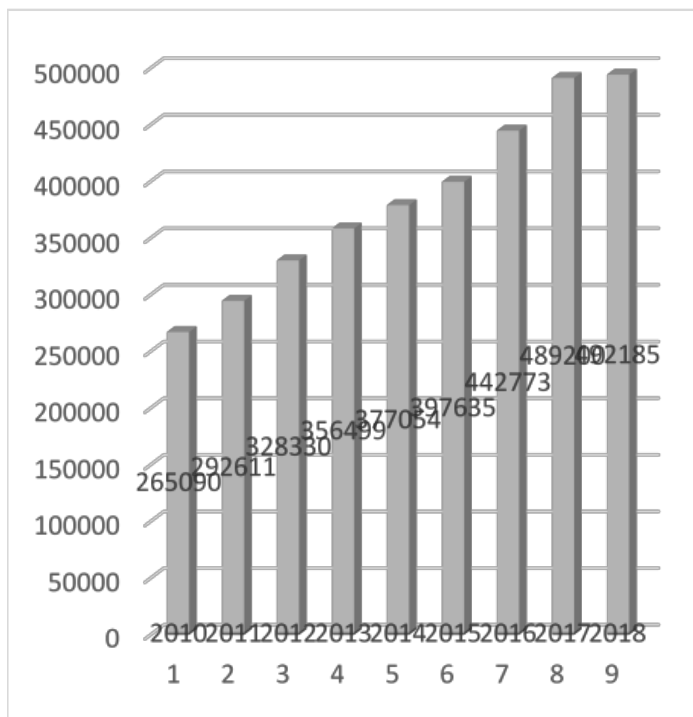
### International Student Enrollment Trends in China

Currently, China belongs to one of the largest destination countries across the world. While keeping the status of the largest country of origin, it has become a destination country for many international students. With this double status, China plays a vital role in the internationalization of higher education market. Chinese innovative policies and strategies for attracting international students made China not only a destination country but a very competitive destination country in the world.

Knowing that it was difficult to pull back many Chinese nationals from abroad and stop a massive outbound, the Chinese government has resolutely implemented some policies and strategies to attract on its soil international students to reverse the so-called brain drain. In 1980, for instance, the total number of international students in China was only about 500. It has reached 2000 in 1987 (Huang, 2003). Since 1995, the number has continued to grow, increasing more than ten times from 36,855 to 442,773 (Wen & Hu, 2019). As showed in Figure 1, in only nine years from 2010 to 2018, the number of international students almost doubled, increasing from 265,090 in 2010 to 492,185 in 2018.

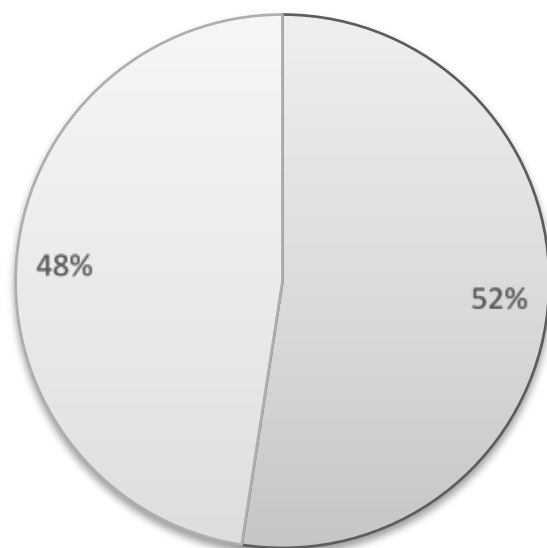
### Figure 1

*Trends Of International Students In China From 2010 To 2018*



**Figure 2**

*Percentage Of International Students By Education Program In 2018*



■ Degree students    □ Non-degree students

Hence, in 2018, 492,185 international students have pursued their studies in 1,004 higher education institutions in China (MoF, 2019). Among them, 258,122 were enrolled in degree programs, representing 52.44% of all international students (see Figure 2), an increase of 16,579 (6.86%) as to 2017. There were 85,062 postgraduate-level students, with an increase of 12.28% compared to 2017, of which 25,618 enrolled as doctoral students and 59,444 in master's degrees; 234,063 international students were enrolled in non-degree programs (MoE, 2019).

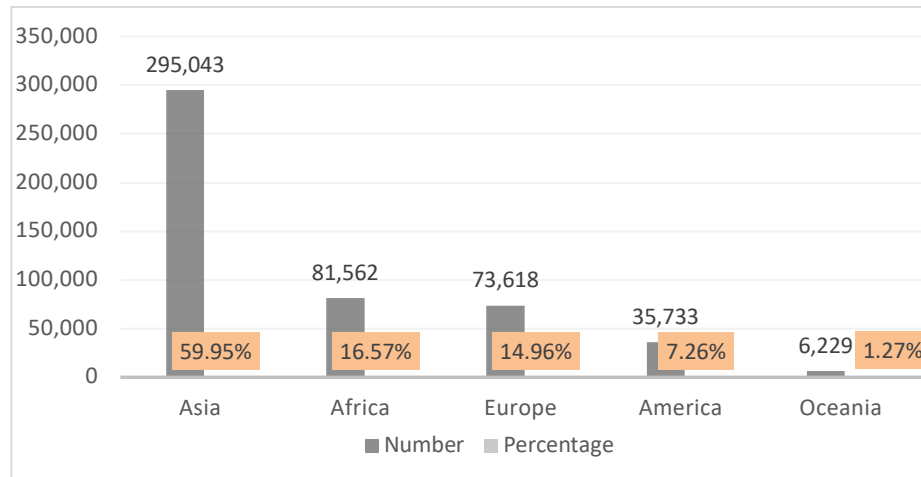
As shown in Figure 3, Asia is the largest region of international students in China. It accounts for 59.95%, with South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, and India, the largest sending countries in 2018 (MoE, 2019). Apart from the United States (5<sup>th</sup>), Russia (6<sup>th</sup>), and France (13<sup>th</sup>), the top fifteen sending countries of international students in China in 2018 were all Asian countries (see figure 4). Many Asian international students are within the region, with China, the largest destination country (UNESCO, 2018). Jon et al. (2014) noted that traveling convenience, lower cost added to cultural, political, and historical proximity between host and home countries are important determinants in studying nearby one's home country.

Regarding the field of study, language program is the most shared field among Asian students in China. For example, Ding's (2016) study conducted in 26 higher education institutions in Shanghai revealed that literature (including Chinese language studies) was the largest field of study for international students, with 51.8% mostly Asian students. Considering the most significant number of Asian students, this may explain the big percentage of non-degree students in Chinese HEIs (see figure 2). Although non-degree students are declining compared to the past years, 48% representing non-degree students remains a significant number. Chinese language, as a non-degree program, plays a vital role in attracting students to China. In their study, Ahmad and Shah (2018) found that Chinese language is one of the most pulling factors for international students in China. Most of their respondents have reported that learning Mandarin and experiencing a new culture is their primary motivation for coming to China.

However, the educational quality factor that becomes very attractive for degree programs plays a vital role in decreasing enrollment into non-degree programs. In 2011 and 2015, there were 59.39% and 53.53% international students in non-degree programs (Ewentu et al., 2017).

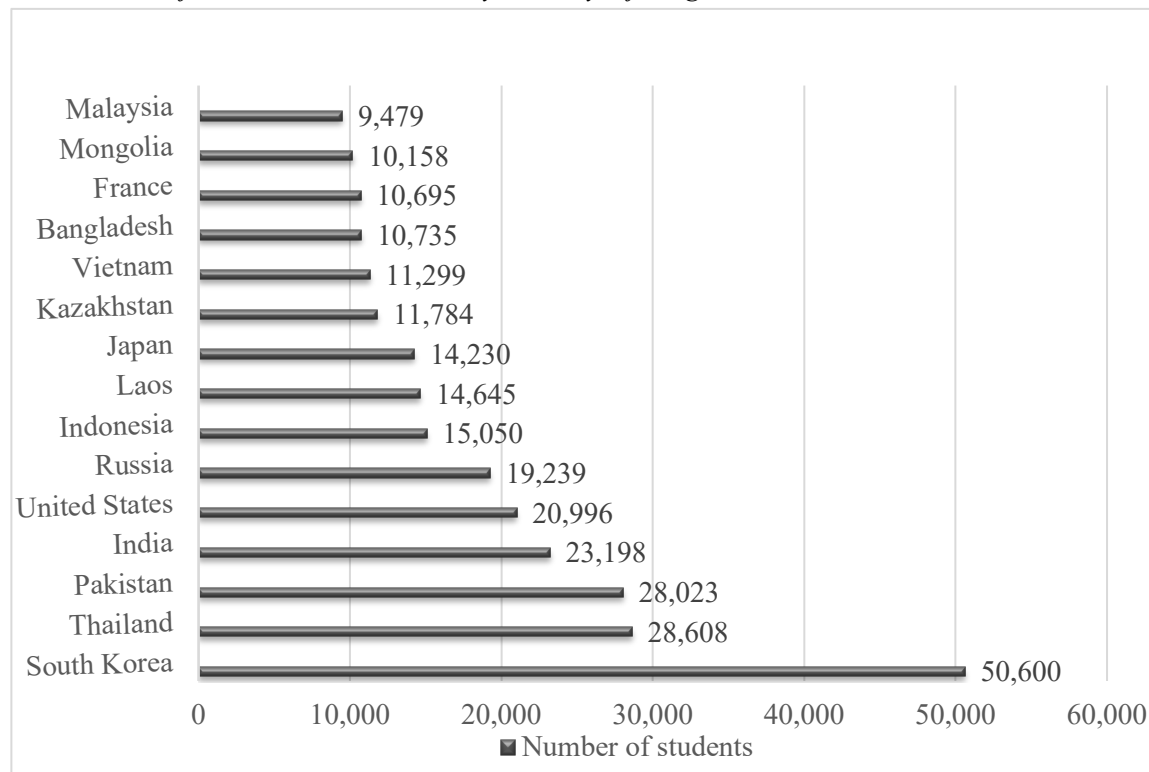
**Figure 3**

*Number Of International Students By Region/Continent In China*



**Figure 4**

*Distribution Of International Students By Country Of Origin In China*



China aspires to become the world's largest destination country in the near future. Many countries used to set a certain number of international students to reach by a certain number of years. For example, France had set to reach 500,000 international students by 2027, Japan 300,000 by 2020, Canada 450,000 by 2022 (CampusFrance, 2018; Dauwer, 2018; Esses et al., 2018; Hennings & Mintz, 2015). However,

very ambitious, China has set to welcome 500,000 students in 2020 (Wen & Hu, 2019; Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Kritz, 2016). China has slightly a larger number and, especially to be reached sooner than other countries mentioned. These data show how China is overtaking many traditional and newly emerged receiving countries across the globe. Recent researches revealed that China is the third destination country behind the USA and the UK (Jiani, 2016; Lu et al., 2019).

**Table 1**

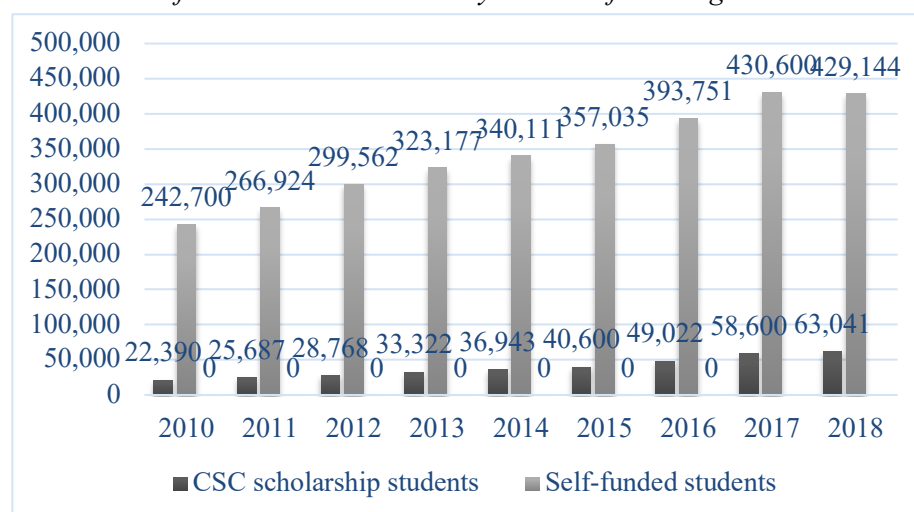
*Top 15 Provinces With The Largest Number Of International Students In 2018*

No	Provinces/Cities	Number of Students
1	Beijing	80,786
2	Shanghai	61,400
3	Jiangsu province	45,778
4	Zhejiang province	38,190
5	Liaoning province	27,879
6	Tianjin	23,691
7	Guangdong province	22,034
8	Hubei province	21,371
9	Yunnan province	19,311
10	Shandong province	19,078
11	Guanxi province	15,217
12	Sichuan province	13,990
13	Heilongjiang province	13,429
14	Shaanxi province	12,919
15	Fujian province	10,340

Source: MoE, 2019

**Figure 5**

*Distribution of International Students By Source Of Funding In China*



### Rationale for International Students Choosing China as Destination Country

Considered as a new player in hosting international students, China has implemented various policies, strategies, and measures to attract international students. These policies, strategies, and measures



are supported with strong, innovative, and frequent reforms (Ewentu et al., 2017). Apart from the national macro-orientation, provinces and institutions have set specific strategies and goals to improve the attraction of international students. According to CampusFrance (2018), new players in providing international education develop aggressive new strategies to enhance their appeal and attract more students, particularly from Asia and, increasingly, from African countries. The motivation of international students to choose one country over another regarding the pull factors results from good policies and strategies implemented in destination countries. A study conducted in Malaysia over the past few years confirmed that the increase of international students in the country is mostly driven by the deliberate government policies and strategies to recruit international students (Jon et al., 2014). However, the host countries' economic, educational, political, and socio-cultural situation is a well-known pulling factor.

From the two perspectives above, a range of detailed factors has been well documented. They range from access facility (easy admission, visa simplification, and scholarship availability) to the environment conditions (cost issue, safety, cultural and language issues); and from quality reputation (institutions programs, and degree value) to the opportunities after graduation (employment opportunity and permanent residency). Many empirical pieces of research conducted in China to find out the most shared motivations of international students to choose China as their study's destination reveal each, different reasons (Wen & Hu, 2019; Jiani, 2016; Lu et al., 2019; Ding, 2016; Song, & Liu, 2014). According to those studies, the main reasons are China's rapid economic development, the reputation of HEIs, the supply of scholarships, its good bilateral relations with other countries, or the Chinese language.

After reviewing empirical studies on international students' motivation to pursue their studies in China, it is found that most of the study's findings agreed on two main reasons. One is China's economic boom. The other is the quality reputation of its higher education institutions. For example, Jiani (2016) found out from semi-structured interviews involving 42 participants that China's strong economic growth is the largest factor that pulls international students. Ding (2016) also found in a qualitative research, including 40 respondents from 28 universities in Shanghai, that the rise of international student enrollment in those universities is motivated by China's rapid growing economic strength and Chinese language. However, unlike Jiani (2016) and Ding (2016), Lu et al. (2019) revealed in their survey based on 355 international students in Chengdu that Chinese higher education quality is the most important reason for attracting international students in China. With a larger scope than that of others, Wen and Hu (2019) discovered in theirs involving 1, 674 questionnaire participants and 30 in-depth interviews from eight HEIs in Beijing that the reputation of Chinese higher institutions and its rapid economic growth are the major reasons of China's attractiveness, with higher institutions' reputation ranking on the top. Similarly, Ahmad and Shah (2018) revealed in their mixed-methods research, conducted in two key universities based on 134 valid questionnaires and 25 interviews, that both the rise of Chinese HEIs in global ranking and the rapid influential economic growth are the major factors that pull international students to China. Again, both together, China's increasing economic development (through a competitive science and technology) and the rise of its higher education reputation are found in Song and Liu's (2014) investigation as the top reasons attracting international students to China.

In brief, this systematic review of empirical studies conducted on this issue revealed that China's economic power and its developing HEIs are the primary rationales for international students to choose China as their study destination.

China's rapid economic growth is undoubtedly one of the major reasons attracting international students to China. International students find China's economic power a convincing reason because it is a source of great opportunity for employment, business, and career development. In the literature, most of the surveys conducted on China's attractiveness revealed that only a few participants do not mention China's economic factor. The majority of them always evoke China's economic prospects as a deciding factor (Ding, 2016; Jiani, 2016). China's economic development symbolically attracts international students and enables China to increase the supply of scholarships. This capability to easily mobilize funds, even at the provincial and institutional levels, is attributed to China's economic power. Thus, China's economic boom is a great factor of attractiveness. It does not only attract international students to China. It also attracts many Chinese internationals from abroad to come back. This is because it creates thousands of jobs for those returnees (LockinChina, 2018).

Although studies showed China's economic growth as an essential motivation for international students, other researchers concluded that the reputation of Chinese HEIs is the primary motivation. For them, the rapid economic growth is just symbolic. The real and shared motivation among international students is the Chinese higher education reputation (Liu et al., 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019). Chinese effort in building World-Class Universities has positively impacted the attractiveness of international students. In the 2017 Academic Ranking of World Universities, for instance, China alone was represented by two universities in the top 100 and 45 in the Top 500, while other developing regions such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa have together only one in Top 100 universities, and 20 in Top 500 (Liu et al., 2018; Wen & Hu, 2019). Compared to other developing countries or even some developed countries, China is probably the most attractive in quality education. To them, good quality education, especially from very reputed institutions, increases the chance of employment. Thus, the reputation of Chinese universities plays a crucial role in attracting international students to China.

However, apart from the rapid economic growth and the reputation of Chinese HEIs, identified as the most critical factors attracting international students to China, the literature review informs us about other rationales which are not negligible in pulling international students to China. They include, among others, an affordable cost of study and living, Chinese language, Chinese good bilateral cooperation, and scholarships.

### ***Cost of study***

The cost of study abroad is the primary element that students consider when choosing a destination (Lu et al., 2019). According to the data from Chinese Ministry of Education, out of 63,041 international students in China in 2018, 87.19% were self-funded. From this perspective, for many of those students, the tuition and living costs are capital for selecting a study destination. Data from empirical studies show that many international students in Chinese higher education institutions have found affordable the cost of study (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Lu et al., 2019). Many of them opted for China because of that lower cost of study compared to other countries.

### ***Chinese language***

A number of international students consider Chinese language as a world prospect language. Several studies have reported that international students think that knowing Mandarin and English would likely increase their opportunities (Ding, 2016). Ding argued that as long as China maintains its attraction as a business player, the language factor will further help the country increase its international students. Thus, they

have chosen China to either learn Chinese or to improve their Mandarin fluency. The reasons mentioned in the literature include: increasing the chance for employment and doing business with China. Hundreds of Chinese Confucius Institutes are established around the world. Those institutes which promote Chinese language and culture across the world bring a lot of international students to China. As mentioned, 48% of international students in 2018 in China are non-degree students. Most of them are in Chinese language program for short or long-term study. Chinese language has been reported in many studies as the most important factor influencing international students to study in China (Ahmad and Shah, 2018; Ding, 2016).

### ***Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperations***

The result of good educational, economic and cultural cooperation of China with the outside world plays an important role in attracting international students to China. One Belt One Road initiative, for instance, has played and will continue to play a crucial role in higher education cooperation; it will attract more international to China (Wen et al., 2017; Lu & Tian, 2018). Unlike from western countries where colonial legacy and language ties with many developing countries affect the decision for study destination of international students from those developing countries, in China, its good relationship with the outside world is crucial in attracting international students. Chinese collaboration programs in higher education with many foreign countries bring a lot of international students to China. According to Jiani (2016), many international students in China, especially those from developed countries, rarely mention Chinese higher institutions' reputation. They have chosen universities in China because of the agreement between their home country and China. Wen et al. (2017) confirmed that China's engagement in international relations has expanded the country's inbound students.

### ***Scholarship***

The scholarship also is not a negligible factor in attracting international students to China (Pan, 2013; Latief & Lin, 2018; Cheng, 2020), even though available data show that less than 10% of international students are scholarship holders (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). For many international students, getting a scholarship from China is one of the determinant decisions for pursuing studies in the country. Some literature presented that scholarships attract only students from less developed countries (Campbell, 2016), which is not always true. Students from developed countries are also concerned with the scholarship. Although some of them have reported that financial motives do not have a strong impact on their decision, a number of them would not be able to come to China for studies (Jiani, 2016). Thus, scholarship plays a role in decision-making process when it comes to select a study destination abroad. For example, a study conducted by English et al. (2016) on the understanding of Western students' motivations and benefits for studying in China showed that around 75% of the students witnessed that scholarship was extremely important in their decision to come to China.

Being aware of the role of scholarship in attracting international students, the Chinese government has put various kinds of scholarships set at three levels: national, provincial, and institutional. Chinese provincial government scholarships and university scholarships, mostly partial-scholarships, are mainly offered to excellent international students who graduated from Chinese HEIs to pursue further studies in China. It is a good strategy that keeps international students continuing their studies in Chinese higher education institutions.

## **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

International education and student mobility are at an exponential speed across the world. The economic benefits resulting from providing international education have impelled many countries to engage

in international education. Traditional countries, as well as new emergent countries, are all in competition to attract international students. Studies show that new emergent countries are developing even aggressive strategies to enhance their appeal and attract more students (CampusFrance, 2018). They pull not only students from less developed countries but also developed nations. Kishun (2007) notes that new knowledge societies all over the globe are creating world competition for the best students to provide skilled labor. China, one of those newly engaged countries in hosting international students, is becoming one of the largest destination countries in the world. This can be seen, as presented above, from an approximate expectation number of international students that each country has given to reach by a certain time. While China has projected to reach 500,000 international students by 2020 (which is already achieved since 2017 according to (Wen and Hu, 2019), other countries such as Japan, Canada, and France have set to reach 300,000 by 2020, 450,000 by 2022, and 500,000 by 2027 respectively (CampusFrance, 2018; Dauwer, 2018; Esses et al., 2018; Hennings & Mintz, 2015). China is becoming one of the leading countries in hosting a high number of international students. That is why our interest to figure out the reasons that pull international students to China. The study found that, as in many other destination countries, several factors attract international students to China. Factors comprise China's rapid economic growth, coupled with the reputation of Chinese HEIs, an affordable cost of living, Chinese language and culture, the diversification of China's educational cooperations, and the scholarship opportunity. However, among all those factors, the rapid economic growth and the reputation of China's higher education institutions have been found as the most shared pulling factors for international students to China.

Unlike some recent studies that showed the reputation of Chinese universities and HEIs as the largest, this study, based on a systematic and rigorous empirical study review, ranks China's rapid economic growth as the major pulling factor. An extensive review of the literature leads us to find out that economic factor comes at first. The findings of those recent studies are mostly conducted in some key universities and institutions from big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and so on, do not reflect the motivation of about five hundred thousand international students all over China. Of course, students from those world-class universities can be motivated by the reputation of those universities due to their education quality and their belongingness to the 'World-Class Universities.' However, the education factor is not yet the core force in many universities in China. Economic factor is not just an appearance as Wen and Hu (2019) claimed in their study. When comparing with highly competitive education systems in the world, China's academic standard and research environment sometimes impact international students to decide against studying in China (Jiani, 2016). The economic factor is still the most reported in the literature. In breaking down universities or cities in which various studies have been conducted, the analysis shows that the motivation of those students in key universities is the university's reputation. However, those in regular universities put forward economic reasons to show their interest in studying in China. China's soft power development and the expansion of its markets in overseas countries play a tremendous role in attracting international students.

A comparative analysis made on the worldwide situation shows that the attractiveness of China is also encouraged by the tightening immigration policies in many destination countries in the West, such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and many others. For instance, in the United States, studies showed that although they remain the leading destination country for international students worldwide, the enrollment rate has progressively declined (Bogdanovska, 2018). China's engagement in globalization and internationalization plays a significant role in attracting international students as well as foreign experts. Its numerous cooperations

with foreign countries, coupled with increasing economic development, constitute a great advantage for its attractiveness. Thus, although existing research emphasized economic factors and higher education quality, many prior global situations contribute to attracting international students to China.

However, challenges that may prevent the growing attractiveness of China as a study destination also exist. One of them is the rise of racial discrimination that has been noticed in China against foreigners, Africans to be precise. As the second largest student population behind Asian (MoE, 2019), recently some African students were stereotypically perceived to spread the COVID-19 pandemic (Danny, 2020; Lau, 2020) to the point that “African Union expressed concern about the situation and called on Beijing to take immediate corrective measures” (NSONO, 2020). Pandemics in destination and origin countries are emergent factors that affect students’ movement and choice for study destination. For instance, a recent study conducted in China Mainland and Hong Kong showed that (2312) 84% out of 2739 respondents expressed any more interest in studying abroad due to the COVID-19 and the mistreatment resulting from it abroad (Kong *et al.* 2021). Like many Chinese students who no longer are interested in studying abroad due to this discrimination, African students might have the same impression of studying in China.

Another challenge might be the foreign residency and work permit policy. Under economic development prospects as the most pulling factor, many international students expect to settle and work in China upon completing their studies. Nevertheless, the percentage of integrating international experts remains so far low compared to many western countries. If this persists, it may affect international students' choice to choose China when having in mind the intention of employment in China after graduation. To maintain the economic factor as the largest pulling factor, foreign residency permit policy needs to be addressed in order to soften this policy. Many growing multinational and private companies in China demand overseas talents. They have the preference of recruiting international talents for the reasons of their international experience and background (LockinChina, 2018). In 2017, for instance, 670,000 overseas Chinese graduates had returned to China and an estimate of 750,000 returnees in 2018; this is because many companies demand overseas talents. According to the same source, the rate of returnees to China is growing by 10% each year. The report added that the rapid development of Chinese private enterprises requires much international expertise to meet the needs of expanding overseas markets and reaching advanced development (LockinChina, 2018). In this respect, China should consider increasing foreign experts and graduates' integration in China to keep its ongoing attractiveness.

It is also worth noting that, unlike many countries that have adopted policies allowing international students to have part-time jobs when studying, China's policies towards its international students' part-time jobs remain restrictive. A part-time job for international students can have three main advantages. One is the preparation and experiences gain for their future career. Two is to relieve the financial struggle faced by many international students when studying. In three, as discussed, multinational and private enterprises are growing in China and need international experience and background. International students who may work in these companies can solve in part the needs of those companies. It will bring a plus to the companies' achievement. Hence, a part-time job is beneficial not only to international students but also to the host country. Regarding the relevance of part-time employment for a student, Tessema et al.'s (2014) study revealed that part-time positively affects students' satisfaction and GPA when students work fewer than 10 hours.

### **CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS**

Based on empirical literature review and official data, this study systematically and rigorously synthesized the reasons for international students to choose China as a study destination. It belongs to

limited comprehensive research of this kind on the issue. The study showed that China's inflows trend is at high speed. It also found out that although many factors pull international students to China, China's rapid economic growth and HEIs growing reputation rank on the top. In comparison to some recent research pointing out Chinese HEIs as the most attractive factor, this study revealed, based on a review of empirical studies', that China's growing economy is the primary factor. Those existing studies present significant limitations in terms of scope. Most of them did not involve many participants and were only conducted in some key universities in the big cities. Thus, although this comprehensive analysis shows a more robust conclusion than existing research, an inclusive and general investigation by the Chinese government might help to understand the matter. It is relevant for the Chinese government to do so because such an investigation significantly contributes to the international higher education policy improvement.

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