



Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 17 (2026), pp. 229-260
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
<https://doi.org/10.32674/1q2w8896>



Contingent mobility: A structuration analysis of Pakistani PhD students in Chinese universities

Ayesha Jameel

College of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, China

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5580-7002>

Zhiyong Zhu

College of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, China

Corresponding Author: Zhiyong Zhu, zzy@bnu.edu.cn,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2582-1169>

ABSTRACT: *Conventional models predict that Pakistani doctoral students prioritize Western destinations, yet China is their fastest-growing choice. This study examines this contradiction through Giddens' structuration theory and interviews 15 Pakistani PhD students across Chinese universities. The concept of contingent mobility captures trajectories that are neither voluntary nor forced, emerging from structural precarity in Pakistan's political instability, research deficits, and sociocultural constraints and asymmetric opportunities in China, including scholarships, flexible admissions, and advanced facilities. Students navigate domestic barriers through credentials and peer networks rather than strategic planning. Extending structuration theory, we argue that Giddens' assumption of stable structures requires revision for deteriorating contexts. Contingent mobility has three dimensions: survival and aspiration, pragmatic-to-epistemic motivation, and soft power intersecting with marginalization. Revealing south–south mobility as distinct from south–north flows, this study offers a revised structuration framework for global south academic migration.*

Keywords: Academic mobility, Contingent mobility, Higher education policy, Pakistani PhD students, South–South mobility, Structuration theory

How to Cite (APA):

Jameel, Ayesha, & Zhu, Zhiyong. (2026). Contingent mobility: A structuration analysis of Pakistani PhD students in Chinese universities. *Journal of International Students*, 16(17) 229-260. <https://doi.org/10.32674/1q2w8896>

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of higher education has become instrumental in equipping students with skills critical for societal development (de Wit, 2014; Knight, 2008; Schoole & Abbott, 2016; Silles, 2016). Within knowledge economies, doctoral education plays a central role in driving innovation and economic progress (Auriol, 2010), with international mobility increasingly recognized as a catalyst for academic career advancement and research collaboration (Acker et al., 2008; de Wit, 2015). Traditional patterns of South–North student flows are now giving way to multidirectional mobility, reshaping global higher education hierarchies (Wadhwa et al., 2012). As Xu (2023) argues, international student mobility has shifted toward a multipolar structure, with emerging hubs such as China challenging the traditional Western-centric paradigm as a trend requiring empirical examination of nontraditional corridors. Notably, China has emerged as a top destination challenging historical dominance, a rise stemming from its economic growth, enhanced educational infrastructure, and strategic projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Hazelkorn, 2011; Khan, 2011; Liu, 2020; Knight, 2015; Wei, 2013).

The appeal of text government-sponsored scholarships and streamlined visa policies has further increased, especially for Pakistani students (Biney, 2021; Peter et al., 2021). These mechanisms have enabled mobility for lower-income Pakistani students who face structural barriers domestically, such as underfunded higher education institutions (Tu, 2025; World Bank, 2024). Conventional push–pull models predict that students from developing countries will prioritize English-speaking Western nations with established diaspora communities (Tim & Geoffrey, 2002). Pakistan's historical mobility patterns to the UK and the USA support this prediction.

However, China has emerged as the fastest-growing destination for Pakistani doctoral students—a non-English, culturally distinct context. According to UNESCO (2023), Pakistani enrollments in China increased from 18,342 in 2013 to 53,891 in 2021—a 194% increase—compared with 32% growth in the UK and 18% in the U.S. China now hosts the third-largest population of Pakistani international students. This apparent contradiction underscores the need to examine how structural constraints and individual agency interact in this underexplored South-South mobility corridor. Mahmood et al. (2026) reinforce this by positioning psychological adaptation, social support, and resilience as core

dimensions of migrant integration and treating academic sojourns as migration requiring structural-agency analysis. However, the interplay between structural constraints and students' agential use of opportunities remains underexplored. This study adopts the definition of 'academic mobility' as cross-border educational mobility for temporary sojourns, distinguishing it from permanent migration (Findlay et al., 2006; King, 2002; OECD, 2021).

The dynamics of academic mobility and the mobility of doctoral students in particular are still largely ignored, despite their increasing number globally and recognition in the knowledge-based economy (GU & Schweinfurt, 2015; Page & Chahboun, 2019). Recent studies by Pakistani scholars (Kamran et al., 2022; Kiyani et al., 2015; Bibi et al., 2022) have established baseline demographic trends but remain limited to aggregate patterns without theorizing the structure-agency dynamics central to doctoral education. This gap is particularly salient given that very limited research has specifically investigated Pakistani PhD students' mobility trajectories to Chinese universities. This study employs the Structuration Theory of Giddens to address two research questions: (i) How do structural constraints in Pakistan and enabling opportunities in China interact to shape the mobility trajectories of Pakistani PhD students? (ii) How does navigating dual structures precarity in Pakistan and opportunity in China shape students' academic and professional trajectories?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic mobility, defined as cross-border movement for educational purposes, has evolved significantly in recent decades. While early research focused on undergraduate student flows (Teichler, 2009), contemporary studies increasingly examine doctoral candidates, reflecting the growing complexity of global higher education systems. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2023), Pakistani student enrollments abroad increased from 18,342 in 2013 to 53,891 in 2021, with China emerging as the primary destination. This trend is particularly pronounced among PhD candidates, whose numbers in Chinese universities more than doubled between 2015 and 2021 (Kamran et al., 2022; Jiani, 2017). Pakistan's educational system faces structural challenges such as chronic underfunding, political instability, and regional disparities that limit access to quality doctoral training.

For Pakistani PhD students, China has positioned itself as a hub that combines financial support, access to cutting-edge labs, and global research networks, enhancing long-term career and social capital, particularly in advanced STEM fields (e.g., AI and engineering), where Pakistan lacks capacity (Saddaf et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020; Yang, 2022; Jiani, 2017). Simultaneously, Pakistan's HEC Overseas Scholarships incentivize mobility, framing it as a strategy to address domestic skill gaps (Kiyani et al., 2015). Timsina et al. (2026) demonstrate a parallel dynamic: when Australia contracted its educational policies, Nepali students and graduates redirected their aspirations toward alternative destinations, illustrating how structural shifts in traditional receiving countries reshaped South Asian mobility patterns.

While South–North mobility (e.g., Pakistan to Europe/US) has received considerable attention, South–South flows (e.g., Pakistan–China) remain relatively underrepresented. Most studies are quantitative, emphasize macroeconomic trends over qualitative insights into agency, and often lack consistent theory-based analysis (Saddaf et al., 2015; Khan, 2011).

Nhi (2025) addresses this gap by showing that personal well-being and desire for international living shape study abroad decisions—a qualitative insight complementing our structuration approach. A theory-driven approach is therefore needed. Using Giddens’ structuration theory, this study investigates how structural constraints in Pakistan and agency factors influence decisions in China. Given that the impact of academic mobility during PhD sojourn remains understudied, this research examines how structural and agency factors interact to shape the mobility trajectories of Pakistani PhD students to China and their subsequent academic and professional growth.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mobility trajectories are neither purely structural nor entirely agentic but emerge from their dialectical relationship (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Traditional models, such as the “push-pull” model, focus primarily on macrolevel factors but fail to capture decision-making complexity. Rational choice theory, with its focus on “methodological individualism” (Goss & Lindquist, 1995), reduces analysis to the individual level and overlooks noninstrumental factors.

Giddens’ structuration Theory addresses this gap by describing the dynamic interplay between macro (structural) and micro (agency) elements, emphasizing the duality of structure, agency, and power, which is particularly relevant for understanding Pakistani PhD students who are navigating constraining structures in Pakistan and enabling opportunities in China (de Haas, 2019; Giddens, 1984).

Structuration theory defines structure as “recursively implicated rules and resources in social reproduction,” meaning that social structures are reproduced through human action across time and space (Giddens, 1984, p. 127). Structures consist of “rules” that guide practices and “resources” that facilitate or constrain actions. Giddens rethink structures as both enabling and constraining, just as language limits expression while enabling communication (Craib, 1992). For Pakistani PhD students, this duality is central: structural constraints in Pakistan (e.g., political instability, underfunded universities, and regional quotas) and enabling structures in China (e.g., scholarships, research facilities, and flexible admissions) to interact to shape mobility decisions.

The conceptual framework of this study, operationalizing Giddens’ structuration theory for the academic mobility corridor in Pakistan, China, is presented in Figure 1. Structural constraints in Pakistan (political instability, underfunded universities, regional quotas) and enabling structures in China (scholarships, advanced labs, flexible admissions) interact dialectically with student agency (strategic use of networks, credential seeking, university selection), producing what we term ‘contingent mobility’ a trajectory that is neither fully forced nor purely voluntary.

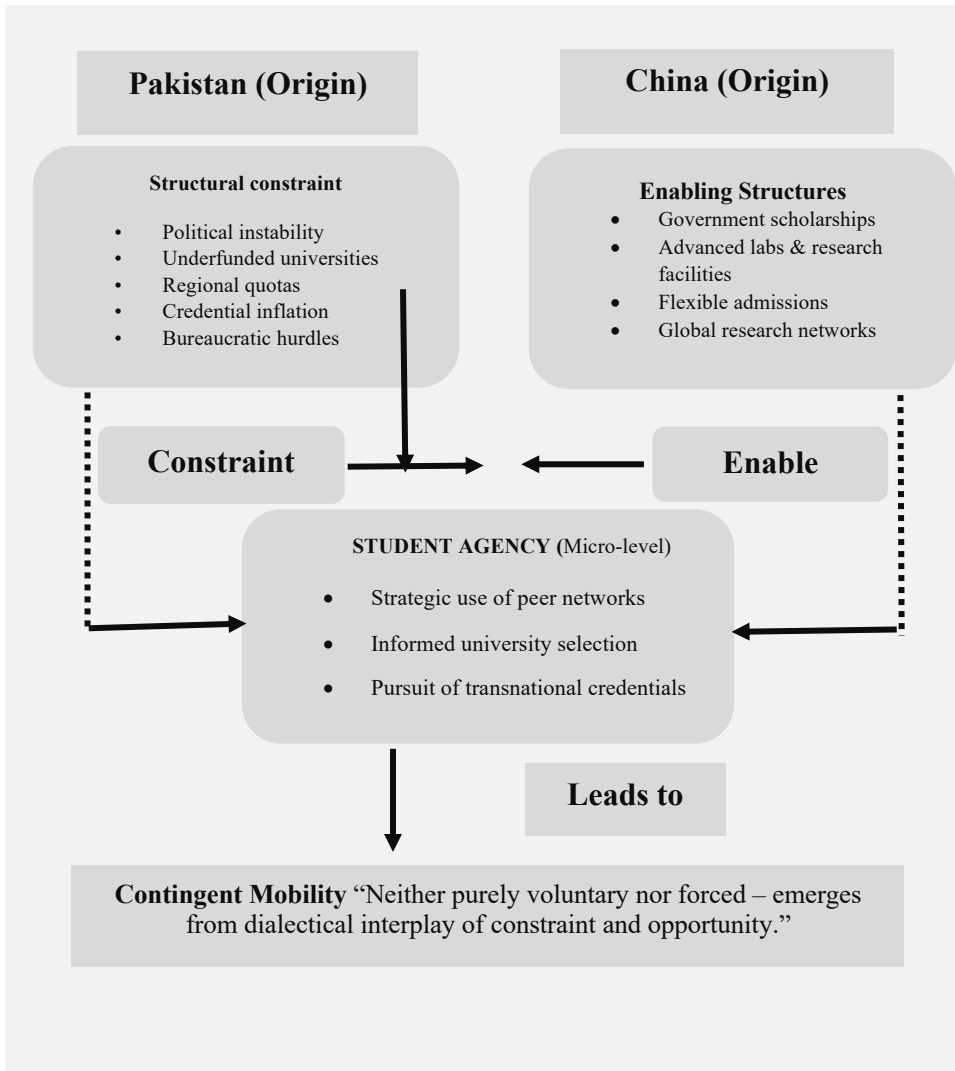


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of contingent mobility

According to Giddens, individuals are knowledgeable agents, although they are not always fully conscious of consequences (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1984b). Agency entails freedom to act purposefully despite constraints. In this study, agency is observed in students' strategic use of peer networks, informed university selection, and pursuit of transnational credentials. Power, the capacity to act within structures to achieve outcomes (Giddens, 1984), is relational and embedded in social relationships. When students lose the power to influence their academic/professional trajectories in Pakistan, mobility to China becomes a means to regain it within dual structures (Stones, 2009).

This study introduces the concept of “contingent mobility” to capture how agency is exercised within structural precarity, where mobility is neither wholly voluntary nor forced but emerges from navigating constraints and opportunities. Conceptually, contingent mobility differs from related constructs along three critical dimensions: (a) unlike purely voluntary mobility, it acknowledges non-negotiable structural barriers; (b) unlike forced migration, it retains purposive agency and strategic calculation; and (c) unlike impelled mobility (which implies a single push factor), it recognizes the dialectical interplay of constraints and enablers. Operationally, we translated structuration concepts into interview questions and coding themes: structural constraints (political instability, funding shortages, regional quotas), enabling structures (scholarships, admissions flexibility, research facilities), and agency (network use, university selection, credential strategies). The duality of structure was analyzed by coding how Pakistani constraints shaped agency while Chinese enablers expanded it—revealing the recursive constitution of mobility. By applying Giddens' structuration Theory, this study examines how Pakistani PhD students negotiate these dual structures, operationalizing power as their capacity to convert constraints into opportunities such as leveraging Chinese scholarships to overcome Pakistani funding shortages. This framework guides the analysis of how power dynamics manifest in students' narratives of constraint, enablement, and strategic choice.

METHOD

As our study focuses on students' mobility decisions, with the aim of understanding and explaining their underlying rationale, a qualitative, interpretivist design was employed. Guided by Giddens' structuration Theory, this research investigates the interplay of structure and agency in academic mobility. The study is framed as a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018), where each participant's mobility trajectory constitutes an instrumental case for cross-comparison. Data were collected from February to December 2023.

Research Design and Participants

To capture key variations in the institutional and regional contexts of Chinese higher education, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Initially, two major public universities in Beijing were selected as primary research sites

because of their high concentration of Pakistani doctoral students. To broaden the scope of institutional and geographical perspectives, the sampling strategy was subsequently expanded to include participants from other major academic hubs, including Shanghai, Wuhan, Nanjing, and Guangzhou.

Sampling proceeded in three stages. First, two major public universities in Beijing were purposively selected on the basis of university records indicating the highest concentration of Pakistani doctoral students. Second, criterion sampling was applied to select participants who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) full-time PhD enrollment at a Chinese university, (b) duration of stay in China of at least 12 months, and (c) Pakistani citizenship. Third, from an initial pool of 8 participants recruited through university channels and social media groups, snowball sampling (chain-referral) was used to reach additional participants until thematic saturation was achieved at 15 participants (Guest et al., 2006). Two potential participants were excluded because they had been in China for less than 6 months.

Recruitment utilized a multipronged approach: initial contacts were made through university channels and social media groups for Pakistani students. To access wider networks, snowball (chain-referral) sampling was also employed (Naderifar et al., 2017), a technique appropriate for qualitative studies of specific communities where no exhaustive sampling frame exists (Bryman, 2016). From this framework, fifteen (15) Pakistani PhD students (eight men, seven women, aged 26–38) were purposefully sampled to ensure variation in gender, discipline (sciences/social sciences), and university location, as detailed in Table 1. The final sample comprised students from several Chinese cities (e.g., Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Nanjing, Guangzhou) in three mutually exclusive categories: C9 League universities, other Project 985 universities (985 institutions not in C9), and other Project 211 universities (211 institutions neither in C9 nor 985). They were enrolled in both English- and Chinese-medium programs and represented seven regions of Pakistan. Fifteen cases achieved thematic saturation on the core research questions (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Guest et al., 2006). All but one participant held Chinese government scholarships (CSC or Mofcom); one held a Belt and Road Scholarship. This sampling focused on China's major academic hubs, the primary destinations for government-funded PhD students, prioritizing depth over statistical breadth.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, guided by a protocol based on the research questions and structuration theory, explored perceptions of educational structures, decision-making, and mobility impacts (Dejonkheere & Vaughn, 2019). The protocol elicited narratives aligned with structuration concepts, probing structural constraints in Pakistan, enabling resources in China, and students' agentic strategies. It comprises approximately 12–15 open-ended questions with follow-up probes as needed. Conducted in person in Urdu at participants' chosen venues (e.g., campus cafés, libraries), interviews lasted 60–120 minutes and were recorded as 'flowing conversations' (Gill et al., 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Recordings were transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and verified by a bilingual research assistant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis and was managed with NVivo software. Throughout, the coding and theme development were actively guided by the core concepts of structuration theory (structure, agency, duality), which served as sensitizing concepts to interrogate the data. For example, during coding, we explicitly identified segments where participants described structural barriers (e.g., funding shortages, political instability), enabling resources (e.g., scholarships, labs), and agentic actions (e.g., choosing advisors, building networks), ensuring that our themes reflected the structure–agency interplay central to our framework.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To enhance the trustworthiness of our qualitative analysis, we engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research process (Berger, 2015). The first author is a Pakistani researcher who has studied in China, a position that facilitated rapport and cultural insider-understanding during interviews. However, we were cognizant of how this shared background might also introduce assumptions; thus, we maintained a reflexive journal to bracket preconceptions. The second author, being Chinese, provided an external perspective, helping to challenge any taken-for-granted interpretations. This collaborative, cross-cultural reflexivity strengthened the analytical process and mitigated potential bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' institution. Participants received detailed information sheets and provided written informed consent covering the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure anonymity. Data were stored securely on a password-protected computer, with all personal identifiers removed from the transcripts and analysis.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Institutional Characteristics of the Participants

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Age	Gender	Marital Status	City	University Type	Duration of stay in China	Funding Resource	Field of Study	Province in Pakistan	Language of Program
Allan	33	Male	Single	Beijing	C9 League	4	CSC	Science (Agricultural Engineering)	Punjab (South Pakistan)	English
Samir	30	Male	Single	Beijing	Other 985 (non-C9)	4	CSC	Science (Atmospheric Chemistry)	Punjab/South Pakistan	English
Amna	31	Female	Single	Beijing	Other 985 (non-C9)	2.5	Mofcom	Social Science (Education)	Federal of Pakistan	English
Fatima	34	Female	Single	Beijing	Other 985 (non-C9)	3	CSC	Science (Envi. Sciences)	NWFP/Norther n Pakistan	English
Ali	27	Male	Single	Beijing	C9 League	2.5	CSC	Sciences (Artificial intelligence)	NWFP/Norther n Pakistan	English

'ameel at el.

Farah	37	Female	Married	Beijing	C9 League	6	CSC	Social Science	Gilgit/Northern Pakistan	English
Khalid	29	Male	Single	Shanghai	Other 985 (non-C9)	3	Mofcom	Social Sciences	NWFP/Northern Pakistan	Chinese
Zara	32	Female	Married	Wuhan	Other 985 (non-C9)	2.5	CSC	Social Sciences	Punjab	Chinese
Bilal	28	Male	Single	Beijing	Other 211 (non-985)	3	CSC	Science, Computer Science	Baluchistan	English
Sana	34	Female	Single	Nanjing	Other 211 (non-985)	3.5	CSC	Business Administration	Islamabad Federal Capital	English
Kamran	30	Male	Single	Shanghai	Other 211 (non-985)	3	CSC	Science Computer Science	Punjab	English
Hira	31	Female	Single	Beijing	Other 985 (non-C9)	3.5	Belt and Road Scholars hip	Social Science Philosophy of Religion	Sindh	Chinese

Imran	36	Male	Married	Wuhan	Other 985 (non-C9)	3	Mofcom	Science Physics	NWFP	English
Alyia	27	Female	Single	Guangzhou	Other 211 (non-985)	2	CSC	Science (Envi. Science)	Gilgit	English
Faisal	33	Male	Single	Beijing	C9 League	3	CSC	Science Mech. Engineering	Baluchistan	English

Note. The university type categories are mutually exclusive. The C9 League includes only C9 members (which are also 985 and 211 institutions). The other 985 (non-C9) includes Project 985 universities that are not in the C9 League. The other 211 (non-985) includes Project 211 universities that are neither in the C9 League nor in Project 985. **(Source) Author's own work)**

FINDINGS

Identifying Structural Factors Shaping Academic Mobility

“Why are more Pakistanis leaving now than in previous years? If you Google the statistic about outbound from Pakistan that people are leaving Pakistan more in recent years, either for labor work, job opportunities, or study purposes. From Pakistan, especially the students who are leaving for more educational opportunities abroad, as per my knowledge and research.” (Allan, interview, 10 September 2023)

This section identifies the political, professional, institutional, and sociocultural factors from the interview findings that influence Pakistani students’ mobility for a PhD in Chinese universities, including those that constrain higher education in Pakistan and those that enable students’ decisions to pursue a doctorate in China.

Political Structures: Constraining and Enabling Academic Mobility

Within Giddens’ structuration theory, these contexts represent opposing structures: Pakistan functions as a structure of constraint, while China is perceived as a structure of enablement. A third, reinforcing dynamic within Pakistan is regional marginalization, which deepens these constraints.

Constraining and Enabling Structures: A Comparative Analysis

Political instability and financial constraints in Pakistan, including chronic underfunding, unaffordable tuition, and politicized governance, tended to constrain students’ agency in a patterned way. Participants consistently described an environment of “institutional insecurity exacerbated by political unrest”.

“I choose to study in China because the current political situation has exploited the education sector in Pakistan; it’s an awful scenario in Pakistan.” (Amna, interview, 12 October 2023)

“Pakistan’s economic collapse post-COVID rendered PhD programmes unaffordable ... Our political system doesn’t care for development.” (Ali, interview, 11 November 2023)

These narratives illustrate Giddens’ concept of “knowledgeable agents”—participants recognized how political and economic structures in Pakistan constrained their doctoral aspirations and acted purposefully to seek alternatives, even if they could not transform those structures directly.

In direct contrast, participants consistently perceived China's political environment as a decisive, enabling factor. They described it as "calm" and "secure", valuing the reliable funding and merit-based systems they experienced.

"During my three years in China, I hardly saw students discuss politics ... the government acts in the national interest, which creates strength. That's why I came to China for my PhD." (Bilal, interview, 15 July 2023)

"I had to seek an environment to enhance my knowledge ... unlike in Pakistani universities, where the system is politicized." (Khalid, interview, 11 April 2023)

Academic mobility thus embodies the agentic navigation between these structures: away from the constraints in Pakistan and toward the enabling resources in China. This dialectical movement—neither purely pushed nor purely pulled—is the essence of what we term contingent mobility.

Regional Marginalization: Reinforcing Spatial Inequities

Students criticized provincial quotas and partisan favoritism, which often excludes marginalized applicants, particularly in federal universities. As most participants belong to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, they highlighted disparities where Punjab receives 50% of PhD seats versus Baluchistan's 4% (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2023).

"I know I am from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and competition is so high that I am admitted to Islamabad. There's no way for us to compete with people from developed cities." (Ali, interview, 11 November 2023)

Ali's reflection shows how structural inequities (provincial quotas) are not merely external barriers but are internalized as constraints on legitimate pathways. His decision to pursue a PhD in China represents a strategic reconfiguration of agency—using international mobility to circumvent spatial injustices embedded in Pakistan's higher education system.

These structural barriers extend to favoritism in faculty appointments and job allocations, exacerbated by centralized, bureaucratic governance. This regional marginalization reinforced the overarching structure of constraint within Pakistan, further limiting legitimate pathways and strengthening the push toward international options where such spatial inequities were perceived to be absent.

Professional Factors

Structural themes emerged as important factors driving Pakistani PhD students' mobility to China: (1) research infrastructure and opportunities and (2) skills transferability and career applicability. These macro-level professional factors collectively shape academic mobility to China's better-resourced system.

Research Infrastructure and Opportunities

The lack of research facilities in Pakistani universities emerged as a primary driver of doctoral mobility to China. These limitations are particularly acute in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and agricultural engineering.

“In Pakistan, conducting research in atmospheric chemistry took months because of a lack of technologies. For instance, EPR software wasn’t available at any university ... Here in China, I operated machines independently.” (Samir, interview, 27 September 2023)

Samir’s experience exemplifies Giddens’ duality of structure: Pakistan’s resource-scarce environment constrained his research agency, while China’s well-equipped labs enabled it, prompting his strategic relocation to access capabilities unavailable at home. In addition to physical resources, Pakistani universities were characterized by bureaucratic hurdles and restricted academic freedom, with research proposals often requiring government approval. In contrast, Chinese institutions offered greater autonomy and access to global scholarly networks.

“I looked at university rankings in China and globally before applying. Here, I work with scholars from China, Europe and Africa. Back home, most professors rarely collaborated abroad.” (Amna, interview, 12 October 2023)

Amna’s account reveals how structural differences in academic cultures (hierarchical vs. collaborative) shape students’ agentic choices. The ability to build transnational networks in China becomes a form of capital that is systematically unavailable within Pakistan’s insulated academic system.

Skills Transferability and Career Applicability

The analysis revealed significant challenges in applying specialized skills within Pakistan’s labor market. Participants frequently cited mismatches between their advanced training and domestic employment opportunities, particularly in emerging fields. The situation was especially acute for students in niche disciplines such as agricultural engineering.

“I want to work in agricultural engineering, which hardly exists in Pakistan as a field of study.” (Allan, interview, 10 September 2023)

Allan’s statement reflects what Giddens calls “knowledgeable agency”, he recognized that Pakistan’s labor market structures offer no viable pathway for his specialized skills, so he strategically pursued international mobility to acquire credentials that might create new opportunities, either at home or abroad.

A clear dichotomy emerged in the students’ long-term perspectives. One group viewed international education as a permanent pathway to professional fulfillment that was unavailable in its home country, citing China’s robust

research ecosystems and aligned industries. Conversely, return-oriented students conceptualized their mobility as temporary capacity-building.

“China has made enormous investments in education; you see educated people more. Are there still gaps? Of course. However, compared with my province and country, they lag behind. After my PhD abroad, I want to bring this knowledge home to improve.” (Sana, interview, 25 November 2023)

Sana’s return orientation illustrates how students can exercise agency within structural constraints not only by leaving but also by planning to transfer acquired resources back home. Her narrative highlights that contingent mobility does not necessarily imply permanent emigration; rather, it encompasses varied post-PhD trajectories shaped by evolving structural assessments. This study contributes theoretically by examining how the transferability of professional knowledge operates as a macro-level structural factor that both constrains and enables individual students’ capacity for skill application. This reflects Giddens’ duality of structure: the same professional knowledge that is devalued in Pakistan becomes a valuable asset when acquired abroad, illustrating how structural contexts determine the symbolic value of credentials.

Institutional Factors

The interview data reveal key institutional structures that play a key role in mediating Pakistani doctoral students’ mobility to China: (1) financial and administrative pathways, combining comprehensive scholarship packages with streamlined visa processes to overcome socioeconomic and bureaucratic barriers; and (2) flexible doctoral admission policies, offering alternative pathways for non-traditional applicants.

Financial and Administrative Enablers: Scholarships and Visa Access

Pakistan’s economic instability was frequently identified by participants as a fundamental barrier. China’s comprehensive scholarship packages emerged as transformative mechanisms, providing not only tuition coverage but also living stipends that enabled full-time research engagement.

“The economic situation of the country is terrible ... After my Bachelor’s, I was working as a lab assistant, earning too little to sustain further education while supporting my family as the male provider.” (Allan, interview, 10 September 2023)

Allan’s narrative illustrates how structural economic precarity in Pakistan directly constrained his ability to pursue doctoral studies domestically. The availability of Chinese scholarships functioned as an enabling resource, transforming his agency from impossible to possible—a clear example of Giddens’ duality where structures both constrain (Pakistan’s economy) and enable (China’s funding).

These types of financial support operate at multiple levels, covering direct academic expenses, basic subsistence, and even familial obligations through stipend savings.

“I could only pursue my PhD because the three-year scholarship provided a livable monthly allowance. From these savings, I support my siblings’ education back home.” (Hira, interview, 29 August 2023)

Hira’s experience demonstrates how financial resources not only enable individual mobility but also reconfigure family structures. Her ability to support siblings’ education from her stipend shows how transnational academic mobility can generate remittance-like effects, extending the impact of enabling structures beyond the individual.

Complementing this financial support, China’s streamlined visa policies for Pakistani PhD applicants were a key factor. Participants highlighted procedural efficiency, with approvals often completed within 15 working days; financial accessibility, as fees were significantly lower than those associated with Western alternatives; and high approval rates.

“The visa requirements and fees were minimal—unlike my friend’s 6-month wait for Germany. China’s process took 3 weeks.” (Kamran, interview, 11 April 2023)

Kamran’s comparison between China and Germany highlights how administrative structures shape mobility choices. China’s efficient visa process reduced bureaucratic friction, enabling students to act on their aspirations without prolonged uncertainty. This contrasts with the more onerous structures of traditional Western destinations, illustrating how China’s strategic policy design actively attracts international students.

Flexible Policies in Doctoral Admissions

China’s flexible doctoral admission policies offered alternatives to the rigid eligibility frameworks prevalent in other destinations. Participants highlighted how China’s recognition of non-traditional academic trajectories—particularly its acceptance of vocational master’s degrees—provided access to those excluded by Western and Pakistani universities’ conventional requirements.

“My master’s degree was from a vocational college, which many Western universities dismissed. China’s policy recognized my practical experience as valid preparation for doctoral research.” (Imran, interview, 5 August 2023)

Imran’s case exemplifies how institutional “rules” (admission criteria) are not fixed but can be redesigned to be more inclusive. China’s flexible recognition of vocational qualifications restructured the eligibility field, transforming what was previously a terminal credential into a stepping stone for doctoral education. This shows how enabling structures can emerge from policy choices, not only from resource endowments.

This inclusive approach extended to language proficiency assessments, where alternatives to standardized tests such as IELTS/TOEFL reduced barriers for applicants from underresourced backgrounds.

“In Pakistan, we had to defend finalized PhD proposals before enrollment. Here, a study plan suffices initially, allowing research to evolve organically.” (Allan, interview, 10 September 2023)

Allan’s comparison of Pakistani and Chinese admission requirements reveals how different structural rules shape applicant agency. Pakistan’s requirement for a fully defended proposal before enrollment imposes a high entry barrier, while China’s flexible study plan allows research questions to develop during the doctoral process. This flexibility enabled Allan to pursue opportunities that would have been closed under Pakistan’s more rigid structure. These policies collectively function as enabling rules that empower agency among marginalized applicants. In Giddens’ terms, China’s admission and visa policies are not merely background conditions but also active “resources” that students strategically leverage to convert their academic aspirations into realized mobility.

Sociocultural Factors Shaping Academic Mobility

Sociocultural factors emerged as a significant structural force influencing Pakistani students’ academic mobility, primarily by constraining individual autonomy and educational choice.

Sociocultural Norms

Entrenched sociocultural norms in Pakistan tend to prioritize collective, patriarchal frameworks over individual autonomy in many educational contexts. Participants emphasized that educational choices are seldom individual, with familial consensus dictating pathways and creating direct pressure that shapes careers. These gendered constraints manifest differently: male candidates face financial obligations as primary breadwinners, while female students navigate restrictive marriage timelines that conflict with educational goals.

“In Pakistan, your education isn’t just yours—it belongs to your family. My father constantly was pursuing me to get a government job ... my ambitions were to get higher education.” (Allan, interview, 10 September 2023)

Family structures constrained Allan’s agency; moving to China allowed him to renegotiate those pressures from a distance.

“In Pakistan, higher education for women is tolerated, not encouraged ... more priority is given to males ... I took a lot of time even to persuade my father to allow me.” (Alyia, interview, 23 October 2023)

Alyia’s extended negotiations show how gendered rules can be navigated through strategic use of external opportunities (scholarships, international

mobility). This collectivism and gendered privileging render local academic environments incompatible with doctoral pursuits for many. Furthermore, ethnic and regional stratification within Pakistani academia further restricts equitable access.

“Your surname or province can dictate which university you attend ... and this is still very prevalent in Pakistan.” (Faisal, interview, 19 November 2023)

Faisal’s observation highlights how inscriptive structures override merit; China offers a perceived escape to more merit-based selection.

Beyond immediate family pressures, participants navigated additional sociocultural constraints. Religious practices required the participants to negotiate halal food access, prayer spaces, and Ramadan accommodations in a non-Muslim majority context. Several participants noted that Chinese universities’ international student dormitories typically provided these accommodations, but off-campus life required additional effort. Gendered mobility expectations operated asymmetrically: male participants reported pressure to remit stipend savings to family as “breadwinners,” whereas female participants faced explicit questions about marriage timing. As one married female participant explained,

“My husband allowed me to come only after I secured a full scholarship—he said it was an ‘investment’ rather than an ‘expense’. My single female classmates faced constant questions: ‘When will you marry? What will a PhD give you?’” (Farah)

Regional identity within Pakistan also shaped the experiences of China as a destination—participants from Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (historically underrepresented provinces) more frequently described China as “neutral ground” free from Punjab’s dominance over Pakistani academia. These intersecting sociocultural divisions foster inhospitable academic environments, pushing students toward the perceived neutrality of international institutions and the pursuit of a “better independent educational choice”. This strategic relocation escaping entrenched sociocultural constraints through geographic mobility is a core expression of contingent mobility.

Identifying Agency Factors Shaping Academic Mobility

This section examines how individual agency and micro-level influences shape the mobility decisions of Pakistani PhD students in China. The interview data highlighted two key themes: personal factors and educational factors behind students’ choices for PhDs at Chinese universities.

“It wasn’t just about Pakistan’s problems. I actively sought China because my supervisor encouraged me from my Master’s to do a PhD from China, and I believed it would fast-track my career. Let’s be honest a Chinese PhD opens more doors.” (Farah, interview, 11 April 2023)

Personal Factors

Pakistani students' decision to pursue doctoral studies in China is driven by two key personal factors. They seek the career advantage and global recognition of a Chinese degree. Simultaneously, they are motivated by the desire for international experience and are influenced by their peer networks.

Career Pragmatism, Credentialism, and Transnational Degree Valuation

Participants framed their pursuit of doctoral degrees in China as a direct strategy to navigate Pakistan's credential-driven labor market and underemployment crisis. They identified a systemic preference for foreign PhDs, where domestic qualifications were often devalued and even entry-level academic positions required doctoral credentials.

"In Pakistan, a PhD is required for university teaching positions. Even regional universities demand it ... You have no choice." (Ali, interview, 11 November 2023)

Ali's statement shows how credential inflation transforms a PhD from an option into a structural necessity, pushing students toward international options.

"After my Master's, jobs in Pakistan required a 'recognized' degree or years of experience. A PhD abroad taught me practical skills for a stable career." (Samir, interview, 27 September 2023)

Samir frames international education as a strategic resource to overcome domestic labor market mismatches. Students strategically leveraged China's accessible programs to meet the demand for foreign credentials, thereby accruing the symbolic capital of a transnational degree that enhanced both their employability and familial prestige.

"In Pakistan, social science has no career value. I can work in the future in Canada or Europe ... this is how I'll build my profile." (Hira, interview, 29 August 2023)

Hira's comment reveals how students anticipate the differential value of credentials across national contexts, using China as a stepping stone for onward mobility. Where Pakistani Credentialism functioned as a constraining structure, students used China's education system as an opportunity for agentic mobility, circumventing domestic barriers to acquiring globally recognized qualifications.

International Exposure and Peer Networks

International exposure motivated Pakistani PhD students to pursue doctoral studies abroad, driven by academic and cultural agency. This pursuit was profoundly shaped by peer networks, reflecting microlevel agency in academic mobility. Many participants highlighted the critical role of friends, seniors, or

colleagues already enrolled in Chinese universities, whose first-hand experiences demystified the application process and academic expectations.

“My decision to come to China was because of seniors at my university who graduated from Chinese universities and they recommended me. Every time I used to talk to them and was reading their papers published with high impact factors in environmental sciences in good journals in China.” (Fatima, interview, 20 October 2023)

Peer networks act as conduits of “practical knowledge” that reduce uncertainty, enabling informed strategic choices. Culturally, the students highlighted transformative experiences, such as learning Mandarin and adapting to foreign societal norms, which sharpened their cross-cultural communication skills. Academically, this exposure provided unparalleled opportunities.

“At conferences here, I’ve built connections that helped me publish in journals that my professors back home only dreamed of.” (Faisal, interview, 19 November 2023)

Faisal’s experience illustrates how international exposure is converted into tangible academic capital publications and networks that would be unavailable in Pakistan. Beyond academia, many sought self-fulfillment through cultural exploration, cross-cultural dialog, and personal growth, framing their journeys as opportunities to maximize potential and inspire families.

Educational Factors

Educational factors significantly influence Pakistani students’ mobility decisions for Chinese PhD programs. Discipline-specific research motivations drive students toward China’s specialized academic strengths, while institutional rankings and reputation inform university selection. Career development considerations, particularly post-PhD employment prospects, further shape these mobility choices.

Research Interest: Discipline-Specific Motivations

For example, students in atmospheric chemistry noted China’s leadership in climate modeling and satellite-based aerosol studies, providing access to methodologies and mentorship unavailable in Pakistan. Similarly, those in AI-driven educational technology highlighted China’s integration of machine learning with pedagogical innovation, in contrast to Pakistan’s more theoretical approaches.

“I decided to come to a Chinese university for a PhD because I was interested in the education system of China. I held an interest in educational technology because in China, there were many good

universities offering programmes ... I don't have any other possibility or choice." (Bilal, interview, 15 July 2023)

Bilal's quote shows how disciplinary structures (availability of specializations) shape mobility—China's advanced offerings create opportunities that Pakistan's academic system does not provide.

Ranking and Reputation

The ranking and reputation of Chinese universities significantly influence Pakistani students' academic mobility. Awareness of these factors is often mediated through social networks and academic mentors. For instance, one student noted the following:

"One of my friends was studying here for two years before me. He said that this university has a very good program in atmospheric chemistry, and if I wanted to pursue a PhD in this field, it has a strong global ranking." (Khalid, interview, 11 April 2023)

Peer networks transmit symbolic capital; rankings become actionable knowledge through trusted social ties. The perceived value of Chinese credentials is substantiated by global rankings. In the 2024 QS World University Rankings, 14 Chinese universities appear in the top 300, whereas none are from Pakistan. Pakistan's highest-ranked institution (NUST) is located at 401–450, while China's Tsinghua and Peking rank 14th and 17th, respectively.

Moreover, language skills play an important role in student decision-making. Many students cited the importance of advancing their English language skills for academic writing and professional opportunities. As one student mentioned,

"If the programme was only in Chinese, I couldn't attend any classes. During my PhD, I have learned more English language skills, which are important for my professional development." (Sana, interview, 25 November 2023)

Sana's comment highlights how language proficiency functions as both a constraint (Chinese-only programs) and an enabler (English skill development) a duality that shapes program choice and long-term career capital.

Impacts of Academic Mobility on Pakistani PhD Students

The PhD journey at Chinese universities, which typically lasted three to four years depending on discipline and institution, significantly shaped Pakistani students' academic trajectories through comprehensive exposure, enhanced research capabilities, and substantial skill development. Access to advanced research infrastructure proved pivotal across disciplines. Environmental science scholars gained technical competencies through specialized software and laboratory equipment unavailable in Pakistan, enabling sophisticated experimentation that enhanced both research capabilities and employment

prospects. Similarly, social science researchers have utilized comprehensive digital archives and analytical tools to employ new methodologies and increase their work quality.

The collaborative academic culture further fostered professional development through interdisciplinary teamwork, leading to co-authored publications in international journals that strengthened academic profiles. Regular conference participation expanded professional networks while enhancing presentation skills. This multifaceted preparation combining technical training, collaborative research, and publication opportunities created a powerful foundation for navigating complex research landscapes that would have been difficult to achieve in Pakistan.

“I have learned so much that if I go back, I can do projects with good earnings. The software and data analysis I learned were meaningful, especially since the world is talking about climate change and my field is environmental science. I am confident because I gained knowledge from theory to practical work.” (Fatima, interview, 20 October 2023)

Fatima’s confidence reflects how access to China’s material resources (software, labs) converted into perceived professional agency—a transformation of structural enablement into individual capability.

“The opportunity to study in a new environment was challenging initially. As a researcher, I know how to conduct empirical research because I have learned over three years in China with students and faculty here.” (Alyia, interview, 23 October 2023)

“During my Master’s, I did not have a research paper because it was not needed. Here, completing a PhD requires the submission of two papers for graduation. I have published three as first author with good impact factors and citations.” (Kamran, interview, 11 April 2023)

Kamran’s publication record illustrates how institutional rules (graduation requirements) can drive research productivity, creating tangible academic capital that would have been unlikely under Pakistan’s less demanding structure.

The professional advantages emerging from this academic mobility experience became equally significant. Many students anticipated strong career prospects in Pakistani academia, where foreign qualifications from China’s increasingly prestigious universities commanded considerable respect, while others planned to pursue international opportunities or roles in China itself. These prospects were directly enabled by the technical skills acquired during doctoral studies, which translated into professional applications. Science graduates mastered specialized laboratory techniques and analytical software with clear industry relevance, while social science researchers developed advanced qualitative and quantitative research capabilities.

“In Pakistan, we lack infrastructure, laboratories, and technology, making it difficult to choose a local university. I was excited to join a

Chinese university with its large laboratories.” (Imran, interview, 5 August 2023)

“The benefit of studying in China is a bright career. In Pakistan, I can obtain a university job or highly paid government projects like my seniors. My profile is also strong for post-doc opportunities in China.” (Fatima, interview, 20 October 2023)

On a personal level, the experience generated notable transformations in confidence, social standing, and cross-cultural adaptability. Most students described how their families and communities accorded them with respect to their ability as doctoral candidates at international institutions. Female scholars particularly emphasized how this experience challenged traditional gender norms while establishing them as educated role models for younger relatives. Several noted how the experience cultivated both self-reliance and intercultural competence that would serve them throughout their careers. The financial independence and professional networks gained during their studies further strengthened their personal and professional trajectories.

“My family respects me more than before—as a female, I sustained on my own for three years in a foreign country. I decided to educate my young siblings, as I am considered an educated person in my family.” (Zara, interview, 12 June 2023)

Zara’s elevated family status demonstrates how academic mobility can reconfigure gendered power relations within the home structure—a form of personal transformation that extends beyond individual skill acquisition.

The findings reveal that the impacts of academic mobility were both patterned and individualized. However, the specific professional skills acquired varied distinctly by discipline, ranging from laboratory techniques to project management. Notably, a consistent theme of personal transformation marked by elevated confidence, social standing, and ambition underscores the significant personal journey that accompanied academic advancement for all participants.

DISCUSSION

This study employs Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to move beyond economic-centric models of student flow (King, 2002; Vasiljeva, 2014), analyzing the academic mobility of Pakistani PhD students to China as a dialectical interplay of macro-level structures and micro-level agency. The findings reveal that mobility decisions are shaped by structural constraints in Pakistan (political instability, underfunded universities, regional quotas, and sociocultural norms) and enabling structures in China (scholarships, advanced labs, flexible admissions, and streamlined visas). Students act as knowledgeable agents who strategically leverage peer networks and transnational credentials—a process we conceptualize as “contingent mobility,” which is neither purely voluntary nor forced. This framework captures the complex trajectory where agency is simultaneously constrained by precarity in Pakistan and enabled by

asymmetric opportunities in China, demanding tactical adaptation rather than a simple binary of choice or compulsion.

The political realm illustrates this contingent dynamic. In Pakistan, structural constraints—political instability, regional marginalization, and institutional discrimination—limit legitimate pathways for academic advancement (Waters & Brooks, 2011; Li, 2013). Conversely, China's internationalization policies function as enabling structures. Students leverage scholarships and streamlined visas to transform exclusion at home into opportunity abroad. This strategic navigation is consistent with Giddens' duality and suggests limitations of reductive push-pull models (Gungor & Tansel, 2005; Tim & Geoffrey, 2002). Our findings extend recent South-South mobility research (Xu, 2023; Nhi, 2025), showing that aspirations are shaped by both economic and noneconomic factors, and align with Phan's (2023) observations of "immobility in mobility" during systemic disruptions.

Professional factors further delineate this negotiated movement. Pakistan's "opportunity deserts" (Marginson, 2016) – outdated infrastructure, skill mismatches, and credential inflation – constrain scientific development and devalue domestic doctoral training. Participants' mobility emerges as an agentic response to these deficits. By accessing China's advanced research ecosystems, students convert structural constraints into personal and professional capital, offering a more nuanced critique than purely economic explanations (Sen, 1999).

Similarly, sociocultural structures in Pakistan—familial pressures, gendered norms, and ethnic hierarchies—con recursively constrain agency, especially for women and minorities. China's relatively gender-equitable environment functions as a counter-structure, enabling participants to reclaim "substantive freedoms" (Sen, 1999). Thus, cross-border mobility becomes a form of situated resistance, contesting monolithic "push" factor accounts (Hazen & Alberts, 2006) and showing that cultural structures are often dynamically interpreted through agentic practice.

At the individual level, contingent mobility is realized through constrained yet purposive agency. Students tactically exploit China's reputation to bypass Pakistan's underemployment crisis and familial pressures. Peer networks demystify destination hierarchies, enabling informed choices. They leverage flexible admissions policies to overcome domestic barriers (Robeyns, 2003). Outcomes extend beyond skill acquisition to professional reconstitution, personal empowerment (e.g., women as "educated role models"), and cosmopolitan identities. This transformation questions linear "brain drain" narratives, revealing mobility as a multidirectional process of capital accumulation where students actively reconfigure the structures that shape their trajectories.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to address an apparent contradiction: conventional models predict that Pakistani doctoral students will prioritize Western destinations, yet China has emerged as their fastest-growing choice. By extending structuration

theory (Giddens, 1984), this study challenges conventional understandings by proposing the concept of “contingent mobility” to describe these complex realities. Rather than being wholly voluntary or forced, their transnational trajectories emerge from the dynamic interplay of structural precarity in Pakistan's deteriorating higher education system, China's strategically designed internationalization policies that create asymmetric opportunities, and students' own agency manifested through credential accumulation and network building.

This framework moves beyond simplistic push–pull models and deterministic concepts such as “impelled-mobility” by capturing three critical dimensions: the paradoxical nature of mobility as simultaneously a survival strategy and aspirational pursuit, the evolving motivations throughout different doctoral phases from initial pragmatic concerns to later epistemic transformation, and the intricate power dynamics where China's soft power initiatives intersect with students' efforts to overcome marginalization.

By advancing this Southern structuration perspective, the study conceptualizes academic mobility as a contested domain where macrolevel structural forces and microlevel individual agency interact to produce unpredictable educational pathways. This offers new insights for promoting more equitable higher education collaborations within the Global South and provides a foundation for comprehending the mobility of other highly educated groups.

The findings underscore the role of mobility as a strategic investment, with students navigating structural and agency dynamics to maximize academic, professional, and personal returns. These findings are necessarily limited by the study's focus on Chinese government scholarship recipients and the perspectives of those who successfully navigated mobility to China, suggesting that future research might productively examine self-funded students, unsuccessful applicants, and longitudinal trajectories to further illuminate the contingent nature of South–South academic mobility.

Implications

The findings have several implications. Theoretically, contingent mobility refines structuration theory for contexts of structural deterioration: in Pakistan, deteriorating structures prompt escape rather than reproduction, requiring a revised understanding of duality. Practically, Pakistani policymakers should invest in research infrastructure and merit-based admissions to retain talent; Chinese institutions could improve sociocultural integration (e.g., halal food, prayer spaces) to increase satisfaction. Policy-wise, reliance on Chinese scholarships may exacerbate brain drain if return conditions do not improve.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, our sample included only Chinese government scholarship recipients and excluded self-funded students. Second, we interviewed only successful applicants, not those who rejected or who chose other destinations. Third, our qualitative design prioritizes

depth over statistical generalizability. Fourth, PhD durations vary (typically 3-4 years), and our participants' experiences may not capture longer-term outcomes.

Future research should pursue specific directions: longitudinal tracking of post-PhD trajectories; comparative studies with other South-Asian sending countries (Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka); research on unsuccessful applicants; quantitative studies with larger samples; and exploration of how China's Belt and Road Initiative shapes mobility policies over time.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

☐ None

☐ Some sections, with minimal or no editing

☒ **Some sections, with extensive editing**

☐ Entire work, with minimal or no editing

☐ Entire work, with extensive editing

REFERENCES

- Abbott, A., & Silles, M. (2016). Determinants of international student migration. *The World Economy*, 39(5), 621–635. <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.12319>
- Ackers, L., & Gill, B. (2009). *Moving people and knowledge: Scientific mobility in an enlarging European Union*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ahmad, A. (2025). *Exploring the influence of Mandarin learning and teaching among students' and teachers' intercultural citizenship development in Pakistani Higher Education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Surrey]. <https://doi.org/10.15126/thesis.901569>
- Ahmad, A. B., & Shah, M. (2018). International students' choice to study in China: an exploratory study. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 24(4), 325–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2018.1458247>
- Auriol, L. (2010). Doctorate Holders: Career, Demand, International Mobility. *Foresight and STI Governance*, 4(4), 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1995-459X.2010.4.26.41>
- Baker, S. E., & Edwards, R. (2012). How many qualitative interviews is enough? Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research. *National Centre for Research Methods*, Southampton.
- Beine, M., Noël, R., & Ragot, L. (2014). Determinants of the international mobility of students. *Economics of Education Review*, 41, 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2014.03.003>
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I do not: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>

- Bhandari, R., & Blumenthal, P. (2010). *International students and global mobility in higher education: National trends and new directions*. Springer.
- Bibi, S., & Amaan, D. S. (2022). ENHANCING PAKISTAN-CHINA COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION. *Journal of Higher Education and Development Studies (JHEDS)*, 2(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.59219/jheds.v2i1.6>
- Bilecen, B., & Faist, T. (2015). International doctoral students as knowledge brokers: Reciprocity, trust and solidarity in transnational networks. *Global Networks*, 15(2), 217–235. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12069>
- Biney, P. A., & Cheng, M. Y. (2021). International students' decision to study in China: A study of some selected international students from universities in China. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(8), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2021.98021>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Briones, L. (2017). *Empowering migrant women: Why agency and rights are not enough*. Routledge.
- Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student motilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Springer.
- Cenci, A. (2015). A "capability view" on migration: Some theoretical issues raised by the Southern Euro Zone highly skilled mobility. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 28(4), 443–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2015.1024636>
- Chatterji, J., & Washbrook, D. A. (Eds.). (2013). *Routledge handbook of the South Asian diaspora*. London: Routledge.
- Choudaha, R., & De Wit, H. (2014). Challenges and opportunities for global student mobility in the future: A comparative and critical analysis. *Internationalization of Higher Education and Global Mobility*, 23(2), 19–34.
- Craib, I. (1992). *Modern social theory: From Parsons to Habermas*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Czaika, M., & Toma, S. (2017). International academic mobility across space and time: The case of Indian academics. *Population, Space and Place*, 23(8), Article e2069. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2069>
- Da Wan, C., Kuzhabekova, A., & Ispambetova, B. (2022). Malaysian PhD graduates coming home: Adjustment and adaptation to the research ecosystem. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(6), 580–595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2022.2098450>
- De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- De Wit, H. (2010). Recent trends and issues in international student mobility. *International Higher Education*, (59).

- DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L. M. (2019). Semi structured interviewing in primary care research: A balance of relationship and rigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, 7, e000057. <https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057>
- Ding, X. (2016). Exploring the experiences of international students in China. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 20(4), 319–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315316647164>
- Fidler, S. D., Clarke, L., & Wang, R. Y. (2023). The impact of political factors on international student mobility. *British Educational Research Journal*, 49, 352–369. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3846>
- Findlay, A., King, R., Stam, A., & Ruiz-Gelices, E. (2006). Ever reluctant Europeans: The changing geographies of UK students studying and working abroad. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 13(4), 291–318. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776406065429>
- Gao, H., & de Wit, H. (2017). China and International Student Mobility. *International Higher Education*, (90), 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2017.90.9992>
- Gérard, E., & Lebeau, Y. (2023). Trajectories within international academic mobility: A renewed perspective on the dynamics and hierarchies of the global higher education field. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 100, 102780. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102780>
- Giddens, A. (1979). *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis* (Vol. 241). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1981). *A contemporary critique of historical materialism* (Vol. 1). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1982). *Profiles and critiques in social theory*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990). Structuration theory and sociological analysis. In C. G. A. Bryant & D. Jary (Eds.), *Anthony Giddens: Consensus and controversy* (pp. 297–315). London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. (1993). *New rules of sociological method*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A., & Gregory, D. (1984). Space, time and politics in social theory: An interview with Anthony Giddens. *Society and Space London*, 2(2), 123–132.
- Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E., & Chadwick, B. (2008). Methods of data collection in qualitative research: Interviews and focus groups. *British Dental Journal*, 204(6), 291–295. <https://doi.org/10.1038/bdj.2008.192>
- Ginnervskov-Dahlberg, M. (2021). *Student migration from Eastern to Western Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Goss, J., & Lindquist, B. (1995). Conceptualizing international labor migration: A structuration perspective. *International Migration Review*, 29(2), 317–351.

- Gregory, D., & Urry, J. (1988). Social relations and spatial structures. *Science and Society*, 52(3), 343–370.
- Grenfell, M., & James, D. (2003). *Bourdieu and education: Acts of practical theory*. London: Routledge.
- Gu, Q., & Schweinfurt, M. (2015). Transnational connections, competences and identities: Experiences of Chinese international students after their return 'home'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(6), 947–970. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3175>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
- Gungor, N. D., & Tansel, A. (2005). *Return intentions of university-educated Turkish expatriates* (IZA Discussion Paper No. 1604). Bonn, Germany: IZA – Institute for the Study of Labor.
- Guo, L., & Baruch, Y. (2021). The moderating role of a city's institutional capital and people's migration status on career success in China. *Human Relations*, 74(5), 678–704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720946102>
- Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. London: Springer.
- Hazen, H. D., & Alberts, H. C. (2006). Visitors or immigrants? International students in the United States. *Population, Space and Place*, 12(3), 201–216.
- Healey, R. L. (2006). Asylum-seekers and refugees: A structuration theory analysis of their experiences in the UK. *Population, Space and Place*, 12(4), 257–271.
- Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. (2023). *Annual Report on University Admissions*. <https://www.hec.gov.pk>
- Hinduja, P., Mohammad, R. F., Siddiqui, S., Noor, S., & Hussain, A. (2023). Sustainability in higher education institutions in Pakistan: A systematic review of progress and challenges. *Sustainability*, 15(4), 3406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043406>
- Horta, H. (2009). Global and national prominent universities: Internationalization, competitiveness and the role of the State. *Higher Education*, 58(3), 387–405.
- Ivancevic, V., & Gourova, E. (2011). Challenges of doctoral studies in Europe. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 13, 32–41.
- Javed, B., Zainab, B., Zakai, S. N., & Malik, S. (2019). Perceptions of international student mobility: A qualitative case study. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 6(2), 269–287.
- Jiani, M. A. (2017). Why and how international students choose Mainland China as a higher education study abroad destination. *Higher Education*, 74(4), 563–579. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0066-0>
- Kamran, T., & Magsi, H. A. (2022). China–Pakistan educational and cultural cooperation under BRI. *Pacific International Journal*, 6(S1), 40–50. <https://doi.org/10.55014/pij.v6iS1.292>

- Kaufmann, V., Bergman, M. M., & Joye, D. (2004). Motility: Mobility as capital. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 28(4), 745–756.
- King, R. (2002). Toward a new map of European migration. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8(2), 89–106.
- King, R., Findlay, A., & Ahrens, J. (2010). *International student mobility literature review*. Bristol, UK: Higher Education Funding Council for England.
- Kiyani, F., Ahmed, M., & Shah, M. (2015). International students' mobility: A case of Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences*, 9(2), 447–460.
- Knight, J. (2015). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5–31.
- Leeman, Y., & van Koeven, E. (2019). New immigrants. An incentive for intercultural education? *Education Inquiry*, 10(3), 189–207.
- Lindberg, M. E. (2009). Student and early career mobility patterns among highly educated people in Germany, Finland, Italy, and the United Kingdom. *Higher Education*, 58, 339–358.
- Liu, D. (2020). The role of social capital/Guanxi in students' decision-making about postgraduate education in China: An explorative case study. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 15, 453–481. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11516-020-0019-3>
- Lo, W. Y. W. (2019). Beyond competition: A comparative review of conceptual approaches to international student mobility. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 17(3), 261–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2018.1525283>
- Mahmood, R., Wang, F. Y., Ahmed, W., Mahmood, S., Suleman, R. M. F., & Mahood, U. (2026). Psychological adaptation in international students' migration: Social support, meaning in life, and resilience in China. *Journal of International Students*, 16(12), 25–56. <https://doi.org/10.32674/s9217427>
- Marginson, S. (2011). Higher education in East Asia and Singapore: Rise of the Confucian model. *Higher Education*, 61, 587–611.
- Ministry of Education, China. (2018). *Annual report on international students in China*. <http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/>
- Muddasir, M., Khan, M. A., & Ahmad, R. (2017). The role of CPEC in promoting academic mobility: A case of Pakistani students in China. *Journal of Educational Development*, 12(3), 45–60.
- Murphy-Lejeune, E. (2003). *Student mobility and narrative in Europe: The new strangers*. London: Routledge.
- Naderifar, M., Goli, H., & Ghaljaie, F. (2017). Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education*, 14(3), e67670. <https://doi.org/10.5812/sdme.67670>
- Nhi, T. L. T. (2025). Exploring the intrinsic dimensions of study abroad aspirations: The case of Vietnamese international students in Japan.

- Journal of International Students*, 15(5), 97–116.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/8w93vt76>
- OECD. (2019). What are the characteristics and outcomes of doctoral graduates? In *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>
- OECD. (2021). *Education at a Glance, 2021*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Owen, G. T. (2014). Qualitative methods in higher education policy analysis: Using interviews and document analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(26), 1–19.
- Page, A. G., & Chahboun, S. (2019). Emerging empowerment of international students: How international student literature has shifted to include the students' voices. *Higher Education*, 78(5), 871–885.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00375-7>
- Panahi, R. (2012). Factors affecting the brain drain from Iran. *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research*, 2(3), 3003–3015.
- Peters, M. A., Hollings, S., Zhang, M., Quainoo, E. A., Wang, H., Huang, Y., & Green, B. (2021). The changing map of international student mobility. *ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education*, 41(1), 7–28.
- Phan, A. (2023). Immobility in mobility during COVID-19: Reflections on “being stuck” in the home country of an international doctoral student. *Journal of International Students*, 13(1), 85–93.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i1.4157>
- Robeyns, I. (2003). Sen's capability approach and gender inequality: Selecting relevant capabilities. *Feminist Economics*, 9(2–3), 61–92.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Scott, C., Safdar, S., Trilokekar, R. D., & El Masri, A. (2015). International students as "ideal immigrants" in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers' assumptions and the lived experiences of international students. *Comparative and International Education*, 43(3), Article 5.
<https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v43i3.9261>
- Sehooole, C., & Knight, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Internationalization of African higher education: Toward achieving the MDGs*. New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Sen, A. (2005). Human rights and capabilities. *Journal of Human Development*, 6(2), 151–166.
- Silva, E., & Warde, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Cultural analysis and Bourdieu's legacy: Settling accounts and developing alternatives*. London: Routledge.
- Stones, R. (1996). *Sociological reasoning: Toward a post-modern sociology*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Suter, W. N. (2012). *Introduction to educational research: A critical thinking approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Teichler, U. (2009). Internationalization of higher education: European experiences. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10, 93–106.

- Tim, M., & Geoffrey, N. S. (2002). “Push-pull” factors influencing international student destination choice. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(2), 82–90.
- Timsina, T. R., Khatri, B. B., Rijal, N., Pokharel, B., & Baral, S. (2026). Educational policy contraction and international student mobility: Nepali graduates and prospective students respond to changes in Australia. *Journal of International Students*, 16(6), 133–154.
<https://doi.org/10.32674/a0zr3954>
- Tu, M. (2025). Education mobility at the cost of widening gender gap? The silent women behind Pakistani male students' success stories in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 26(2), 336–353.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2024.2426385>
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2023). *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students*. Montreal, Canada: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- Wei, H. (2013). An empirical study on the determinants of international student mobility: A global perspective. *Higher Education*, 66, 105–122.
- World Bank Group. (2024). *World Development Report 2024*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications.
- Xu, B. (2021). Understanding education on China's Belt and Road Initiative: A cultural political economy approach. *Beijing International Review of Education*, 3(1), 56–71.
- Xu, X. (2023). Reconceptualizing international student mobility. *Journal of International Students*, 13(2), i–iv. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.5868>
- Yang, P. (2022). China in the global field of international student mobility: An analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 52(2), 308–326.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1764334>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.

Author bios

Ayesha Jameel is a PhD student at Beijing Normal University, China. Her research explores South–South academic mobility, transnational migration, higher education internationalization, and the role of gender and patriarchy in shaping educational trajectories. Her work is situated in the sociology of education and draws on qualitative methodologies and sociological frameworks, including structuration theory and intersectionality.
Email: Ayeshajameel88@yahoo.com

ZHIYONG ZHU is a Professor of Sociology and Education Policy at Beijing Normal University, China. He holds a PhD in Sociology and Education from the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include educational policy implementation, curriculum reform, school leadership and management, teacher development, and higher education reform. Email: zzy@bnu.edu.cn
