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Colorism in Employment: Hearing the Voices of “Waiyuoren” Teachers in China

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing body of literature on international students and foreign teachers in China, research on the transition of international students from the Global South into English-teaching roles remains limited. This study fills this gap by exploring international students’ experiences of their transition from being international students to being foreign teachers. Five international graduates working as foreign English teachers in China were interviewed using a qualitative case study approach. The key findings of the study revealed that international students’ key motivations for remaining in China are driven by economic opportunity, cultural exposure, and community inclusion, while systemic challenges, such as job instability, language barriers, excessive workload, and wage disparities rooted in colorism, are also highlighted. The originality of this study lies in its focus on marginalized foreign teachers labeled waiyuoren, whose experiences are often shaped by racialized labor segmentation and neoliberal educational market exploitation.

Keywords: international students, foreign teachers, global south, colorism, kindergarten employment, China

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INTRODCUTION

The growing popularity of international education has led Chinese parents to teach their children English. Historically, foreign teacher recruitment began in the pre-1949 era, with Christian organizations recruiting foreign teachers (Zheng & Wu, 2023). In the post-1949 era, China changed rapidly from a Western to a Soviet approach. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the opening-up transition shifted from the Soviet model to the Western approach, spurring the rise of foreign teacher recruitment (Chen & Su, 2021).

The massive migration of foreign teachers to China made them unprepared to cater to diverse needs. Foreign teachers also face cultural and language barriers. They face challenges in adjusting to life’s cultural and everyday aspects, such as overcoming language barriers, lacking a supportive environment, and navigating differing views on teaching practices and professional boundaries (Yi et al., 2020). Moreover, the emerging economic prospects of China present an opportunity for individuals from the global north, including “backpacker teachers,” to engage in English teaching roles within private and public Chinese educational institutions (Stanley, 2013). According to Kim (2015), this trend of skilled teachers moving to China is driven by economic factors that benefit their careers, research opportunities, adventures, and last resorts. Nevertheless, some Chinese people perceive foreign teachers as subject to their judgment of desire, curiosity, envy, and resentment (Henry, 2013).

The preference for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) over nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) is closely linked to native speakerism. This bias affects the well-being and teaching effectiveness of NNESTs; however, additional investigation is needed to explore the complex factors in this context, including motivation and teacher well-being (Deng, 2024; Deng et al., 2024). The dynamics between foreign English teachers and Chinese learners are influenced by variations in culture, language, and teaching methodology. While certain studies have examined these elements, a deeper investigation is necessary to understand how these variations influence classroom dynamics and overall teaching effectiveness (Wang, 2011). In addition, factors such as homesickness, culture shock, and unmet expectations can lead to elevated turnover rates, exemplified by the occurrence of “midnight runners,” where foreign teachers leave their jobs unexpectedly (Deng, 2024; Wolff, 2009). Moreover, in 2020, a growing number of international students in China decided to work after their

study to fill the gaps in the need for English-language teaching, especially those affected by “midnight runners”(Wolff, 2009). However, international students face language barriers and cultural differences that cause them to leave after they complete their education (Iqbal et al., 2019; Jeremie et al., 2024). Thus, this study explores international students’ experiences of transitioning into teaching employment in China through the lens of segmented labor market theory. This study answers the following research questions:

1. What are international students’ perceptions of their decisions to stay and work in China?
2. What are their experiences of their transition as foreign teachers in connection with segmented labor market theory?

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students’ Intention to Remain in China for Employment

International students’ decision to stay in their host countries for work is shaped by a range of factors, such as economic opportunities, cultural assimilation, and governmental regulations. In China, numerous international students demonstrate a significant desire to remain drawn by competitive salaries, advantageous working conditions, and enticing lifestyle choices (Iqbal et al., 2019; Jeremie et al., 2024). Strong economic growth and a broad job market significantly contribute to this appeal (Song & Yunus, 2024). Nonetheless, despite these advantages, challenges remain, such as limited job prospects for international students, language barriers, and cultural differences, leading some individuals to depart after completing their education (Iqbal et al., 2019; Jeremie et al., 2024).

In the United States, there is a notable trend of Chinese students returning to their home country, driven by better economic prospects in China and a surge in nationalist sentiment (Kellogg, 2012). Nonetheless, the United States remains a compelling option for skilled migrants, particularly those who move into the workforce, as their choices are influenced by economic opportunities and individual goals (Yu, 2016). In the United Kingdom, the framework surrounding immigration has imposed considerable challenges for international students aiming to secure employment postgraduation, leading to disparities in career prospects and complications in establishing residency (Moskal, 2017). In addition, South Asian students face significant challenges in employability, including limited access to internship opportunities and deficiencies in culturally tailored career services (Nachatar Singh et al., 2023).

In Australia, the country continues to attract international students, especially those from China, because of favorable academic and employment prospects (Liu et al., 2023; Zhai et al., 2019). Nonetheless, Chinese students frequently choose to return to their home country from Australia, which is influenced by emotional considerations, difficulties in cultural assimilation, and enhanced job opportunities in China (Zhai et al., 2019). Moreover, Germany attracts significant interest from international students in terms of long-term

retention; however, the actual retention rates are relatively low. This discrepancy stems primarily from life-cycle factors and challenges involved in transitioning from academic settings to professional employment (Glorius, 2016). Across various countries, factors such as employment opportunities, cultural adaptation, and policy environments significantly impact international students' decisions to stay in or depart from their host nations (Koenings et al., 2021; Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024). Furthermore, the workplace atmosphere and sociocultural factors play crucial roles in shaping international graduates' initial career mobility intentions (Farivar et al., 2019).

Moreover, most countries in the global North, particularly in North America, utilize designer migration to maintain their talent. Designer migration involves the intentional application of immigration policies aimed at drawing in and retaining highly skilled and educated individuals, who can make substantial contributions to the economy and society of the host country (Hawthorne, 2012). For example, Canada has become a popular choice for international students because of its good education system and prospects for poststudy employment and permanent residency (Akbar, 2024; Judge & Walton-Roberts, 2024; Tavares, 2020). A significant proportion of these students come from countries such as India, China, and Vietnam, with Ontario acting as a prominent hub for educational pursuits (Akbar, 2024). Canada offers postgraduate work rights to international students, allowing them to acquire professional experience in the country after completing their studies. This policy greatly improves Canada's attractiveness as a place for education and supports international graduates as they move into the Canadian job market (Joshi & Ziguras, 2024; Tran et al., 2022). The Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) program is a key component of this policy, enabling graduates to work in Canada for up to three years depending on the length of their academic programs (Tran et al., 2022).

Foreign Teachers' Experiences in China

Foreign teachers in China are referred to as “外国人 or *waiguoren*,” since the word *waiguoren* means “foreigner”. *Waiguoren* was used to characterize foreign migrants who were not of Chinese ethnicity (Liu, 2021). According to Henry (2013), “the term *waiguoren* is typically reserved for those perceived to be most different, racially and culturally, from the Chinese population: white Westerners’ (p.225).” Scholars commonly believe that *waiguoren* is a form of othering citation. “*Waiguoren*” is associated with nationality and color distinct from the dominant group. On the other hand, Norwood (2014) argued that colorism is another form of othering that could be a form of racism; even within nonwhite majority groups, power and privilege are often linked to whiteness. However, the concept of colorism is complex to define (Culbreth, 2024). In a study by Lan (2022), those with “*white skin* privilege” received better treatment and greater job opportunities. Furthermore, the literature on the presence of foreign teachers focuses predominantly on White Westerners, while research addressing the context of global South workers identified as foreign teachers is lacking. Thus, this research examined the context of being “*waiguoren*” from the

perspective of foreign teachers who belonged to the global south.

Foreign teachers often face significant cultural disparities and adaptative hurdles in China's educational environment. These challenges encompass language barriers, varying teaching methodologies, and the divergent expectations of students and administrative staff (Golis, 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Furthermore, differences in the cognitive perspectives of international educators and learners concerning teaching methods could hinder effective communication and professional development (Yin et al., 2024). Moreover, foreign teachers significantly enhance the global integration of Chinese higher education, offer varied viewpoints, and promote intercultural comprehension among local and international students (Yin et al., 2024). However, a disconnect frequently exists between institutional expectations and teachers' actual experiences, marked by excessively high standards of professionalism and educational quality that do not consistently reflect real-world contexts (Golis, 2024). Teaching in China significantly impacts the professional identities of international educators, improving their skills while also generating tensions arising from differing educational and cultural environments (Liu et al., 2023). These professionals often encounter the challenge of merging global experiences with local educational practices, a process that can prove both demanding and rewarding (Liu & Ye, 2019).

Foreign teachers in China face intricate challenges stemming from cultural, professional, and systemic factors. Language barriers pose substantial challenges for effective communication with students and colleagues, particularly foreign educators. Furthermore, significant variations in instructional approaches, classroom management techniques, and educational standards between China and teachers' countries of origin frequently result in misinterpretation and disputes concerning teaching methods, individual privacy, and boundaries (Golis, 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Adjusting to these new cultural environments can lead to emotional strain, which may foster negative emotions among foreign educators (Golis, 2024).

Foreign teachers may encounter difficulties in managing classrooms because of the differing disciplinary expectations between China and their countries of origin (Yin et al., 2024). Adapting to local teaching methods and developing instructional strategies that align with the Chinese educational context can be challenging, requiring educators to integrate their prior teaching experience with new local requirements. Furthermore, insufficient support systems, characterized by a lack of supportive relationships and resources, exacerbate students' ability to adjust successfully to their teaching roles (Golis, 2024).

However, systemic issues present considerable challenges. The leadership approaches of Chinese supervisors, coupled with cultural differences, can affect foreign teachers' self-efficacy, making effective communication and constructive feedback essential yet difficult to achieve (Liu et al., 2023). In addition, disparities in employment are widespread, especially among foreign educators of nonwhite backgrounds, who often face differences in hiring practices and pay relative to their White counterparts. However, common racial identities can enhance relationships with Chinese students (Liu & Ye, 2019). Moreover, targeted

professional development programs tailored to meet the distinct challenges faced by foreign educators in China are often lacking (Yin et al., 2024). To successfully navigate these challenges, foreign teachers often rely on interpersonal interactions to obtain emotional and practical support, thereby facilitating their cultural adaptation (Golis, 2024).

Theoretical Underpinning: Segmented Labor Market Theory

Segmented labor market theory suggests that the labor market is divided into distinct segments, each governed by its own set of rules and characteristics. This segmentation creates disparities in employment conditions, wage levels, and job stability across sectors (Hudson, 2007; López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2022). This theory identifies two primary segments. The primary segment consists of stable and well-paid jobs that offer good working conditions, opportunities for career advancement, and job security. Workers in this segment typically possess higher levels of education and specialized skills (Hudson, 2007; López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2022). On the other hand, the secondary segment is characterized by low-paying, unstable jobs with poor working conditions, limited opportunities for advancement, and high turnover rates. This segment often includes marginalized groups, such as immigrants, minorities, and low-skilled workers (Hudson, 2007; Roux, 2006; Sabel, 2017).

Segmented labor market theory is underpinned by several key principles that highlight the complexities of labor market dynamics. First, the labor market is not a single, uniform entity; instead, it is marked by the heterogeneity of work situations, with different segments catering to distinct types of jobs and workers, resulting in varied employment experiences and outcomes (Letrémy et al., 2007; Meher, 2021). Second, barriers to mobility significantly hindered workers from transitioning between segments. These barriers often stem from discrimination based on race, sex, or ethnicity as well as disparities in education and skill levels (Hudson, 2007; Meher, 2021; Paz, 2013). Third, institutions, such as employers, unions, and government policies, play a vital role in reinforcing and maintaining labor market segmentation. These institutions influence critical aspects such as hiring practices, wage determination, and job security (Grimshaw et al., 2017; Marín et al., 2020; Urbaniec, 2022).

Additionally, social stratification, including factors such as caste, race, and gender, profoundly affects labor market participation and wage disparities, perpetuating unequal opportunities and outcomes for different social groups (López-Roldán & Fachelli, 2022; Meher, 2021). Finally, economic and social discrimination continues to sustain segmentation by affecting access to jobs, wages, and working conditions, thereby reinforcing systemic inequities (Howell, 2011; Meher, 2021). Table 5 summarizes the components of segmented labor market theory on the basis of the literature review.

The Research Context in China

China's efforts to advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 and foster social justice through the provision of scholarships to international students are varied

and impactful. On the basis of data from the Chinese Ministry of Education, out of 1004 higher education institutions in 31 provinces or autonomous regions, 492 185 international students, excluding students from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, were included in the 2018 data, with 12.81% receiving Chinese government scholarships (MOE China, 2019). Scholarships associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) play a crucial role in promoting sustainable educational development and lifelong learning (LLL), enhancing students' educational journeys, and equipping them with future challenges (Sarwar-Aalam et al., 2019). Furthermore, scholarships for international students in China from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries are directly associated with efforts to alleviate poverty (Yuan, 2020). They foster the development of human capital, draw in foreign investments, and facilitate technology transfers, all of which collectively contribute to a notable decrease in poverty levels within recipient nations (Gu & Qiu, 2021). Furthermore, the scholarships offered by China serve as instruments of soft power, enhancing its international presence while promoting educational objectives that align with SDG 4. The objective of these programs is to enhance both the quality and the accessibility of education offered to international students (Yuan, 2022). Despite their positive effects, challenges persist, such as limited exposure to SDG Target 4.7, ineffective teaching methods, and the need for enhanced student engagement. By addressing these challenges, there is potential to significantly improve China's role in advancing global education and promoting social justice (Lin, 2024). It is advisable for the Chinese government to implement preferential policies for international students with precision, refine talent training methodologies, and establish suitable evaluation criteria to assess the quality of international students. These strategies guarantee that scholarships are effectively aligned with and enhance the benefits associated with sustainable development objectives (Gu & Qiu, 2021; Qian, 2014).

METHOD

A qualitative case study research approach that entails a thorough investigation of a particular instance or phenomenon to grasp the fundamental causes and processes of an issue (Merriam, 2009; Stake & Visse, 2022). This method offers in-depth insight into real-world situations through active engagement. Case studies have found extensive applications across multiple fields, such as business, education, social sciences, and management. They serve to analyze complex scenarios, advance theory, and provide essential insights for informed decision-making (Barquet & Machado, 2017; Priya, 2021). Investigating marginalized groups, particularly highly marginalized groups, is essential yet frequently overlooked because of methodological challenges (Couch et al., 2014). Engaging in case studies with these populations involves various challenges, such as obstacles to participant access, ethical considerations, and the need for culturally sensitive research methodologies (Creswell, 2019). Smith (1999) notes that

Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who benefits from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? (Smith, 1999 p.10)

Participants

The study included five participants who were international students and who had studied for their graduate degree at Chinese universities (See Table 1). Four of the participants classified themselves as Muslims, and one was a Christian.

Table 1. Demographic profiling of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of Origin	Highest Education	Scholarship Received	Experienced Working in China
Participant 1	Female	Tanzania	Master's Degree from China	CSC	Yes/fulltime
Participant 2	Male	Afghanistan	Master's Degree from China	MOFCOM	Yes/fulltime
Participant 3	Male	Rwanda	Master's Degree from China	CSC	Yes/Part-time
Participant 4	Male	Afghanistan	Master's Degree from China	MOFCOM	Yes/fulltime
Participant 5	Female	Philippines	Master's Degree from China	CSC	Yes/Fulltime

Note. CSC means China Scholarship Council, and MOFCOM means Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) Scholarship China

All participants received scholarship funding from the Chinese government during their studies in China; two participants were supported by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), and the remaining participants were funded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC). Although the CSC has two types of scholarships, embassy application and direct admission from a Chinese university, I failed to confirm their scholarship information. Three participants were male, and two were female. All of them came from the Global South. All the participants had

experience working in China, with four working full-time to teach English. However, one participant had part-time work experience.

Data collection and analysis

I utilized a purposive sampling technique focusing on international students who received their education in China and who had work experience as foreign teachers. The interviews were conducted online due to the foreign teachers' availability. The interviews were conducted via WeChat, which is another device for recording and transcription using artificial intelligence. To conduct a thematic qualitative data analysis, it is essential to follow a structured and systematic approach to ensure rigor and reliability. The initial phase required in-depth engagement with the data, including meticulous reading and rereading of transcripts, field notes, and other qualitative sources. This immersion facilitates a profound understanding of the content (Green et al., 2007; Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Xu & Zammit, 2020). Initial codes must subsequently be developed through the systematic identification of key features in the dataset. This procedure involves assigning codes to segments of data that capture their significance (Galanis, 2018). It is possible to utilize both inductive and deductive approaches, where inductive coding is driven by data and deductive coding is informed by theoretical frameworks (Naeem et al., 2023). After the data were coded, the next step involved exploring the themes by categorizing related codes into potential themes and identifying patterns among them (Galanis, 2018). A broader data context ensures that themes are significant and relevant (Green et al., 2007). It is essential to review themes by meticulously analyzing all the extracted coded data to ensure coherence and consistency. This phase may involve combining, fine-tuning, or discarding specific themes to guarantee that they faithfully reflect the data (Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Xu & Zammit, 2020). It is essential to validate themes across the entire dataset to ensure the integrity of the analysis (Galanis, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential in qualitative studies to safeguard participants' well-being. Before the interview, I obtained an informed consent form to obtain participants' permission. Informed consent is highly important, as it represents a continuous process that requires regular reassessment during the study (Rooney, 2015). It is essential for participants to understand the study's procedures and potential risks, using multimedia tools to clarify complex information (Goodwin et al., 2019). Protecting participants' privacy through confidentiality and anonymity is crucial (Vainio, 2013); however, ensuring confidentiality can be difficult in studies that are small-scale or address sensitive subjects. In this study, I ensured the confidentiality of the participants through anonymity and transparency with them that there was no potential risk in their participation. Reducing harm is a crucial ethical consideration because qualitative studies may result in emotional or psychological distress (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). It is essential to be ready to handle risks and offer necessary support. Upholding autonomy is crucial to guaranteeing that participation is voluntary and

free from adverse effects. Preventing coercion and maintaining ethical reflexivity throughout the research are essential. It is essential to uphold relational ethics by cultivating transparent, honest, and respectful relationships with participants, thereby establishing trust and ethical integrity in qualitative research (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024).

RESULTS

International Students' Perception of Their Decision to Stay and Work in China

Economic Opportunities. International students are drawn to China because of their economic opportunities, competitive salaries, and financial promises compared with their home countries. This financial incentive is not only about personal gain; it also extends to supporting family members back home in the form of remittances. The ability to save money for future endeavors, such as further education or starting a business, adds to their decisions. Moreover, rapid economic growth in China has created a dynamic job market, particularly in sectors such as technology, education, and business, which further encourages students to consider their long-term careers in the country. Some international students shared the following.

"The salary that right now I get here, you know, I can support myself, my family here and besides this, right now I can support my parents back to my country and even though, and even I can save a little bit."

"I think this is a very good opportunity to do the job. Why? Because here, ...I can save money for the future."

Cultural exposure and learning. Living in China offers students a unique cultural experience in an international setting, enhancing their adaptability and intercultural communication skills in both Chinese and English, which are crucial in today's global job market. Students often express a desire to learn Chinese, which is a critical asset for both personal and professional growth. However, international students shared that they were required to learn the Chinese language and culture during their studies. However, despite these courses, they felt unable to reach the required proficiency because their program was in English and they studied with fellow international students. Moreover, the opportunity to work allows them to engage with local customs, traditions, and social practices to foster a deeper understanding of Chinese society and enrich their experiences. Some participants said the following.

"I wanted to learn about a different culture and move to the new environment. I think they are not that different, not too different, but I became focused; my focus in China is more on education. I can learn from the Chinese educational environment. At the same time, it was the COVID-19 pandemic. I have a job."

Job Stability Concerns. While economic opportunities are appealing, many students have expressed concerns about job stability. The nature of employment contracts in China can be precarious, with many positions being temporary or subject to sudden change. This uncertainty can lead to anxiety regarding a country's long-term prospects. Students often worry about the implications of losing their jobs, especially if their work visas are tied to their employment. The fear of not being able to find another job quickly can deter some students from committing to a long-term stay. Some participants shared the following points.

"The greatest difficulty being a teacher is that this job is not stable. My job is not stable. You have the job today, and you are not sure that you will have this job tomorrow. It is not stable is you are contracting with agencies that are like not reliable at all."

Social Integration and the Community. In this study, most participants were Muslims. Their desire for social integration plays a crucial role in international students' decision to stay in China, where they feel welcome and respected of being Muslim. They were able to build relationships with local people, and other expatriates enhanced their sense of belonging and community. Many students reported that engaging with Chinese society enriched their experiences and helped them adjust to living in China. One participant mentioned the following.

"I think nobody will ask you, why are you praying? Especially on Friday, hundreds of people come to the mosque to pray. I think Chinese people are good in this thing. They in front of you they do not say anything."

Challenges of living abroad. Despite the many benefits of living in China, international students face significant challenges that can affect their overall experience. Language barriers often hinder effective communication, making it difficult to navigate daily life, access services, or build relationships. Cultural differences can also lead to misunderstanding and feelings of alienation. One of the participants noted that,

"I think one problem is that language barrier that you cannot communicate with people. Sometimes when we take our plate and go to the kitchen, and we see that there is pork in the kitchen, and they need to give food for teachers and students."

International Students' Experiences with their Transition as Foreign Teachers

Job Stability and Employment Contracts Foreign teachers often experience significant instability in their employment with the unexpected termination of contracts. Many teachers report that their contracts are not guaranteed for the full duration, leading to uncertainty regarding their futures in China. A lack of stable

contracts can deter teachers from committing long-term work to their positions. Some participants shared the following points.

"Even if you have signed five years, there is no guarantee for that. If you do not have a job, you cannot tell them why you do not have a job; they say that we introduced you, nobody wants you."

Colorism in Wage Disparities and Economic Incentives. The wages offered to foreign teachers can vary significantly depending on their nationality, appearance, and the institution in which they work. Many teachers express that while pay can be more attractive than it is in their home countries, there are disparities in wages, where teachers from certain backgrounds may receive preferential treatment in terms of salary. Economic incentives can be appealing; however, working conditions often lead to dissatisfaction. Some participants remarked:

"If I had liked an American passport, I could earn three, four, five times more than I was working. They are getting money for this; for example, if my salary is 20,000 RMB and one school's actual salary, it will be like a divided half and half will go to the agency."

Excessive Workload and Demanding Schedules Foreign teachers often face demanding working conditions, including long hours and high expectations, without adequate support. Many studies have reported that nurses are required to work multiple shifts with little time for breaks, which can lead to burnout. This theme underscores the challenges of working conditions for foreign teachers in which the expectations placed on them do not align with the support they receive. This can create a stressful environment that affects overall job satisfaction. Some of them shared the following:

"You must be there in the school 7:30, one hour earlier to pick up students, and the whole morning you have class, you do not have the resting time. You need to be there and then signed your attendance and leave it will be five, and when you come back home, it will be 6:30. The whole morning, the whole afternoon, and the whole evening shift. Three shifts you need to work."

Underappreciation of Qualifications. Many express frustration that their qualifications and experiences do not lead to better positions or higher salaries, as hiring practices tend to favor certain nationalities and appearances over merit. Thus, it is not solely based on qualifications or experience but also on nationality and perceived desirability. This can lead to feelings of stagnation and dissatisfaction among teachers, who feel that their potential is not being realized. Some participants mentioned the following.

"Even if you have a master's degree in China, if you have a bachelor's, if you have a PhD for the current job that I do, even if you work for 10 years, 20 years, like no big difference, no big development. If I was from Germany or if I was from France or if I was from Italy, people would trace that and pay more for those kinds of people."

DISCUSSION

This study explores international students' experiences of transitioning into teaching employment in China through the lens of segmented labor market theory. On the basis of these findings, international students' perceptions of their decision to stay and work in China were drawn from robust economic opportunities, cultural exposure and learning, job stability concerns, social integration and community, and the challenges of living abroad. The significance of international students emphasizes the importance of providing support to their families and saving on future aspirations as the primary reasons for their persistence. Furthermore, opportunities for cultural exposure and the ability to learn Mandarin are regarded as significant for both personal and professional development, although language barriers and restricted immersion in English-medium programs impede complete integration.

Research has shown (Song & Yunus, 2024) that international students are increasingly attracted to China because of its growing economy, diverse job market, and ease of national and local employment policies, which have enhanced the accessibility and transparency of employment. Competitive salaries, scholarship opportunities, and avenues for professional growth have significantly increased China's tenure. The opportunity to participate in cultural exchange and receive top-notch education, particularly in Project 985 and 211 universities in a diverse cultural environment, acts as a significant attraction. Nonetheless, obstacles, such as language barriers and cultural differences, pose considerable challenges to adaptation and prolonged residence (Jeremie et al., 2024; Zou & Zhu, 2018). The challenging dynamics of the Chinese job market, along with stringent visa policies and a lack of understanding of local employment frameworks, may impede international students' job security (Jeremie et al., 2024). In response, universities have enhanced their employment guidance and support services (Song & Yunus, 2024). The importance of social integration bolstered by religious tolerance and effective government coordination in cities such as Changchun is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among students (Zou & Zhu, 2018). In addition, students with favorable experiences in China tend to remain, while those with a deep attachment to their native culture frequently opt to depart (Lin & Kingminghae, 2017).

In addition, the findings also explore their experiences of transition as foreign teachers in connection with segmented labor market theory, highlighting job stability and employment contracts, colorism in wage disparities, excessive workload and demanding schedules, and underappreciation of qualifications. Wage disparities rooted in nationality and appearance, particularly 'white complexion,' can create further divisions within the labor force, with White

Westerners frequently earning considerably more than their non-Western peers do, even when qualifications are comparable. Challenging working conditions, characterized by extended hours, heavy workloads, and profit-driven practices, lead to burnout and discontent, further entrenching their status in a marginalized labor segment.

Foreign teachers teaching in international schools often face job instability characterized by elevated turnover rates and difficult working conditions that are frequently linked to leadership challenges (Golis, 2025; Golis & Jones, 2024). The employment contracts of most foreign teachers are influenced by market dynamics, where profit motives frequently overshadow the quality of education, leading to agreements that often do not meet teachers' expectations (Golis, 2024; Golis & Jones, 2024). While not directly termed colorism, there are signs of a structured system in which foreign teachers, particularly from non-Anglophone nations, might encounter inequalities in positions and pay, indicating potential biases in salary allocation (Golis & Jones, 2024). Furthermore, numerous expatriate educators perceive that their credentials are not fully appreciated because recruitment methods can occasionally prioritize looks over actual qualifications. This superficial approach frequently constrains their impact within the educational environment and perpetuates their exclusion from professional positions (Golis & Jones, 2024; Poole, 2024).

Implications for Policy and Practice

On the basis of this study, the following recommendations are made for policy and practice toward improvement.

1. In this study, the majority of participants were employed in agency or third-party employment, making it easy for foreign teachers to be exploited, such as through salary reduction and sudden contract termination. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and other relevant labor departments establish a standardized regulatory system for foreign teachers to ensure their contract duration, role, salary, and quality through strict qualification verification.
2. In connection with the discrimination of salary disparities due to color and race, it is recommended to enforce a policy to guide schools and recruitment agencies in the development of anti-discrimination guidelines on employment-making qualification-based employment rather than colorism.
3. Although China has no specific formalize policies for the Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) program for international students as it does in Canada, prioritizing international students who graduated in China for job employment with pathways for better job incentives is recommended.
4. Language barriers continue to be the greatest challenge among foreign teachers, despite their education in China. It is recommended that Chinese universities or schools employ a continuous learning space to learn the Chinese language and cultural understanding.

5. The transition from international to foreign teachers seemed overwhelming among the participants. It is recommended that teachers receive counseling support from their employers and offer professional development or introductory seminars to assist them in their transition.

Conclusion

This study explored international students' transition from being international students to being foreign teachers. The key findings of this study revealed that their perceptions of staying and working in China are driven by economic opportunities. In addition, the findings of this study demonstrate a link between colorism, race, and neoliberalism. Colorism shapes foreign teachers' experiences and makes them "waiguoren" as a form of othering and discrimination in the workplace. This study cannot be generalized to the entire context of foreign teachers because of the sample size and characteristics of the participants. However, despite this constraint, it reveals that global South foreign teachers are in the second segment of the hierarchy. Future researchers might focus on examining these nuances in the context of "waiguoren" in relation to labor market theory. Despite the study revealing the results of the neoliberal aspect of kindergarten employment, it is important to further explore the role of agency-based employment as a space for exploitation. Nevertheless, this study offers recommendations for policy and practice to improve kindergarten foreign teacher employment in China toward China's kindergarten modernization in 2035.

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