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Choosing China: Unpacking the Motivations of International Students through a Case Study in Shanghai

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ABSTRACT: *The internationalization of higher education continues to accelerate with globalization, making China one of the top host nations for international students. This qualitative case study took place at a university in Shanghai, with 76 international students from 20 countries enrolled in the same English-taught engineering program. This research explored the motivations of international undergraduate students pursuing degree programs and their overall experience in China. The research reveals four main factors that shape students' decision-making: academic reputation, social network influence, affordability, and safety. Additionally, many students identified academic difficulties even as they acknowledged the benefits of studying in China. This study recommends that Chinese universities improve their recruitment tactics, including expanding communication channels, increasing school visits, and strengthening alumni networks to attract more qualified and well-suited students and enhance their reputation.*

Keywords: case study, international student in China, recruitment strategies, student motivation

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INTRODUCTION

In today's global knowledge economy, competition increasingly depends on talent acquisition. As the world's largest developing economy and an influential global actor in global affairs, China is important for considering key aspects of its current system and enhancing services for international students (Gao & De Wit, 2017). During the September 2024 Chinese National Education Conference, China must further advance the internationalization of its education sector. This requires a dual strategy: actively "bring in" international resources and expertise while "going global" to promote China's education achievements and practices worldwide (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Institute of International Education (IIE), the number of international students studying abroad has steadily increased in recent years (OECD, 2025; IIE, 2024). China, as a rising global education power, has seen its international student population grow (Wen & Hu, 2019). The country's efforts to enhance the quality of higher education institutions, coupled with its rich cultural heritage and economic opportunities, made it an attractive destination for students worldwide (An & Duan, 2020). While a growing body of literature explores the motivations of international students in China, much of this research has focused on areas such as cultural exchange, language acquisition, and traditional medicine (Lyu, et al., 2022; Ma, 2017). As China continues to enhance the quality and rigor of its higher education system, further investigation is needed to understand the motivations, perceptions, and experiences of international students pursuing nontraditional disciplines. Additionally, more research is needed to examine how current recruitment initiatives (Wen et al., 2018) influence students' motivation and program choices.

This study took place at S University, a large comprehensive university located in Shanghai, China, one of the most popular destinations for international students. S University is ranked among China's top-tier institutions, and it is also within the global top 50, with a strong reputation for engineering innovation. The university offers 77 undergraduate majors across 42 colleges, covering a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. International students can choose instruction languages in Mandarin, English, or French. All participants in this study were enrolled in College X, a fully English language teaching engineering program, a field that remains among the most sought-after choices for international students in China (Li, 2018).

At the time of data collection, the college had 107 degree-seeking undergraduates from 26 countries. Given the college's scale, diversity, and multidisciplinary focus, this case provides a representative example of the demographic profile under study and offers a strong foundation for exploring the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the key motivations influencing undergraduate international students' decision to pursue their degrees in China, as reflected in the case of S University?
- RQ2: How do undergraduate international students at S University perceive the benefits and challenges of studying in China?
- RQ3: How do institutional recruitment strategies shape undergraduate international students' decision-making process to study in China?

This study aims to offer valuable insights for educational institutions, policy makers, and enrollment management stakeholders involved in the international education sector to enhance the attractiveness and quality of international study experience in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the global process of internationalization, universities worldwide are competing to recruit a diverse body of international students for both commercial purposes and knowledge acquisition (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Traditionally, China has been perceived as a major sending country for international students; however, its impact should not be overlooked (Wen & Hu, 2019). To understand this population, recent studies were conducted to explain why international students choose to study in China. The quality and reputation of China's higher education are major pulling factors for international students; furthermore, the booming economy in the country made it an appealing regional hub for students seeking more career opportunities (Wen & Hu, 2019). The number of international students almost doubled from 2010 to 2018, reaching 492,185 (Guiaké et al., 2021). This rapid growth reflects China's strategic investments in its higher education system, including policies, strategies, and measures to attract international students (Ewentu, 2017). Apart from macrolevel national efforts,

institutions have established specific strategies and goals to attract more international students. Factors documented to affect institutional attractiveness range from facility access to environmental conditions and after-graduation opportunities (Wen & Hu, 2019; Ma, 2017; Lu et al., 2019; Ding, 2016).

A systematic review of empirical studies reveals that China's strong economy combined with developed higher education institutions are two primary rationales for international students to choose China as their destination country; however, notably, the literature also indicates that other rationales are not negligible when international students choose China. They include "an affordable cost of study and living, the Chinese language, Chinese good bilateral cooperation, and scholarships" (Guiaké et al., 2021, p. 211). Cost is a primary factor that international students consider when they choose where to pursue their education (Lu et al., 2019). According to the data from the Ministry of Education, 87.19% of international students in China were self-funded. Chinese institutions' affordable costs make them a preferred option (Ahmad & Shah, 2018; Lu et al., 2019). On the financial side, scholarships also play an important role in attracting international students. Not only students from less developed countries but also those from developed countries indicate that scholarships play a critical role in their decision-making process when they choose to study in China (English et al., 2016). A variety of scholarships that the Chinese government provides at the national, provincial, and institutional levels form a good strategy to attract international students (Guiaké et al., 2021).

Research has shown that international students choose to study in China to improve their Chinese proficiency because this will likely increase their likelihood of employment in positions that require doing business with China. As China maintains its attraction as a business partner on the global stage, this language benefit will continue to help the country attract more international students (Ding, 2016). China's strategic partnerships with foreign countries also involve many international students. According to Ma (2017), many international students study in China because of the agreement between their home country and China rather than the reputation of their chosen institution. For example, the Belt Road initiative, which involves the construction of constructive relationships with many foreign countries that are sources for higher education cooperation and healthy international relations, will attract more international students to China (Wen et al., 2018; Lu & Tian, 2018). China's flexibility in visa and program entry, citizens' attitudes and hospitality, and receptiveness and career development are new pull factors among African and Asian international students (Gbollie & Gong, 2020). In addition, international students are attracted by Chinese culture and its inclusiveness, which has become a contributing factor that motivates students to pursue higher education in China (Lyu, et al., 2022).

Although international students are finding China as an increasingly attractive study abroad destination, challenges remain, including language barriers, unsatisfactory learning experiences, and insufficient institutional support services. According to Altbach and Knight (2007), building English-medium programs is a common initiative that has been taken to attract international students. The creation of English-taught programs, especially in fields such as

engineering, is intended to help students whose first language is not Chinese overcome the language barrier. However, the implementation is not always successful. To highlight specific issues of English-medium instruction (EMI), Shao and Rose (2024) interviewed teachers and administrators at a highly ranked university in China. The findings revealed insufficient English competence, insufficient time allocated to preparing for teaching, and a lack of cooperation between English and subject teachers. Moreover, teacher-fronted learning activities focusing on teacher-lecturing and student-listening constitute 95% of the EMI at another top Chinese university (Tong & Tang, 2017), which is consistent with the findings of Jiang and Zhang (2019), who confirm the dominance of teacher-fronted teaching in EMI classrooms. This teaching style leads to low output from second-language learners and insufficient classroom engagement (Tong & Tang, 2017).

Unsatisfactory learning experiences are another factor that pushes students away from choosing China. Tian et al. (2022) explore undergraduate international students' perceived learning experiences. The results from their survey administered to 1,428 international students studying at 34 universities in China revealed that the perceived classroom learning environment was rated as moderate to low, the academic engagement level was low, and both had significant negative effects on their academic development. Zou and Fu (2025) explore academic acculturation among international students and report that STEM and non-STEM students face different challenges. Navigating structured pathways under research pressure is necessary for STEM students, whereas language barriers and difficulties with career alignment are faced by non-STEM students. This research emphasizes the importance of building discipline-specific support systems for international students, including peer networks, career resources, and customized guidance, to provide valuable knowledge that can aid in facilitating international students' academic and professional transitions.

Institutional support is critical in helping students navigate these challenges and maximize the value of their educational experience. The literature on student experience in China suggests that the country needs to pay attention to the considerably low level of international students' satisfaction with their study and living experiences and work on improving support services in its higher education institutions (Ding, 2016). Research has suggested that individuals with strong self-beliefs are more likely to be preserved in challenging situations, and for international students, social self-efficacy "serves as a crucial psychological resource for navigating unfamiliar cultural and social environments" (Nguyen & McGregor, 2025, p. 189). Nguyen and McGregor's (2025) study underscores the importance of intervention to promote social self-efficacy among international students, which can support the growing trend of studying in China, as this method will better assist international students in adapting socially.

Recruitment strategies play a significant role in attracting international students to China. Focusing on the implications for university recruitment and marketing, Yin et al. (2025) investigate the factors in international students' decision-making processes when China is chosen as their study destination. University websites and social media were found to have greater effects than

traditional agents or print materials across different information channels did. In addition, parental expectations and support play a significant role in influencing students' decisions in collectivist cultures. To remain competitive in the international education market, Chinese universities should strengthen their digital presence, involve families in recruitment and outreach efforts, and leverage student peer networks (Yin et al., 2025).

At the undergraduate level, Li et al. (2022) analyze international student recruitment strategies from 41 “double first-class” universities in China and echo findings from previous research that political and social-cultural rationales outweigh economic and academic rationales for Chinese universities when recruitment policies are determined (Wen et al., 2018; Tian & Lowe, 2018). Compared with undergraduate international students, postgraduate students place greater emphasis on China's economic development and the strength of its higher education system. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers in higher education to craft recruitment strategies targeting different populations and guide them to effectively attract and support international students within an increasingly dynamic global landscape (Li et al., 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Originally, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) applied the “push-pull” model to examine how international students choose their study destinations. Students' decisions to study abroad are multifaceted and shaped by both “push” factors in their home countries and “pull” factors associated with destination countries. Push factors often include limited academic opportunities, political instability, or economic hardship, which motivate students to seek education overseas (Lee & Rice, 2007). Pull factors encompass quality of education, safety, cultural attractions, and career prospects (Bodycott, 2009). Their findings emphasize that international education choices are multistage processes: students first decide to study abroad, then select a country, and, finally, an institution. It contributes to the literature by integrating both macrolevel (e.g., national education policies) and microlevel (e.g., family influence, safety concerns) considerations.

Dai et al. (2023) explore the motivations behind international doctoral students choosing China as a study destination, further employing an expanded push–pull model that incorporates macro, meso-, and microlevel factors. On the basis of qualitative data from 55 international students at three major Chinese universities, this study reveals that economic benefits, including scholarships and a lower cost of living, favorable visa policies, and perceptions of personal safety, are prominent nation-level pull factors. At the institutional level, China's rising academic reputation and the impact of academic returnees with overseas training enhance the appeal of its universities. At the individual level, students' motivations range from diasporic identity, cultural curiosity and recommendations from family and friends.

Both of these studies underscore the limitations of the original push–pull framework. Traditionally, many studies on motivation have applied push-pull from a macro perspective, focusing on external factors, including social, political,

and economic factors (Altbach, 2003; Knight, 2004). The microlevel push–pull factors that shape students’ subjective decision-making remain underexamined (Dai et al. 2023). According to Teichler (2004), personal characteristics, including gender, age, and academic ability, are essential when international student mobility is analyzed. Both external and internal factors should be examined to deepen the understanding of international students’ decision-making processes (Findlay et al., 2012). Furthermore, origin countries may have “pull” factors that attract students, whereas destination countries may simultaneously present “push” factors that deter international students (Findlay et al., 2012). International students’ decisions to study abroad are shaped by macro, meso-, and microlevel factors from both their origin and destination countries (Dai et al., 2023). By extending the traditional binary push–pull framework into a more dynamic, multilevel model that better captures the complexity of international student decision-making, Dai et al. (2023) advance the current literature and position China as an emerging educational hub for international students. Informed by this model, this study focuses on macro, meso-, and microlevel aspects from an institutional angle in relation to recruitment strategies to understand international student motivations and needs for student affairs services.

In summary, the current literature identifies a complex interplay of academic, sociocultural, and practical factors that influence international students’ motivation and decision-making when they choose to study abroad destinations. The present study contributes by focusing specifically on one case of international undergraduate engineering students in China, shedding light on their unique challenges and motivational dynamics. Combining previously developed push–pull models (Altbach, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Dai et al., 2023), researchers intend to examine international student mobility, with a focus on China as an emerging top study destination on the global stage.

METHOD

This case study explores why international students choose Shanghai, China, as a destination and their current experience enrolling at College X within S University. College X offers three English-taught undergraduate majors: Mechanical Engineering (ME), Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE), and Materials Science and Engineering (MES). First-year students do not need to declare a major until the end of the first summer semester. There are no requirements for declaring a major, and students can choose any major on the basis of their own interests. A total of 76 international students from 20 countries participated in this study (Table 1). Guided by the “push-pull” framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), a comprehensive analysis of interviews with international students at College X was conducted from November to December 2024. An initial participation survey was distributed to the entire international student group at College X through WeChat, a popular messaging app in China. Students from the same country coordinated a time when more than half of the students from that country could attend. Milk tea or lunch was provided for the students who participated in the interviews. Student participation was entirely voluntary. Given

the large number of participants, a focus group interview was employed in the study. For nationalities with two or more student participants, group interviews were conducted. Each focus group included students from the same country to encourage shared discussion around cultural and academic adjustment, thereby facilitating culturally specific dialogs. These focus groups enabled the researcher to observe collective narratives and group dynamics that may shape students' study-abroad experiences. For countries with only one student participant, a one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted. These allowed for deeper engagement with personal perspectives that might not emerge in a group setting and provided a space for more nuanced or sensitive insights.

Both formats followed a semi-structured interview guide that included open-ended questions related to students' academic adjustment, cultural experiences, institutional support, and future aspirations. The interview guide was informed by the relevant literature and the "push-pull" framework. All the interviews were conducted in English by the first author, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for the identification of recurring themes across both individual and group responses. The first and third authors inductively coded the transcripts and then organized them into broader thematic categories that reflected both individual narratives and shared group patterns.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics Characteristics

Country	Gender	Sojourn Stay	Major
Philippines	Male	Fifth Year	ME
Philippines	Female	Third Year	ECE
Azerbaijan	Male	Second Year	Undeclared
Azerbaijan	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Azerbaijan	Male	First Year	Undeclared
India	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
India	Male	First Year	Undeclared
United States	Female	Fourth Year	ECE
United States	Female	Fourth Year	ECE
United States	Male	Fourth Year	MSE
United States	Female	Third Year	ECE
United States	Male	First Year	Undeclared
United States	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Canada	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Russia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Bangladesh	Male	Fourth Year	ME
United Arab Emirates	Male	Second Year	ECE
Nepal	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Vietnam	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Tanzania	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Japan	Female	Fourth Year	ECE

Malaysia	Female	Fourth Year	ECE
Malaysia	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
Malaysia	Male	Third Year	ECE
Malaysia	Male	Third Year	ECE
Malaysia	Female	Second Year	ECE
Malaysia	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Male	Fourth Year	ME
Indonesia	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
Indonesia	Male	Third Year	ECE
Indonesia	Male	Second Year	ECE
Indonesia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Indonesia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
South Korea	Male	Seventh Year	ECE
South Korea	Male	Seventh Year	ECE
South Korea	Male	Sixth Year	ECE
South Korea	Male	Sixth Year	ECE
South Korea	Male	Sixth Year	ME
South Korea	Male	Sixth Year	ME
South Korea	Male	Fifth year	ECE
South Korea	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
Thailand	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
Thailand	Male	Fourth Year	ECE
Thailand	Male	Third Year	ECE
Thailand	Male	Third Year	ME
Thailand	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Thailand	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	Third Year	ECE
Armenia	Male	Third Year	ME
Armenia	Female	Second Year	ECE
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Armenia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Kazakhstan	Male	Fourth Year	ECE

Kazakhstan	Male	Second Year	ECE
Kazakhstan	Female	Second Year	ECE
Kazakhstan	Male	Second Year	ECE
Kazakhstan	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Kazakhstan	Female	First Year	Undeclared
Mongolia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Mongolia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Mongolia	Male	First Year	Undeclared
Singapore	Male	Fourth year	ME

FINDINGS

Motivation to Study in China

There are four main factors that “Pulled” international students to choose to study at College X at S University in Shanghai, China. They are academic reputation, social network influence, affordability, and safety.

Academic reputation emerged as a key factor attracting international students to Chinese universities. A significant number of students from diverse geographical regions, including the Philippines, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam and India, emphasized the university's high global ranking and the quality of education at College X as primary factors influencing their decisions to study there. As the group from Azerbaijan cohesively stated,

S University is high in the ranks of Asian schools. It has a good quality of education, and we have the opportunity to explore Asia. The university has a direct connection to Asia for future jobs and careers; we also have a chance to explore the research further with others nearby.

More than 90% of participants affirmed that they would reapply to S University, citing its holistic benefits, including networking opportunities, internships, and exposure to a diverse academic community. A couple of students from Thailand, acknowledged S University 's value in terms of academic quality and cultural experience, “It’s easy to obtain research opportunities; the facilities are good... You can obtain opportunities to have access to world-newd companies, and there are many alumni who are famous business people...There are lots of resources for internships.”

Social network influence has emerged as a second critical driver in shaping international students’ decisions to study in China. During the interviews, students from countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, India, South Korea, the United States and Canada shared that they had come to know about S University through recommendations from family members or friends who were previously or currently enrolled there. Family influence is a significant factor influencing students’ choice of S University. Some students stated that they had Chinese heritage, expressed a strong interest in Chinese culture, and recalled being introduced to it during their childhood. Additionally, they mentioned having

relatives in Shanghai or other major cities throughout China. Students from Japan, the United States, Canada, and the UAE indicated that they had family members in China, and this became a factor in their choice of S University. The Japanese student stated, "I am half Chinese, my mother is Chinese, and my dad is Japanese. Compared to going to the West, it is more inclined for me to choose China. I can have more opportunity and spend more time learning about Chinese culture." An American student who had family members in Shanghai stated, "My parents are Chinese and from Shanghai, and I was born and raised in the United States, but I visited China very often. I can spend time with grandparents here and can go home very often."

Several Armenian students actively promoted S University, resulting in an uptick in applications during the following admission year. An Armenian student mentioned that the presence of many peers at S University influenced his decision to apply: "I have lots of friends here. Many students from my school are also here." A Kazakh student similarly remarked, "Going to China for studies is quite popular; many students from my school have chosen to go there." Students from the United States explained his discovery of the university: "I came across this university when browsing an app, and my friends told me it is a truly good school."

Affordability stands out as a third defining feature among international students studying in China. In the interviews, students highlighted that compared with Western educational institutions, the relatively lower tuition at S University significantly bolstered its attractiveness, particularly among students from developing countries. Students from Azerbaijani, Bangladesh, Filipino, and Thailand stated that lower tuition is more feasible. One Thai student stated, "tuition and the facilities are cheaper compared with the US." Even students from more developed countries, including Singapore, emphasized the importance of affordability and compared tuition with those in Australia and the United States. The majority of students from the United States indicated that living and studying at S University is relatively affordable compared to pursuing education in their home country. For students, economic considerations play a vital role in their decision to study abroad, and studying at S University is undoubtedly a more budget-friendly choice.

Safety forms a fourth cornerstone for international students in China's appeal as a study destination. In the interviews, students from the United States and Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines and Thailand, pointed to Shanghai's safety, dynamic urban lifestyle, and easy access to global opportunities as other important factors influencing their choice of S University. A student from the Philippines elaborated, "The U.S. does not feel safe, and my parents are very worried about my well-being. They prefer alternative options, like China, for my studies." Echoing this sentiment, the Azerbaijani student commented, "China is safe, and Shanghai, in particular, is a vast yet secure city." A student from the United States also underscores safety as a crucial consideration in their decision to apply to S University,

I wanted to come to Shanghai because safety is paramount. I visited Shanghai many times, and I truly like the city. In addition, it is a very safe city where I

can freely walk around, even if I'm studying late into the night. I can't do it when I am back home.

Students also emphasized the impact of a welcoming atmosphere on their decision-making process. An Armenian student remarked, "This place offers a safe environment and fosters a friendly international community." A Bangladeshi student added, "The people here are incredibly friendly, and it's very important to me that the living costs are reasonable, and everyone is busy yet approachable. In terms of safety and friendliness, it is the best city."

In addition to the factors mentioned above, language accessibility, convenient lifestyles, and cross-cultural experience are appealing to international students when they consider studying at S University. The interviews revealed that College X successfully attracted applicants by offering English-taught programs, which significantly increased students' willingness to apply. International students, particularly those from English-speaking countries, highly valued this feature, as it eased their academic experience. As one Malaysian student shared,

I had already planned to study in China, but I don't think I can study in a Chinese-taught program because I am from an international school with international curricula. Therefore, choosing S University and College X was easy, not only because it was highly ranked but also because it offered programs in English.

In the interviews, the students highlighted the convenience of daily life as another appealing aspect of choosing S University. An Azerbaijan student shared,

Accessing online shopping platforms such as 'Taobao' and 'JD' is effortless, with fast, efficient, and convenient door-to-door delivery services offering a wide range of products at low prices. Ordering food delivery is also straightforward and affordable, and the widespread use of Alipay or WeChat Pay makes transactions incredibly convenient everywhere. There's no need to carry a lot of cash.

The opportunity to immerse themselves in Chinese culture and engage in cross-cultural learning was also a major attraction for students. A Russian student commented, Shanghai is beautiful, the people at the school are very friendly, and there are some differences between academic learning here and the Russian teaching system. I also want to better understand Chinese culture as a reason why I want to come to China.

Perceived Challenges

Despite all the positive experiences, the students mentioned that they faced two major challenges: academic pressure and language barriers outside of the classroom. Students frequently mentioned the rigorous curriculum at their programs, which often clashed with their precollege preparation. For example, Azerbaijani students struggled with "Gao Kao-style" coursework, while Thai students criticized fast-paced lectures: "I feel the workload here is very high; I

need to do lectures and homework, and I do not have enough sleep. It's hard to find balance between study, sleep and social communication here". In addition, many echoes this sentiment. A Mongolian student indicated that "I expect it to be hard but did not expect it to be that hard. The educational system is very different from my high school, so it takes a lot of time to adapt."

To help students cope with academic requirements, College X offers support that has already been recognized by many students. A student from Kazakhstan mentioned, "It's challenging to study. However, have helpful TAs and teachers to seek help." An Indian student suggested that,

We will advise future students and peers to prepare academically, for example, to strengthen math and physical skills before coming and to become mentally prepared for the competitive environment at College X. There is a need for proactive engagement with professors and the utilization of teaching assistants' support to overcome academic hurdles.

The Chinese language was also perceived as a challenge. Although formal instruction was provided in English, students lived on the main Chinese campus, where they experienced difficulties communicating with local peers and faculty. Language barriers sometimes led to feelings of isolation and less social integration, although programs such as the "buddy system" were praised for easing transitions and promoting social integration. Moreover, students from Kazakhstan and Mongolia suggested offering tiered Chinese courses to accommodate different proficiency levels, thereby improving language support for international students. Azerbaijani and Korean students proposed events to bridge gaps between international and Chinese students, promoting cultural understanding and social integration. Many students from various countries explained that "Sometimes only international students are in a specific class, and that feels lonely. It's hard to make friends with Chinese students; group members sometimes don't speak English."

Importance of Recruitment Strategies

During the interviews, the students offered valuable insights into how recruitment practices could be strengthened to better attract and support future international applicants. Their recommendations highlighted the importance of adopting more effective and student-centered recruitment strategies, including expanding communication channels, increasing school visits and outreach activities, strengthening the alumni network, improving the clarity of website information, and providing more transparent scholarship criteria and application guidelines.

Expanding clear communication channels with the university is recommended mostly within student groups. Students want to be well prepared before they arrive, but it is not easy to find all the instructions for them. Freshmen from Malaysia and the Philippines noted disorganized onboarding processes, including unclear timeline instructions for health checks and residency permits. These logistical issues added to the initial stress of adjusting to a new environment. Students advocated for centralized onboarding guides and better communication

channels (e.g., email updates) to streamline the initial adjustment process for new students. A student from Malaysia stated,

There is an information gap among international students regarding various activities. It was quite challenging at the beginning. As freshmen, it was difficult for us to obtain information, and we had to visit various offices to inquire. Later, as we got to know more people, that was no longer necessary.

Students also expect College X to increase the frequency of school visits, as they desire face-to-face communication and hope to obtain more direct enrollment information from the university. Students from India, Thailand, and Kazakhstan urged S University to partner with local high schools, especially international schools offering A-levels and IB, and attend university fairs to increase visibility and attract potential applicants. A student from Thailand mentioned,

Many universities visited our school. I went to many presentations to ask questions. However, S University was not there. I think students would be interested in knowing this program. In addition, you should go to visit our school, and our school needs to let students know who you are.

The alumni network is another communication channel that students consider when they apply to S University. Alumni testimonials from countries such as India, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan were deemed critical for showcasing the real-life experiences of international students at College X. Thus, College X should leverage alumni networks more effectively. Students from Indonesia expressed an interest in knowing more alumni from the home country and staying in touch with them.

Students from Thai and Kazakhstani suggest that College X update its website and utilize social media platforms, including Instagram, to showcase student life and recruitment campaigns, thereby reaching wider potential candidates. Consequently, College X should improve its digital marketing efforts. A student from Thailand explained,

I did not find too many updates via Instagram about College X. Young people all loved to use Instagram to look for information. I found a student via Instagram of College X and added him to ask questions about here. I saw many universities also do advertisements on Instagram. I think you guys should be some campaigns on Instagram to attract more students.

It is also important that, as addressed by students from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, having early and clear scholarship criteria and receiving early application guidance are good tools for attracting students. According to the students, providing detailed information with transparency about scholarship opportunities and streamlining the application process will attract more international students, particularly those from developing countries. A student from Bangladesh shared, “I truly need scholarship to study here. If there are no scholarships from here, I can’t afford to come. That’s also why I chose to accept admission.”

While this research is a case study of one institution, the size and national diversity of its participant pool suggest that many of the identified experiences resonate with the broader international student community in China. The findings, therefore, reveal a valuable microlevel perspective on student decision-making and lived experience, complementing the more common institutional macroanalyses.

Academic reputation remains the paramount “pull” factor attracting students to S University and, by extension, to China as an educational destination. This is powerfully reinforced by the overwhelming degree of satisfaction reported, with approximately 90% of participants expressing no regret over their enrollment. Secondary factors, including social networks, affordability, and safety, further solidify the choice once academic quality is assured.

However, the student narratives highlight critical areas for enhancement: streamlining onboarding instructions, strengthening Chinese language support, and refining recruitment strategies. Addressing these is not merely operational but strategic. Doing so directly improves social integration, mitigates academic and cultural stress, and crucially translates positive individual experiences into a stronger institutional and national reputation.

Ultimately, for China to solidify and grow its standing in global student recruitment, future efforts must extend beyond promoting academic prestige to proactively improving the granular, personal journeys of international students. This study emphasizes that sustained success is built at the intersection of institutional reputation and individual student satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Grounded in the “push-pull” framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the findings of this study illuminate the factors influencing international students' decisions. The role of S University's global ranking and educational quality as pull factors underscores the significance of institutional reputation in international recruitment, which is consistent with prior studies (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Similarly, personal referrals were another key pull factor identified by students, highlighting the enduring influence of word-of-mouth networks in shaping the perceptions of S University's community and academic rigor. This aligns with research emphasizing the role of social capital in international student decision-making (Dai et al. 2023). Cost-related factors further emerged as decisive pull factors, particularly for students from developing countries. With respect to Western institutions, the affordability of tuition and living expenses positions S University as a pragmatic choice for students seeking high-quality education without excessive financial burden. These findings resonate with those of studies on economic conditions (Gbollie & Gong, 2020) among international students and suggest that S University's competitive pricing strategy enhances its global accessibility. The appeal of S University's multicultural environment, including English-taught programs and opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, was another critical pull factor.

As noted above, international students are increasingly likely to apply to

universities in China, reflecting greater global trends in student mobility. Understanding their motivations is therefore essential for increasing the number of international students enrolled in Chinese universities. The results suggest three key strategies. First, universities and their programs should provide comprehensive support to facilitate international students' smooth transition. Universities should outline the steps for visa application and offer guidance on addressing other related issues concerning registration and orientation. In addition, offering more language and classroom readiness programs, as well as initiatives that support acculturation, will further assist students in becoming better prepared for their academic integration. Moreover, universities can benefit from creating more school visits and outreach activities, including high school visits and online events. These initiatives can help establish early connections with potential students and familiarize them with the campus environment. Strengthening the alumni network is also highly important. Alumni can serve as mentors for new students, share valuable career insights, and foster a strong sense of community. By taking these measures, universities in China can establish efficient communication channels that enable students to be well informed and prepared and enhance their academic and social integration. Universities need to create open and effective communication channels to better support students in their new higher education journeys. Furthermore, efforts should be put into marketing, outreach, recruitment, and social media campaigns. This enables students to access as much information as they would like to know about the academic, social, and cultural context of the university in terms of daily campus life. Finally, Chinese universities should provide information with transparency regarding scholarships, application expectations, and admission criteria while developing more targeted international recruitment markets. While implementing these practices, institutional collaboration between student affairs offices should be encouraged, which will allow prospective students to receive all-rounded perspectives and institution-specific information (Qin & McNaughtan, 2023).

Given that previous frameworks have focused primarily on push factors from the home country and pull factors from the host country, this study aims to explore push and pull factors within the same context as the host country for international students seeking an undergraduate degree in China.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences, perceptions, and expectations of international students at S University and its recruitment and retention strategies. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the suggested improvements, S University can further enhance its appeal as a leading institution for international education, attracting more talented students from around the world and fostering a more inclusive and vibrant academic community. Strategic recruitment efforts leveraging digital platforms and alumni networks could enhance S University's visibility in different regions. Future research could explore longitudinal trends in student experiences or compare S University's strategies with those of peer institutions in China and globally. Ultimately, S

University's ability to adapt to the evolving needs of international students will determine its success in sustaining its position as a leading destination for global talent.

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

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This article utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools during the preparation process. AI tools were used primarily for polishing language and verifying grammar and spelling accuracy. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards.

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