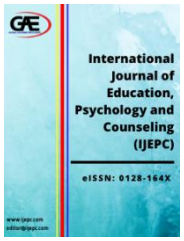
International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997




**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELLING (IJEPC)**
https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc

# MOTIVATION FACTORS FOR PURSUING A PHD IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Lin Yan[1], Nazatul Syima Mohd Nasir[2*]

[1]Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia
e21e017f@siswa.umk.edu.my https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6636-9090

[2]Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia
syima.mn@umk.edu.my https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6238-022X

*Corresponding Author

**Article Info:**

**Article history:**
Received date: 27.01.2026
Revised date: 25.02.2026
Accepted date: 09.03.2026
Published date: 17.03.2026

**To cite this document:**

Lin, Y., & Nasir, N. S. M. (2026). Motivation Factors for Pursuing a PhD in Malaysia: A Case Study of Chinese International Doctoral Students. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling, 11*(62), 979-997.

**Abstract:**

In light of the growing higher education across borders as a trend, the student mobility across borders internationally have received much attention. But most of the literature has concentrated on undergraduate and masters students in well-established Anglophone destinations and the doctoral level mobility to new Global South destinations is yet to be explored. To fill this gap, the research explores the incentives behind Chinese students studying doctoral programs in Malaysia via a qualitative case study that was undertaken in a public university in Malaysia. The semi-structured interview with six Chinese doctoral students was used to produce data that were analyzed via thematic analysis. According to the findings, the decision making of participants was impacted on the basis of staged decision making. In the structural context, fierce competition to be admitted into the doctoral program in China and pressures associated with the advancement of careers were the most significant push factors, whereas Malaysia had a relatively easy admissions process, relative geographical proximity, affordability as well as a flexible doctoral structure which served as major pull factors. On an individual level, those external circumstances were filtered through the lens of expectancy-value appraisals such as the perception of possible success, professional and academic value, and the expected cost of study abroad in terms of money, time and emotions. The results also indicate a repetitive conflict of prestige and accessibility whereby Malaysia has frequently been chosen as a viable and desirable middle-ground destination. Combining the Push-Pull theory and the Expectancy-Value theory, the paper provides an explanation in the form of a process of how doctoral destinations are

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IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997

selected based on it and adds to the scholarly literature on the subject of South-South movement of students, doctoral education across the borders, and making decisions about the destination.

**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.1162057

**Keywords:**

Chinese Doctoral Students; Doctoral Destination Choice; International Student Mobility; Malaysia; South–South Mobility

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## Introduction

In the face of a more and more internationalised higher-education scene, cross-border student mobility remains an ongoing trend. The statistics by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics also demonstrate that over 6.3 million students enrolled in higher education studies abroad in 2021 (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2022). In these movements, China is one of the largest sender countries and the size and complexity of its outbound student population have been instrumental in influencing the rest of the world in higher education (Li and Qi, 2019).

There has been a significant amount of literature analyzing international student mobility and destination choice, but it has also focused on traditional, English-speaking destinations and the Global North countries (F. Li et al., 2021; Nicholls, 2018; Phan, 2022a; Yang et al., 2017). Therefore, new destinations in the Global South have been accorded relatively less systematic coverage, even though they are becoming visible in the international education markets (Xu et al., 2024). Malaysia is especially important in this regard: the country has been promoted as an educational center of Southeast Asia with an increasingly large international student population (Amzat et al., 2023; Wong and Wen, 2013). Information provided by the higher education department of Malaysia indicates that Malaysia hosted 139,000 foreign students in 2022 of which 27.96% were students of mainland China (Xu et al., 2024). The growth highlights the significance of Malaysia as an emergent node of South-South mobility but research regarding the Chinese students studying in Malaysia, particularly those at the doctoral level, is also still small-scale (Xu et al., 2024).

The lack of doctoral-oriented studies may be considered a factor as doctoral education implies different decision logics, e.g., research apprenticeship, supervisory match, publication expectations, and completion risk that cannot be easily deduced to the tendencies found among

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EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997
under-graduate or non-teaching post-graduate students. Doctoral enrollments by international students have grown internationally (Nerad and Evans, 2014) albeit previous studies have generally focused on in-programme experiences such as doctoral attrition (Golde, 2000), supervisor-student interactions (Magyar and Robinson-Pant, 2011), and enculturation into the discipline and professionalization (Cho, 2009), not the reasons behind and evaluative systems by which doctoral applicants elect to study overseas and opt to go to specific locations (Phan, 2022b). It is especially the case when it comes to those destinations outside of the Western world, such as Malaysia, where the question of doctoral decision-making is still largely unexplored.

To fill these gaps, the paper explores the reasons behind Chinese international doctoral students in Malaysia. The research is based empirically on semi-structured interviews with six Chinese doctoral students attending a Malaysian government university. It theoretically proposes an integrative conceptual model that combines structural opportunity environments depicted by Push Pull Theory (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) with individual motivational appraisals outlined by Expectancy Value Theory (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002) and thus doctoral destination choice can be viewed as a sequence of decisions. The results can be used in practice to provide information on institution recruitment and support of international doctoral students and add to discourse of policies on movement of doctoral students between the south (Xu et al. 2024).

## Literature Review

### *Motivations for Studying Abroad*

Motivation is defined as “the reason behind behaviour” (Guay et al., 2010) and serves as the The concept of motivation can be characterized as the cause of behavior (Guay et al., 2010), which is why it is considered as the motivating factor which drives people to behave in specific ways (Lai, 2011). When applied to the study abroad experience, it is used to refer to the determinants leading to choosing to study abroad. It remains an intricate psychological process informed by personal needs, aspirations, objectives but also guided by macro-level processes in terms of political, economic, cultural, educational and policy-related issues (Maringe and Carter, 2007).

There has been an abundance of research on the motivation behind studying abroad through the lens of the push-pull framework (Chen, 2017; Lee, 2017; Li & Bray, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), which assumes that study-abroad choices are determined by the joint influence exerted by push and pull determinants in the home and host countries. One of the most representative works in this area is the work by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), who stated that the procedure of making a decision regarding the study abroad involves three steps: opting to pursue education overseas, choosing the destination country, and picking an educational institution. These were found to be the six major push-pull factors impacting the decision-making process of students on studying abroad: knowledge and awareness about the host country, advice given by other people, cost consideration, environment, social connections and geographic distance. Wilkins et al. (2012) also summarized existing literature and identified the most frequently quoted push drivers of study abroad, which are as follows: lack of opportunities/capacity in home countries, poor education quality, the tendency of employers towards qualifications obtained abroad, presence of certain disciplines, and domestic economic problems or politics. The key pull factors include the quality of education and reputation of the

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EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997
destination country/organization, higher ranking, employment chance, chances of enhancing one's English, and cultural diversity.

Although it is widely used, the push-pull model has been criticised because of its focus on macro-level factors and its neglecting of micro-level, individual point of view. Regardless of that, it is still the groundbreaking paradigm of the research of study-abroad decision-making processes and still develops with the addition of new information by researchers.

### *Motivations for Studying Abroad Among Doctoral Students*

The majority of the literature examining motivations behind studying abroad is devoted to undergraduate and master's programs, and there are less direct examinations of the motivations behind doctoral students (Li and Qi, 2019), especially in the pre-decision stage (i.e., when the choice to study overseas is not considered as a possibility). One of the most comprehensive lists of motivation factors identified by Zhou (2015) included intrinsic interest in research and teaching in addition to high utility of a U.S. doctoral degree and extremely high monetary costs of withdrawal. According to Yang et al. (2017), the motivations of Chinese students seeking STEM doctoral degrees abroad include: enriched life experiences, self-cultivation, broadened research perspectives, improved career prospects, and contribution to life improvement. The influences were also exerted by micro-level elements (e.g., family, teachers, and peers) and macro-level conditions (e.g., institutions, supervision, and financial aspects). The motivations behind an overseas doctoral program, according to Li and Qi (2019), are further a consequence of both pull-push mechanisms concerning academic, personal, experience related to oversea and family/friend related reasons. Fei et al. (2023) did a case study based in Malaysia on the basis of the motivations why students want to study in Malaysia with the help of such factors as recommendations of coworkers, comparative advantage, cultural affinity and self-improvement. These conclusions serve as the theoretical background of this paper.

Over the last few years, Malaysia has become one of the most popular countries for South-South student mobility (Xu et al., 2024). As a relatively new regional center and considering that a large share of its overseas students are Chinese Doctoral students, additional research is necessary in order to find out why these unique individuals have such reasons. These studies will add to a better overall insight into what motivates doctoral students to study abroad.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The present study uses a double-theoretical approach where Push-Pull Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) are used as the conceptual framework to conceptualize the motivation behind the mobility of the Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia. Although the Push-Pull Theory is based on migration research (Lee, 1966), its applicability to the field of international education can be effectively used to describe the large-scale structural forces that encourage mobility. Precisely, it defines the push of unfavorable circumstances in the home country versus the pull of institutional or situational advantages in the destination host country (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

Nevertheless, structural factors are not the whole story of the decision-making in respect to mobility. EVT offers an essential and complementary perspective at the micro level, based on personal cognitive evaluation (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). It states that education decisions are based on two fundamental mechanisms, such as expectation of success (e.g., perception of

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flexibility and probability of getting a PhD), and perceived task value attributed to the effort. The value is multidimensional, including interest, attainment, future use and relative costs, such as cost associated with finances, time and psychology (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Motivation is thus a reaction of assessing the expected achievement critically over the subjective value and perceived restrictions.

Importantly, this paper is not discussing those theories as equal and separate lenses. Instead, they are merged into a single integrated cross-level model (which is illustrated in Figure 1). We define destination choice as a sequence of steps. Push-pull conditions at the macro level provide opportunities structures, which set off the first consideration of mobility. Next, the EVT serves as a psychological filter. People react to these structural facts by making evaluations of them at the micro-level based on what destinations promise the best prospects of success and value. The integration contributes to the development of doctoral mobility studies since it correlates macro-structure determinants with micro-motivation processes, providing an explicit explanation of how Malaysia can be perceived as a possible and beneficial location to obtain a PhD degree as a Chinese student. The study under this framework responds to two main research questions:

(1) What are the ways that macro level push and pull factors play important role in the initial intention of Chinese students to study a PhD in Malaysia? (2) What kind of influence does individual expectancy-value evaluation (success expectancies, subjective values, perceived costs) exert on shaping and completion of the destination choice?

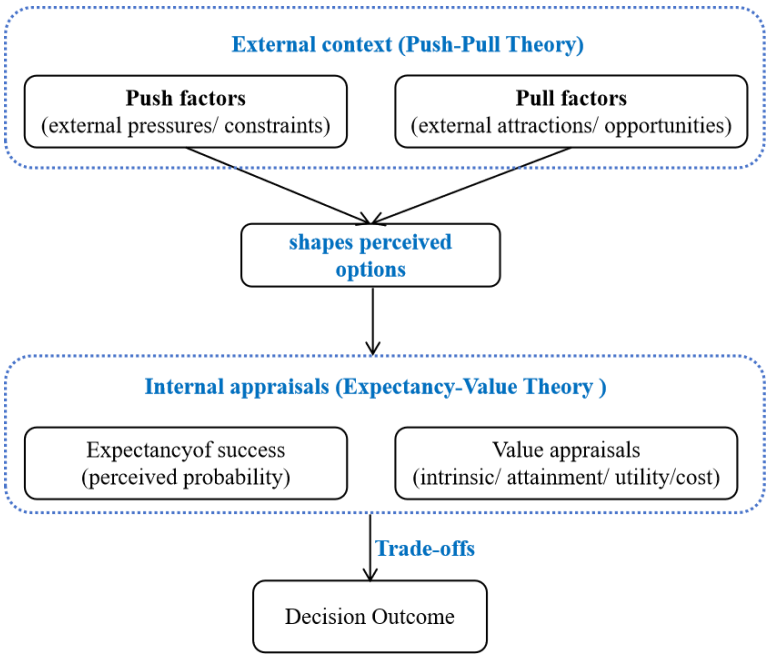



**Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework of The Study**

## Methodology

### *Research Design and Context*

A qualitative case study design was used to examine the way Chinese international doctoral students assess their choice to undertake a PhD in Malaysia. In particular, the study had

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concentrated on the early stages of the decision-making process and choice of destination of the participants. Qualitative case study was considered very suitable as allowing the thorough investigation of bounded phenomenon within certain institutional and sociocultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2014). The design ensured that by restricting the case to a single Malaysian public university, each individual motivation of participants could be analyzed in detail using dynamic interactions between individuals and overall structural conditions.

***Participants***

This paper focuses on six Chinese international doctoral students who are part of PhD programs, which is provided in Table 1. The authors have used a mixture of convenience sampling and snowball sampling through recruitment of participants by the first author. It was chosen because it would be suitable to reach information-rich participants in a relatively small and networked community (Sadler et al., 2010). Instead of looking into the statistical representativeness, the sampling plan aimed to obtain the insight depth by varying the disciplinary background and the level of academic study. Thus, the sample covered various areas of specialization and had both those who were only starting their doctoral studies and individuals who were in their second or third year of doctoral studies. The willingness to participate was free, and everyone gave their written informed consent before undergoing the interviews and were reassured that they were going to leave anytime they pleased without any penalty. Identifying information was eliminated and replaced by anonymous codes of an alphanumeric code (U1-U6) to ensure confidentiality. Every file that contained a participant was locked with some passwords that only members of the research team could access.

**Table 1: Participant Information (N=6)**

| Number | Gender | Marital status | Field of study | Study stage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| U1 | Female | Married | Cultural Heritage | Third year |
| U2 | Female | Married | Business Administration | Third year |
| U3 | Female | Married | Education | Second year |
| U4 | Male | Married | Entrepreneurship Education | Second year |
| U5 | Male | Single | Architecture and Human Living Environment | First year |
| U6 | Male | Married | Marketing | Third year |

***Data Collection***

The data were gathered by using semi-structured interview. The interview guide had been based on the participants initial decision-making and destination selection with regard to doctoral study in Malaysia. It has been guided by Push-Pull Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory. The guide had been comprised of open-ended questions regarding perceived constraints within home contexts, appealing characteristics of Malaysia as an option to pursue your PhD, perceived chances of success and finishing the PhD among the participants, expected benefit of doing the PhD, and cost related to the decision. Clarifying purposes and asking specific examples of the respondents to expound their answer followed the prompt.

Due to facilitation of a more subtle expression and reduction of language-related obstacles, the interviews were run in Mandarin, the native language, of both the interviewer and respondents. The process of gathering data occurred between January and August 2025. All the interviews

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were held at a suitable time and place that are convenient to the interviewees, with each of them being about 30-60 minutes long. Having obtained the consent of the participants, all the conversations were recorded on audio and after transcribed verbatim to be analyzed.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was applied as a method of data analysis whereby the coding and generation of themes were supported by NVivo software. The process was done in several steps: familiarisation of the transcripts, initial coding, theme generation and refinement. The given procedure made it possible to achieve the resulting themes being internally consistent and conceptually different (Braun and Clarke, 2006). There was a hybrid deductive-inductive methodology (Ferday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Deductive coding was based on the study conceptual framework which consisted of push conditions, pull conditions, expectancy beliefs, subjective task value, and perceived costs. Simultaneously, inductive coding was applied to reflect meanings, tensions, and decision-making considerations that went outside of the set theoretical categories. The codes were subsequently organized into an operational codebook and the themes were derived through constant comparative analysis between the participants to discover repeated patterns, divergences, and sequence of decision-making. Analytic memos were kept during the course of the analysis to keep track of interpretive decisions and provide a clear audit trail.

### *Trustworthiness and Rigour*

In order to make the results more credible and reliable, various approaches were used (Creswell and Miller, 2000). A member check was done where participants were invited to look over the interview summaries and initial interpretations to establish whether they were accurate. Also, the insider positionality of the first author, which was informed by shared language and cultural heritage of the participants, made it easy to develop a rapport and aided in eliciting subtle information. To alleviate the danger of over-familiar interpretation, the second author played the role of a peer debriefer who critically evaluated new emergent codes and interpretation at all stages of analysis. All these steps contributed positively to the strength of the trustworthiness of the study.

## Findings

### *RQ1: What Are the Ways That Macro Level Push and Pull Factors Play Important Role in The Initial Intention of Chinese Students to Study a PhD in Malaysia?*

The decisions made by the participants to study abroad in the doctoral program were not influenced by individual elements, but through a sequence and interactive decision-making model. Based on their narratives, it is indicated that the structural push factors in China initially triggered the consideration of studying abroad seriously followed by the pull aspects of Malaysia which became appealing due to their correspondence with the participants personal situations and their expectations of success. It can be seen in this case that the selection of Malaysia did not merely respond to the limitations at home, but a consequence of determining which location would seem to be both affordable and worthwhile.

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### *From Blocked Domestic Opportunities to Overseas Consideration*

The pressure point was that there was high level competition to be admitted as a doctoral student in China. Four participants indicated that they had applied more than once to PhD programs in China with no success even when they were strongly motivated to pursue studies. To these participants, multiple rejections were not just an academic failure but a kind of stagnation and stimulated reconsideration of all feasible avenues. According to their stories, Chinese family rivalry, restricted enrolment, and rigorous requirements of graduands all contributed to a perception of PhD in China as an uncertain venture, taking much time and energy to complete.
As U1 explained:

> *I have always been aspiring to undertake a PhD, and I had made up my mind to research in the area of cultural heritage. It happened quite some time ago, most probably 10 years back when I had applied to obtain a PhD in cultural heritage in China but was unsuccessful ... (U1)*

Similarly, U3 reflected on repeated attempts and the emotional effect of prolonged uncertainty:

> *I have also taken exams in China and applied to various famous universities. In a number of situations, I had reached the necessary score level but was not enrolled because there were insufficient spaces available; in other instances, I failed it by one or two points. Later on, I had such feeling that I did not want to wait in China any further. It is really tough and time-consuming. (U3)*

The given records indicate that the reason behind looking out there was not only due to the lack of admissions available in the country, but also because the applicants were increasingly unwilling to stay in the long and unpredictable domestic application cycle.

### *Career Constraints as A Catalyst Rather Than a Background Condition*

The career development pressures were augmented by the push conditions especially with regard to those participants who were already working in Chinese universities. The PhD was no longer just an academic ambition to these participants but became progressively seen as essential in getting promoted, to access research funding and career security over the longer term. In this way, the career limitations did not merely offer an overarching reason to pursue a doctorate; they raised the intensity on determining a realistic path to the degree.
As U2 noted:

> *According to the author, there is definitely the tendency in universities to have a PhD: As there was already some policy that some of the better-known universities would require a PhD before they would consider a professor for some of the higher professional titles, it is my assumption that this is going to be a trend.*

The discovery indicates that structural pressure within the home setting was present at both institutional and individual levels. The participants were not only interested in having a PhD but also many of them believed that the postponement of doctoral studies could cause

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professional stagnation. This is how career limitations turned the process of looking at a doctoral path into an urgent one.

### *The Role of Supervisors and Workplace Peer Networks in Reducing Uncertainty*

The relocation of the consideration of overseas study to the selection of Malaysia as one possible choice in the process of studying abroad was assisted according to participants accounts by their supervisors and their workplace peer networks. These important people served a purpose of information sources, legitimacy sources, and confidence boosters. It is important to note that their influence was essential since participants were making decisions without all of the available information but instead used trusted interpersonal networks to make sure that Malaysia would be a believable and achievable doctoral destination.

Some of the participants were reassured about admission steps, program schedules, and values of degrees through the encouragement offered by supervisors or colleagues with experience of studying in Malaysia. By doing so, social networks assisted in turning structural pressure into action on the ground because a specific destination became perceived as more navigable and less risky.

### *Why Malaysia Emerged as A Workable Option*

In case of domestic pressure that demanded looking outside, Malaysia would become appealing because it was seen as a feasible option. The participants were always unanimous in their description of Malaysian doctoral study being a lot more attainable compared to the very competitive Chinese system. Specifically, they saw the admission process as significantly easier and simpler, frequently oriented on research proposals, language competence, and supervisor approval rather than very competitive admission tests.
As U6 stated:

> *In China, the application of a PhD is very competitive, and includes intensive tests, few openings, and stringent requirements. On the other hand, admission in Malaysia is usually open to all those who have a research proposal, evidence of English language proficiency and approval by a supervisor.*

It was analytically significant in this aspect since admissions accessibility was not considered in isolation, but rather its importance arose because it was able to answer the previous feelings of exclusion and uncertainty of the participants in China. Thus, Malaysia was chosen not just as an easy option, but it was seen as providing a more realistic way under the prevailing limitations.

Proximity to a geographic location and relatively cheap price also made Malaysia more desirable. It was perceived by participants that Malaysia was close to China and thus it could be reached with more manageable travels, cost of living and finances compared to its overseas alternatives. U4 put it this way:

> *I have thought about various other countries, but I decided upon Malaysia because it was nearer to China and more accessible by planes compared to the rest. Besides, the tuition charges in Malaysia are quite moderate and the living expenses are reasonable. All in all, it is a good deal in terms of money spent on it. (U4)*

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It is also vital to note that these pull factors were directly linked to the overall life situation of the participants. Numerous individuals have had a work-family balance, and in this case, the distance and cost are not negligible factors but the key factors on which it depends what kind of international education can be realistically offered.

### *Perceived Quality and Flexibility: Attraction Through Compatibility*

Participants additionally described the Malaysian doctoral education experience as a mixture of academic excellence and practical ease. They found the fact that doctoral training has always been research-oriented and focused on individual research, critical thinking and academic writing important. Meanwhile, they recognized the apparent flexibility in the organization of studies, specifically in the ability to remain in contact with supervisors without having to stop working or caring about their families.

As U2 observed:

> *The PhD programs in Malaysia are quite flexible. They have a research focus, and attendance of the class is not required daily. I am able to communicate and learn virtually enabling me to manage my professional life and personal life. It is quite lenient to us as the current employees of the faculty.*

The theme highlights a significant conflict among the decision-making of participants. Malaysia did not have to be portrayed as the most prestigious location and yet frequently regarded as the most suitable option according to participants actual situation. To put it otherwise, what participants looked for was not merely the most symbolic value, but a doctoral program that might easily be incorporated into the existing work and family commitments. Such implication is that the choice of the destination entailed the trade-off of prestige and accessibility, and in most cases, accessibility had to dominate when the participants felt that a more prestigious choice would have a greater likelihood of failing to finish or disrupt the candidates personally.

## *RQ2: What Kind of Influence Does Individual Expectancy-Value Evaluation (Success Expectancies, Subjective Values, Perceived Costs) Exert on Shaping and Completion of The Destination Choice?*

The choices made by participants were not only based on structural push and pull factors. Instead, the external circumstances were evaluated by the participants in terms of their estimates regarding the probability of success and the worthiness of investment in terms of getting a PhD degree in Malaysia. In other words, the results indicate that the choice of destination as determined by the interplay between macro-level opportunity structures and micro-level expectancy -value assessment.

### *Expectancy: Assessing The Likelihood of Success*

An important personality characteristic that informed the participants in making their choices was their predicted likelihood of success. Prior to making a commitment to doctoral studies outside of one's home country, participants would evaluate their own academic capability, linguistic proficiency and capability to assimilate into another academic setting. In addition to determining whether it was considered possible to study abroad or not, these self-evaluations also shaped what kind of institution was viewed as appropriate.

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There have been instances when expectancy beliefs were shaped by comparison with people of the same age who have studied abroad. The fact that other people went to study abroad triggered the consideration by the examinees of their own academic and linguistic preparedness and the question of the possibility of achieving this goal as an international doctoral student. One participant gave an example:

> *Upon seeing my colleagues go out of the country, I had the impression that my research capabilities were higher compared to theirs, as well as the fact that I had a better command of the language, so I decided to have a go at it and put it to test. (U3)*

The account indicates that the expectancy appraisals were not created in isolation, but rather they were socially processed through the comparisons with the appropriate other. These comparisons gave the participants more confidence that the pursuit of a PhD outside their country is possible and practically achievable.

The assessments of success made by participants had an impact also on their institutional choices. In one instance, this was made explicit by one participant who stated that he or she preferred attending a lesser ranked university since the university seemed less complicated and hence a much better option:

> *I would rather select a less prestigious college which is slightly simpler. Even if I had the chance to make another choice, I would repeat the decision. (U5)*

The given account indicates that participants were not prompted to follow the best alternative possible. They, however, balanced the fame and the probability of acceptance, advancement, and graduation. It means there is an obvious prestige/accessibility compromise whereby a low symbolic position would be traded off to boost a higher possibility of achieving success. This implies expectancy appraisals acted like a sieve on which structural opportunities were filtered and ranked. Combining both, it can be inferred that expectancy beliefs took centre stage in the process of converting external opportunities into real life decisions. Rather than responding to attractive destination attributes, participants determined if such opportunities could meet their perceived abilities and odds of successful accomplishment.

### *Value: Why The PhD Was Seen as Worthwhile*

Should expectancy beliefs have allowed participants to determine if doctoral study abroad was possible, value appraisals influenced the judgment about whether or not the expected rewards were worth the amount of work put in. In addition to the expectancy beliefs, the participants assessed the benefit of engaging a PhD program overseas. It was articulated through various related aspects like academic interest, usefulness to one`s career, and social status. To other participants, it was an intrinsically valuable endeavor, based on sincere personal inquisitiveness and long-term dedication to a research area. There are examples where U1 explained that they took a lot of interest in cultural heritage and viewed Malaysia as a significant place to explore it:

> *What I am especially attracted to is the theoretical study of cultural heritage instead of just its artistic representation or the very act of producing artworks. When I studied it further, I understood that the investigation of*

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*cultural heritage within Malaysia, a nation with such a varied past in culture, would have been the perfect decision.*

The same trend could be observed in the U4 account where doctoral studies were not only treated as a career demand but also as a chance to further develop an existing research interest:

*To me, the idea of obtaining a PhD means more than professional advancement, I would really like to study this topic. My Master paper touched upon similar content and I have always dreamed of studying this topic more in detail. (U4)*

Simultaneously, the PhD had a high utility value on participants. It has been seen as a tool of upward mobility in higher educational institutions, better access to research opportunities, increased academic credibility and greater employment prospects. The degree was thus considered valuable by the participants both in terms of intellectual gains and also in terms of its expected tangible rewards. As expressed by the band U2:

*Upon finishing my PhD, with regards to either writing projects or the next career openings like mentoring the master students, I can state that the PhD degree will grant me an edge over others. I also assume that there will be more chances to earn money and that my salary will certainly rise.*

This instrumental attitude has also been expressed by U4 in a description of the prospective gains of doctoral research regarding future professional positions:

*I am convinced that this learning experience will be useful to me in future occupations like educational management, student affairs, and research work." [U4]*

Moreover, participants also attributed attainment value to the PhD as a signifier of identity and social status. In China the doctoral degree was not merely seen as an academic qualification but also as a symbol of social status, success, and family prestige. As U4 said:

*A PhD degree remains a very significant mark of identity in China, in particular, in their universities. (U4)*

Based on these findings, it can be assumed that the value of the PhD was multidimensional. The participants did not go into the doctoral program with only some motivations but they included intellectual, professional, and symbolic factors to evaluate the appropriateness of the degree in terms of the effort necessary to obtain it.

### *Costs And Contradictions in The Decision-Making Process*

The perceived value of the PhD was always measured against its relative expenses in terms of financial costs, academic demands, and most acutely the destabilization of family harmony, as the participants state. The participants were married, especially mothers, whose feelings of guilt due to work and family conflicts were very intense. Take U2, who regretted emotionally the loss of her child presence, stating that the most significant loss she made was the failure to be with her child, U2 poignantly remarked on the emotional cost of her absence. Having already been away from her family during the last two years almost a year, she felt strongly ashamed saying, I am feeling pretty guilty now (U2). The stories of U2 and other similar ones of U3 who also deplored the lack of key moments in their children's lives emphasize the fact that

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IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997
doctoral migration was not an academic opportunity alone but a smart bet accompanied by emotional burden.

The results identify a number of contradictions that lie at the heart of these findings: between career progress and home duties, and between career interest and the so-called intimacy cost of divorce. These contradictions are essential in the comprehension of the peculiar attraction of Malaysia. The choice of destination was not always to be used to maximize total status, but because the destination provided a realistic middle-ground, a compromise between the aspiration of great heights and real ability to support ones familial and emotional welfare.

### *Analytical Synthesis: From Structural Pressure to Feasible and Worthwhile Choice*

Considering all the findings, this is an indication of a processual pathway. The structural push factors in China, particularly its recurrent rejection of admission and lack of career development opportunities, led to the fact that participants had considered seriously the idea of studying a doctorate abroad. Besides, the pull characteristics of Malaysia i.e. easier admission processes, proximity to Malaysia, low-costs and flexibility of the program arrangements made it perceptible as one of the potential destination options available to participants. Nonetheless, the external conditions were translated into action by participants in the form of expectancyvalue appraisals: did they think they would succeed in a particular institutional context and would the degree be worth the risks?

The step also included trade-offs. Participants frequently agreed on lower status in return to greater accessibility, and compared long-term career benefits with short-term individual and familial expenses. The results indicate that Malaysia was also selected not only due to its attractiveness in structural terms, but also because it was viewed as a viable option as well as a valuable target under the conditions of the actual life of the participants.

## Discussion

Decisions made by Chinese students to study a PhD in Malaysia are motivated by the fierce competition in China towards doctoral admission and the practical desire to advance in their careers. The result is consistent with the assertion by F. Li et al. (2021) that improvement of career was one of the main reasons to study abroad. However, despite the fact that doctoral admission is highly competitive in China, it is usually not given much attention, and the low level of available local opportunities remains an effective push factor (Dai et al., 2023). On a larger scale, this observation refers to a critical phenomenon in South - South migration in which students of developing countries explore options in the Global South as an alternative to avoid overcrowding and competition in their countries academic systems.

As regards the pull factors, the attraction of Malaysia is its closeness in geography and relative low cost (Diana and Wen, 2013; Zeeshan et all, 2013). The Malaysian PhD programme has an especially convenient model of flexibility as highlighted by Fei et al (2023) which would be an ideal option of mature students looking to balance their work life and educational interests. These results are in line with theoretical studies and practical research and also highlight the unique nature of the Malaysian appeal as a destination of study. Nonetheless, in this research it has been indicated that these features are not just conveniences but they put Malaysia in a strategic position as a regional education hub in South-South mobility, whereby the choice of

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997
destination is determined by pragmatic proximity, with a greater focus on structural fit than the conventional Western-based concepts of prestige.

Apart from the mentioned external factors, the interaction between the expected success of the participants and the subjective valuation of the degree influenced the choices made by the participants. It follows both the findings of Yang et al. (2017) and Yue and Lu (2022) as they state that the decision of mobility occurs as a result of a dynamic assessment of the expected advantages in relation to the perceived expenses. The cost aspect in particular is important when thinking of the South-South movement. Although a degree in the Global North can be more symbolic, the cost can sometimes be prohibitive financially and psychologically. Conversely, education in Malaysia offers significant instrumental value, as it allows obtaining credible credential of career progress along with an increased level of the perceived probability of completion.

Being an advanced cohort of students, Chinese international PhD students make study-abroad choices that are highly interrelated with their professional advancement (L. Li et al., 2021). They are more prone to perceive the notion of going abroad to get a PhD as an investment in professional future. To the ones already working in universities, a PhD is not just an indicator of academic identity but also a critical piece of paper to reach promotion and long-term job security. Consequently, their decision in regard to the pursuit of doctoral study abroad is based on whether or not they can benefit professionally by completing their degrees. In cases where they think that gaining a PhD will result in considerable career gains, they become more interested in obtaining it. Even though attaining a PhD can be very demanding, they are still prepared to study outside their home country provided that they consider the ultimate benefits of studying abroad in terms of career and finances will be higher than the short-term costs.

Conclusively, all of the results indicate that Chinese students of doctorate degree are not just going downhill on the world hierarchy but they actively use the South-South options to get the best out of their careers. A PhD is an important step to take when one is already employed at China universities, because it is the way to achieve more professional security. It is part of a larger trend in international education, where regional hubs in the Global South act as critical safety valves of academic talent, allowing people to further their careers without facing the intense barriers normally experienced by traditional Western destinations.

## Conclusion

The research has it that the process of making a decision by Chinese doctoral students is not an immediate response to discrete factors but instead a multi-step process. Although external pushing and pulling forces form initial impetus to move, such structural forces cannot adequately clarify the ultimate destination choice. The results indicate that students become proactive evaluators and sort out options at macro level based upon their individual expectations to succeed and their understanding of the value of the degree.

One of the major findings of the present study is the trade-off between institutional quality and accessibility of studies. The participants would prefer a consistent and controllable path in Malaysia in preference to higher-ranking alternatives, which would be riskier in regard to non-completion or at a too high cost to the student personally. Therefore, the choice of Malaysia can be considered as a practical compromise whereby the students benefit most professionally without having an adverse effect on their finances and homes. It illustrates that doctoral

mobility is the intricate act of balancing structural opportunities with the limits that exist for individuals.

Contributions to Research This paper contributes in four different ways to the subject of international education. In practice, this offers empirical evidence of reasons behind actions of Chinese doctoral candidates in the Malaysian setting as it records not only the structural motivators of their behavior but also their inner psychological assessments. Theoretically, the research is contributing to the existing literature through merging Push-Pull Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory within a single framework. This combination demonstrates that the macro-level situations are filtered by micro-level judgments of feasibility and cost to present more of a process perspective on student mobility.

In policy-related terms, the outcomes indicate that South-South doctoral flow could be enhanced by making admissions clear and adopting internationalization plans that can be tailored to meet the particularities of mature students. Particularly, policies are to aim at forming steady educational settings that decrease the unpredictability that usually comes with studying abroad. In practice, the outcomes show that universities can enhance the recruiting process by making program flexibility and structure of supervision more understandable. It is necessary to offer customized help to the candidates who are required to balance between their doctoral investigation and professional activities as well as other personal duties in order to make the destination more attractive.

**Limitations and Future Research**

In spite of these findings, this paper also has limitations that need to be considered. The number of respondents is relatively low, and the respondents are from a particular institutional environment, and thus, this may restrict the external generalizability of the results. Also, the students are of one particular age range, and disciplines and academic years. Subsequent studies would fill those gaps by increasing the participant population to have more variety in disciplines represented and a variety of different types of universities. Moreover, there could be longitudinal studies examining the development of these initial motivations and expectancy-value estimations over the course of the various stages of doctoral programs in Malaysia.

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| **Acknowledgements:** | The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Malaysia Kelantan for providing the necessary resources and support throughout the course of this research. Special appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who contributed valuable insights and constructive feedback, which greatly enhanced the quality of this paper. |
| **Funding Statement:** | No Funding |
| **Conflict of Interest Statement:** | The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling (IJEPC). |

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| **Ethics Statement:** | This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Language Studies and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, approval number UMK.A16.800-6/1/1(13). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes. |
| **Author Contribution Statement:** | All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Author 2 was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Author 1 handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. Author 1 contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission. |

International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling
IJEPC
EISSN : 0128-164X
Volume 11 Issue 62 (March 2026) PP. 979-997

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