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Higher Education Research & Development

ISSN: 0729-4360 (Print) 1469-8366 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cher20

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To cite this article: Yuxiao Jiang, Kun Dai & Alan C. K. Cheung (2026) Heading the road less travelled: exploring Chinese students' motivations to study in Tanzania, Higher Education Research & Development, 45:3, 586-603, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2025.2551086

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2551086

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Published online: 05 Sep 2025.

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HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
2026, VOL. 45, NO. 3, 586–603
https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2551086

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Heading the road less travelled: exploring Chinese students' motivations to study in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

The global pattern of international student mobility is increasingly diverse and complex. Existing studies predominantly focus on student flows from less-developed to more-developed countries, primarily in Western countries or emerging educational hubs like China. However, the reverse student mobility from these established regions to relatively more peripheral destinations, particularly Africa, remains underexplored. To fill this gap, we interview 14 Chinese students with study experience in Tanzania to understand the rationale behind this unconventional choice. Drawing upon a modified push–pull model, the findings reveal that students are simultaneously 'pulled' toward and 'pushed' to Tanzania by several intertwined structural and individual factors. Notably, the growing China-Tanzania relations, strengthened university alliances, availability of scholarships, and low entry requirements attract students seeking unique experiences and opportunities to accumulate Africa-related capital. Simultaneously, challenges such as a saturated domestic job market, high costs of Western education, and credential inflation push students to adopt a more pragmatic approach, reinforcing Tanzania as an optimal choice to balance their aspirations and capabilities. This study offers a marginalized yet integral perspective on the unique reverse student flow, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping global student flows.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 February 2025
Accepted 10 August 2025

KEYWORDS
International student mobility; motivation; push–pull model; Chinese students; Tanzania

Introduction

Understanding the motivations behind international students' decisions to study abroad has become an important topic in the field of international higher education. In recent decades, global patterns of international student mobility (ISM) have undergone significant transformations, characterized by increasing diversification and complexity shaped by shifting geopolitical power dynamics (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). While existing studies have predominantly explored the traditional flows of students from less-developed to

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more-developed countries – particularly to Western nations and emerging educational hubs such as China – the phenomenon of reverse student mobility remains underexamined. Specifically, the movement of students from more established or central regions to relatively peripheral destinations, such as those in Africa, has received limited scholarly attention.

Many scholars (e.g., Gong & Huybers, 2022; Mok & Marginson, 2021) highlight a departure from the historically Western-oriented model of ISM, marked by the rise of regional educational hubs and an increasing volume of South-South mobility. A prominent example of this trend is the growing educational exchange between Africa and China, underpinned by deepening strategic cooperation (Mulvey, 2021). These evolving partnerships have significantly shaped educational collaborations and are poised to further stimulate student mobility between the two regions.

While the increasing presence of African students in China has attracted growing academic interest – particularly in studies examining their motivations and experiences (e.g., Dai et al., 2024, 2025; Dai & Hardy, 2022, 2023; Ma, 2017; Mulvey, 2021; Wen & Hu, 2019) – this body of research has primarily contributed to understanding South-South mobility from one direction. To more fully capture the complexity of ISM, it is essential to also consider the reverse flow of students from China to Africa (Jiang et al., 2025). Although the number of Chinese students in Africa remains relatively low at present, this trend is expected to grow in light of expanding China – Africa strategic partnerships. Investigating this emerging trajectory is both timely and necessary, particularly in response to growing scholarly calls to decolonize knowledge production and challenge dominant Western-centric frameworks in global higher education.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to address this research gap by examining the unique case of Chinese students in Tanzania as a typical example of reverse student flow from China to Africa, aiming to uncover the rationale behind this unorthodox choice. Drawing upon a modified push–pull model, it aims to explore the central research question: *What motivates Chinese students to study in Tanzania?* Although still marginal, this reverse flow of students offers valuable insights for rethinking the prevailing Western-centric paradigms of ISM. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of ISM and enriches the scholarly discussion on the increasingly diversified and complex dynamics, particularly within the Global South.

The Tanzanian context and China-Tanzania relations

This section situates the inflow of Chinese students to Tanzania within a broader context, focusing on the socio-cultural and educational landscape of Tanzania as well as the evolving bilateral relationship between China and Tanzania. Tanzania, having experienced relative peace and stability since its independence, is widely regarded as one of the safest and most politically stable countries on the African continent. This stability plays a crucial role in enhancing the country's appeal as a host destination for ISM, offering a secure environment for incoming students (Sehoole & Lee, 2022). Coupled with its rich cultural heritage and abundant natural resources, Tanzania presents itself as an attractive option for international students seeking distinctive experiences. Importantly, while Swahili is the national language, English is widely spoken and serves as the primary medium of instruction in Tanzanian higher education institutions (Fussy, 2019).

The prevalence of English-medium instruction significantly reduces linguistic barriers and improves accessibility for international students from diverse backgrounds.

In addition to socio-cultural appeal and linguistic accessibility, the growth of Tanzania's higher education sector has further positioned the country as an emerging hub for international education. Although relatively nascent, the sector has undergone substantial development, particularly following the liberalization of education policy in the 1990s (Fussy, 2019). Key reforms, such as the adoption of National Higher Education Policy of 1999, marked a transition from a state-cantered model to a more liberalized and decentralized framework (Kanju & Masabo, 2025). These reforms have played a pivotal role in enhancing institutional accountability and quality assurance mechanisms. From its origins in 1961 with a single university affiliated with the University of London, Tanzania's higher education landscape has grown substantially. By 2023, the number of accredited higher education institutions had grown to 54 (TCU, 2023), thereby broadening academic offerings and increasing capacity to host international students.

Equally important are the strengthening diplomatic and educational ties between China and Tanzania, which have created new pathways for student exchange and cooperation. The bilateral relationship between China and Tanzania represents one of the most enduring and strongest partnerships in Africa. Diplomatic ties between the two nations date back to 1964, coinciding with Tanzania's independence. While early cooperation was largely focused on economic and infrastructural development, recent years have witnessed an emphasis on educational collaboration (Xinhua News, 2023). Higher education cooperation has been significantly strengthened through the evolving institutional partnerships and policy initiatives (Xu, 2023). As part of the '20 + 20 Scheme', the University of Dar es Salaam was paired with East China Normal University to establish a specialized African Studies Centre. This center serves as a platform for research collaboration and academic exchange, and has since paved the way for further partnerships between Chinese and Tanzanian higher education institutions.

These developments have contributed to a gradual increase in the number of Chinese students in Tanzania. According to the Tanzania Commission for Universities, the number of international students studying in Tanzania, including those from China, reached 1,062 (TCU, 2023) – more than triple the figure recorded in the early 2000s. However, when contextualized within Tanzania's total tertiary education enrollment of 334,857 students (TCU, 2023), the presence of international students remains marginal. This limited representation constrains the available sample size and thereby necessitates a qualitative research approach to enable in-depth exploration. Although the overall scale of this reverse student flow remains limited, the trend is anticipated to grow in the coming years, especially in light of expanding bilateral partnerships. Understanding the motivations and experiences of Chinese students in Tanzania is therefore crucial for comprehensively analysing the shifting dynamics of ISM. This inquiry is especially timely in light of increasing scholarly efforts to decolonize knowledge production and challenge the dominance of Western-centric frameworks in global higher education discourse.

Research on international students' motivations to study abroad

Exiting research has extensively explored international students' motivations to study abroad, particularly on students from developing countries to developed countries (Xu

et al., 2024). With the rise of regional hubs and the increasing ISM within the Global South, more studies are investigating motivations for South-to-South transitions, notably China, which has consistently ranked as one of the top receiving countries in recent years. For instance, studies by Ma (2017) and Wen and Hu (2019) emphasis China's distinctive future development prospects and high-quality reputation function as major pull factors for ISM to China. Taking a more macro view, Mulvey (2021) highlights the asymmetry in power distribution and scholarship provision aimed at enhancing soft power as the main factors contributing to the rise of African students in China.

However, those studies on either Western-oriented or regional-hub ISM predominantly focus on conventional transition from relatively less developed to more developed countries, research on reverse student mobility remains limited (Cantwell et al., 2009). Some studies have explored the reverse flow of students from developed countries to emerging regional hubs such as Mexico, Turkey, and China. For instance, Cantwell et al. (2009) found that international students from developed countries studying in Mexico were mainly driven by a desire to experience a different culture. Similarly, Kondakci (2011) revealed that international students in Turkey primarily seek to experience a culture unlike their own. Apart from seeking unique experience, students may also be motivated by a sense of cosmopolitanism. As Lee (2022) suggested, Western students in China attempt to differentiate themselves and become bona fide cosmopolitans. Additionally, other factors may contribute to this reverse flow as well. Oladipo et al. (2023) highlighted that governmental cooperation, financial support, university partnerships, and the opportunity to gain social capital have facilitated the reverse student flow from the Global North to China.

Nevertheless, few studies have specifically delved into the reverse international student flow within the Global South, especially from developing countries to more periphery destinations like Africa. To address this research gap, we focus on the aforementioned unique case of Chinese student study in Tanzania, aiming to investigate the rationale behind this unconventional choice.

Theoretical lens: a modified push–pull model

Informed by traditional push–pull model, we attempt to propose a modified push–pull model (see Figure 1) that integrates both structural and individual factors, highlighting the interplay between them to better understand Chinese students' motivations for studying in Tanzania. The traditional push–pull model is a foundational framework in ISM research. While there are many variants, it essentially posits that push factors encompass disadvantages and challenges accumulated within students' home countries that drive them away from domestic education, and pull factors consist of advantages and opportunities in anticipated host countries, attracting students to study abroad as an alternative way to access better education (Altbach, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In the early stage of the push–pull model, influenced by historical-structural theories, especially the world systems theory, scholars emphasized the structure force with attributing individual decisions to global power dynamics (Altbach, 1998). This perspective focused on external structural factors like social, political, economic, and environmental factors, asserting that the core countries control global knowledge production and students from periphery countries sought high-quality education in core countries for better personal development (Massey et al., 1993).

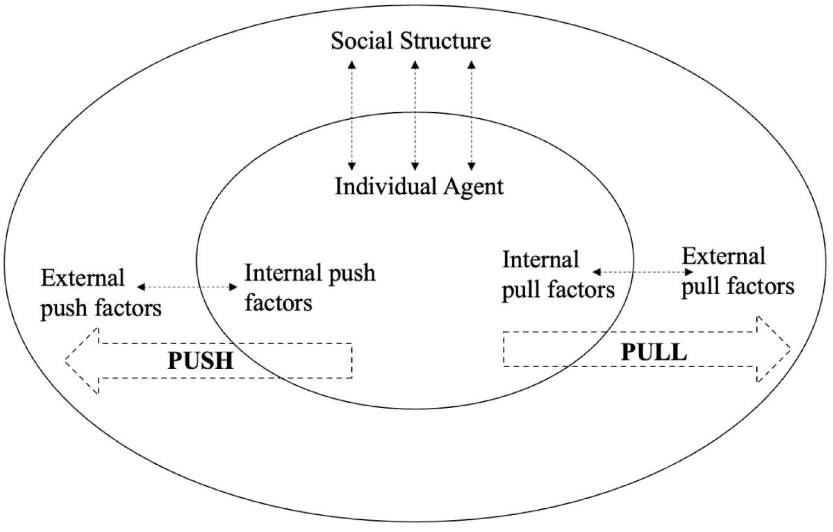

Figure 1. The modified push-pull model.

The early push–pull model primarily highlighted macro-level structure factors while neglecting the role of individual characteristics and human agency regarding studying abroad. Thus, scholars have started to emphasize the importance of human agency in studying abroad, considering individual factors like personal traits, family background, and language ability (Li & Bray, 2007). Notably, Li and Bray (2007) also provided a more critical perspective on the push–pull factors by suggesting that origin countries may have 'pull' forces to attract students, while destination countries may also include 'push' forces that dissuade international students from choosing them (Cheung et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers have highlighted that push–pull forces extend beyond the dynamics between home and host countries. Students may compare push–pull factors of different countries to make optimal choices tailored to their individual capabilities in a broader global landscape (Dai et al., 2023; Kondakci, 2011).

Despite these advancements, existing push–pull models tend to treat individual and structural factors separately, overlooking the complex interplay between them. As Massey et al. (1993) argue, individual decisions are deeply embedded within social structures. This study proposes a modified push–pull model that integrates individual choice as an intrinsic part of social structure, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individual and structural factors. Furthermore, given the intricate nature of push and pull factors, which may exist in both host and home countries and even emerge through comparisons with other nations, it becomes challenging to strictly categorize them as either pushing from the home country or pulling from the host country. In the context of the reverse student flow from China to Tanzania, driven by strategic cooperation rather than regional competition, the conventional binary opposition between host and home country may not be suitable as well. Therefore, instead of categorizing push and pull factors based on the home or host country, this modified push–pull model emphasizes the nature of pull factors as advantageous and push factors as disadvantageous elements that concurrently drive student mobility. Hence, we will take a more comprehensive perspective that deals with the interconnectedness and complexity between factors to

understand how the structures and agents interplay (De Haas, 2021), functioning as push and pull factors influencing students to study in Tanzania.

Research design

The research adopts an exploratory qualitative inquiry to investigate the motivations of Chinese students studying in Tanzania. Qualitative inquiry enables a rich, in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena that are not readily captured through standardized quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). The exploratory nature of this study is appropriate given the limited scholarly attention to the reverse student mobility from China to Tanzania – an emerging but underexplored dimension of ISM. This approach aligns with the study's objective of uncovering the multifaceted and often interrelated motivations underlying Chinese students' decisions to study in Tanzania and is well-suited to examining the nuanced interplay between structural forces and individual agency, as framed by the proposed modified push–pull model.

Snowball sampling was employed to identify and recruit potential interview participants, leveraging the authors' professional network. The first author previously worked at a Chinese university that maintains institutional partnerships with Tanzanian universities and had established connections with several Chinese students who had study experience in Tanzania. Following the establishment of contact with the first cohort of participants, these individuals were invited to refer their Chinese peers to participate in the study. Through this iterative process, a total of 14 participants were recruited (6 males and 8 females), with backgrounds primarily in Education, History, Linguistics, Political Science, and Anthropology (see Table 1). Recruitments cease upon reaching data saturation, as further data collection is deemed unlikely to yield additional meaningful insights (Guest et al., 2020). Despite the relatively small sample size, the richness and comprehensiveness of the data collected provide sufficient depth for a nuanced understanding of the intertwined structural and individual factors shaping the participants' decisions to study in Tanzania.

All participants are postgraduate students enrolled in joint programs co-organized by their home universities in China and partner universities in Tanzania. The joint programs typically span approximately 12 months and are supported by substantial financial aid, primarily through scholarships provided by the China Scholarship

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Code	Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Program
1	Mei	Female	Linguistics	Master
2	Qian	Female	Education	Master
3	Fang	Female	History	Master
4	Dan	Female	Education	Master
5	Jing	Female	History	Master
6	Chao	Male	Education	Master
7	Wei	Male	Education	Master
8	Niu	Male	Political Science	Master
9	Hong	Male	Education	Master
10	Ran	Male	History	PhD
11	Jie	Female	Education	PhD
12	Tian	Female	Anthropology	Master
13	Lu	Female	Education	Master
14	Jun	Male	History	Master

Council (CSC). This funding not only ensures monetary subsidies but also confers state-endorsed prestige, as recipients are recognized as nationally sponsored scholars. The Tanzanian universities attended by participants are all locally prestigious public institutions. While they may not be as globally competitive as some internationally renowned universities, they hold strong academic reputations within Tanzania and serves as gateways for regional academic exchange and collaboration.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews online in Chinese. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' institution before initiating the interviews. All sessions were audio recorded with participants' consent. The interview questions were guided by the modified push–pull model with the main research question: *What were the motivations that drive you to study in Tanzania?* Additionally, more open-ended and probing questions were employed during the interviews. All interview materials were meticulously transcribed anonymously, and coding and thematic analysis were performed rigorously.

For data analysis, a thematic approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis began with repeated readings of each transcript to ensure deep familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture salient ideas expressed by participants (e.g., modest academic performance, financial stress). These preliminary codes were refined, compared, and synthesized into broader thematic categories. The emerging themes were reviewed to ensure coherence with the coded extracts and their relevance to the dataset as a whole. This process involved iterative cycles of coding and recoding, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns and overarching themes that reflected the underlying motivations of the participants. In addition to inductive coding, based on the modified push–pull model, we deductively reorganize the push and pull factors and comprehensively delineate students' structure-agency negotiation. By combining the inductive approach with theoretical insights from the modified push–pull model, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of the rationales behind this unconventional case of reverse student mobility from China to Tanzania.

Findings

Through an exploration of students' personal narratives, the findings reveal that students are simultaneously 'pulled' toward and 'pushed' to Tanzania by several intertwined structural and individual factors. These factors collectively reinforce Tanzania as a strategic and viable destination that aligns with their aspirations and capabilities. Drawing upon the modified push–pull model, our analysis categorizes those intertwined structural and individual drivers into push and pull factors. Despite the presentation of each factor separately in the following text, it is crucial to recognize that students' decisions are intricately woven together with various push and pull factors.

Pull factors

The burgeoning China-Tanzania engagement

Among African nations, Tanzania maintained one of the strongest and longest-standing relationships with China (Lammich, 2024). As of 2022, China had remained Tanzania's largest trading partner for seven consecutive years, with Chinese firms representing the

primary source of foreign direct investment in the country (Xinhua News, 2023). Many students viewed this robust bilateral relationship as fertile ground for future personal and professional opportunities, interpreting their academic pursuits in Tanzania as long-term investments aligned with this promising trajectory. As Chao articulated:

> Everyone can see how much China values Tanzania as its partner. We've been close for decades, and now, with even more investment and collaboration, the opportunities are only growing. That's why I'm here – to be part of this future.

Such narratives underscore the role of strategic state policies in shaping students' perceptions of Tanzania as a land of opportunity. Participants believe their experiences and knowledge gained in Tanzania will translate into unique advantages and enable them to contribute meaningfully to the evolving China-Tanzania relationship. Students connect their Tanzania academic journey with their future career paths, viewing it as a stepping stone to long-term success (Consoli, 2024). The thriving China-Tanzania engagement functions thus as a vital and influential pull factor, impacting students' expectations and conceptions of Tanzania, and steering them towards choosing Tanzania for their future studies.

Deepened university alliance

Given the centralized control characteristic of China's internationalization of higher education, universities often align their strategies with national directives (Mok & Marginson, 2021), fostering collaborations with Tanzanian institutions to promote staff and student exchanges. In this context, the students in our study participate in joint programs facilitated by their home universities. These well-established partnerships provide a streamlined pathway to studying in Tanzania, making the process more accessible and efficient. As emphasized by Qian:

> I joined a well-designed joint program between my university and the University of Dar es Salaam. It's a direct route to study in Tanzania, made easy by the strong partnership between the institutions.

This statement reflects how the institutional partnerships between Chinese and Tanzanian universities facilitate students' studies in Tanzania, highlighting the crucial role these partnerships play in driving ISM (Oladipo et al., 2023). The direct route to Tanzania, as Qian describes it, simplifies the process for students, making an otherwise unconventional destination more accessible and navigable. Therefore, these institutional collaborations provide tangible, structured opportunities for students, motivating them to consider Tanzania as a viable and practical destination.

Governmental scholarships

In this study, all participants received substantial financial backing through the CSC, which offers generous subsidies more than sufficient to cover all program-related expenses. The financial appeal is especially significant when considered in the local context. According to the World Bank, Tanzania's GDP per capita in 2023 was $1,224.50, equating to roughly $102 per month. In contrast, the CSC offers monthly stipends of $1,300 for master's students and $1,500 for doctoral students – amounts that far exceed local income levels and provide recipients with a comfortable standard of living.

Many students (e.g., Fang, Chao, Wei, Niu, and Lu) highlighted the pivotal role of the CSC scholarship in motivating them to study in Tanzania. As Niu explained:

> Scholarships are key – getting the CSC scholarship is a huge relief, covering all my costs and making this opportunity possible.

Beyond financial support, the CSC scholarship also confers considerable prestige, as it is highly competitive and typically awarded to top-performing students. Recipients are recognized as nationally sponsored scholars, a designation that enhances both academic and professional profiles. Notably, compared to more traditional and competitive study destinations, Tanzania presents less competition to obtaining CSC sponsorship, making it a more accessible option for students with average academic records. As Wei reflected:

> The CSC scholarship isn't just about funding – it is a mark of prestigious recognition. With my current grades, studying anywhere but Tanzania would make this prestigious scholarship out of reach.

As illustrated by Niu and Wei, the CSC scholarship not only alleviates financial burdens but also offers a form of state-endorsed legitimacy that enhances students' credentials. These findings echo prior research emphasizing the central role of financial considerations in shaping international study choices (Ma, 2017; Mulvey, 2021; Wen & Hu, 2019). The relative accessibility of the CSC scholarship in the Tanzanian context thus positions the country as an increasingly attractive destination for Chinese students seeking both economic feasibility and professional recognition.

Low entry requirements with English as the medium of instruction

The relatively low entry requirements of Tanzanian institutions emerged as a significant pull factor, making study in Tanzanian a feasible option for many Chinese students. Unlike Western programs, which often demand rigorous language proficiency tests (e.g., IELTS/TOEFL) and high academic performance, Tanzanian institutions tend to adopt more flexible admission criteria. Students can utilize their domestic English test scores or even provide a faculty-endorsed statement to meet application requirements. For students with modest English proficiency or academic achievements, these relaxed standards significantly lower the barriers to application and admission. As Chao noted:

> With limited English skills and an average academic record, Tanzania's flexible admission standards make it my most realistic study option – and the best choice for my situation.

This accessibility is particularly appealing to students who might struggle to meet the stringent requirements of institutions in other regions, highlighting the critical role of educational availability (Dai et al., 2023). The perception of Tanzanian as a practical and attainable destination enables students to consider and pursue opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach.

In addition to flexible entry requirements, the use of English as the medium of instruction across Tanzanian universities adds further appeal. Since independence, Kiswahili has functioned as the national language of daily life, while English serves as the primary language for instruction and academic research at the tertiary level (Fussy, 2019). As international students primarily reside and study within university settings, they are more likely to be immersed in an English-speaking environment. This linguistic

context offers students ample opportunities for language immersion through both formal academic instruction and informal interactions with faculty and peers. As Jun reflected:

> Though my English is not that good at present, studying in Tanzania actually provides me with an immersive environment to enhance this ability, as I have to use English every day for my studies and to communicate with professors and peers. Practice makes perfect.

This perceived benefit of language development, in combination with flexible admission standards, enhances the overall attractiveness of Tanzanian institutions. These features provide viable and realistic pathways for students to achieve their educational aspirations while circumventing potential academic or linguistic barriers.

Seeking unique personal experiences

Many students expressed a strong desire to fulfill their curiosity and engage in sensation-seeking by immersing themselves in a new environment. For these students, studying at Tanzanian institutions was seen as an opportunity to gain unique experiences and broaden their horizons. Many participants (e.g., Chao, Wei, Hong, and Tian) emphasized their keen interest in experiencing the cultural diversity and richness of Tanzania. As Tian described:

> Tanzania promises incredible experiences in a place I've always found magical. Studying here lets me explore this amazing country, turning my education into an exciting adventure.

Tanzania, with its wealth of cultural traditions, languages, and practices, provides an enriching environment for those seeking cultural immersion. Additionally, Tanzania's natural wonders, including the Serengeti National Park and Mount Kilimanjaro, further contribute to its appeal. The considerable cultural distance between Tanzania and China has sparked students' curiosity, driving them to explore a world that feels vastly different from their own. In this context, the opportunity for unique experiences emerges as a significant motivator for students to study in Tanzania, highlighting the importance of distinct cultural experiences in shaping students' study abroad decisions (Cantwell et al., 2009; Kondakci, 2011).

Establish professional gains by accumulating Africa-related capital

Many participants viewed studying in Africa as an opportunity to accumulate Africa-related capital like specialized knowledge, cultural understanding, and strategic social networks to develop distinctive expertise. For many participants, studying in Tanzania was seen as a strategic investment in both their personal and professional development. They anticipated significant long-term benefits, especially in terms of career advancement. By pursuing this less conventional academic path, they believed they could gain a competitive edge, acquiring Africa-specific credentials that would set them apart in a crowded job market. As Jie explained:

> Tanzania was my choice for its unique professional opportunities and local insights. It's the perfect place to build Africa-specific expertise while expanding my network.

Students' goals extended beyond academic knowledge; they sought to build extensive social networks and deepen their understanding of local cultures, which they believed would open doors to future career opportunities (Oladipo et al., 2023). They viewed the accumulation of

Africa-related capital as a critical asset, helping them stand out in the competitive global job market. As such, students 'consequently seek out newer and rarer experiences abroad in order to increase their social standing and ultimately outshine and outclass others in the ongoing symbolic battle for greater distinction' (Lee, 2022, p. 5). They believe that the Africa-related capital gained through their immersive studies in Tanzania will provide a competitive advantage, particularly in the context of a thriving China–Africa engagement.

Push factors

The saturated domestic job market

The demanding domestic job market serves as a significant push factor driving Chinese students to explore alternative opportunities. The growing number of graduates coupled with a shrinking pool of job opportunities has intensified competition, creating a highly competitive and stressful environment. Participants in the study often referred to this situation as 'nei juan', a term that encapsulates the feeling of being caught in an unrelenting struggle to outperform peers, a constant race that produces stress, tension, and dissatisfaction (Consoli, 2024).

Given this competitive pressure, many participants (e.g., Mei, Fang, Ran, Jie, and Jun) viewed studying in Tanzania as a strategic escape from the intense demands of China's hyper-competitive job market. They believed that studying in Tanzania would allow them to reset their personal and professional trajectories, free from the overwhelming pressures of the domestic labor market. This decision was motivated by a sense of optimism about the emerging opportunities in Tanzania, which offered a potentially less stressful, more balanced, and fulfilling environment. As Mei explained:

> China's job market is tough – the long hours and stress rarely match the pay. Tanzania's market looks brighter, with better growth and the promise of work-life balance and job satisfaction I couldn't find at home.

This sentiment illustrates a broader shift in the outlook of Chinese students. Faced with the mounting pressures of the domestic job market, many viewed studying in Tanzania as not only a chance for career advancement but also an opportunity to escape the stressors and dissatisfaction of the job market in China. Despite potential challenges in adapting to a new country, students were drawn to the opportunity of pursuing a more rewarding career and lifestyle in Tanzania. They saw it as a strategic and practical decision for their long-term personal and professional development.

High expenditure in Western countries

The substantial financial burden associated with study-abroad programs in Western countries emerged as a key push factor influencing participants' decisions to explore alternative destinations such as Tanzania. Western programs are often characterized by high tuition fees and competitive entry requirements, which can be prohibitively expensive, particularly for students from less affluent backgrounds (Kondakci, 2011). These programs are often profit-driven, leading to tuition costs that impose considerable financial strain on students. Additionally, limited scholarship availability further exacerbates this challenge, making Western education inaccessible to many students who are financially constrained (Kondakci, 2011). As Hong reflected:

> Western education costs too much and is far beyond my budget. While disappointing, I doubt the investment would pay off given the uncertain returns.

This sentiment reflects a growing concern among students about the financial viability of studying in Western countries. For many, the combination of steep tuition fees, high living expenses, and limited scholarships creates a significant barrier. Even students who may have the financial means to pursue an education in the West are often prompted to critically assess whether the high cost of education in developed countries justifies the potential returns, especially given the uncertainty of post-graduation employment outcomes. As Lee (2022) points out, despite the prestige of a degree from a Western institution, these credentials do not necessarily guarantee secure or lucrative career outcomes. This financial calculus pushed students to consider alternative destinations like Tanzania, which offers relatively low costs of education and living, as well as opportunities that align with their academic and professional goals.

Credential inflation

Many participants (e.g., Jing, Chao, Jie, and Lu) expressed concerns about the declining value of traditional degrees due to the oversaturation of graduates with similar qualifications. The global expansion of higher education has significantly weakened the correlation between academic credentials and economic rewards, leading to the devaluation of degrees in an increasingly competitive job market (Araki & Kariya, 2022). As a result, students have shifted from a credentialism approach – where the degree itself is viewed as the key to success – to a more pragmatic perspective that prioritizes the acquisition of specialized skills and practical experience. This shift has led students to reconsider the utility of conventional academic pathways. For those seeking careers that require Africa-related expertise, direct engagement with African contexts – such as studying in Tanzania – was perceived as more valuable than merely obtaining a degree. As Jing expressed:

> Credential itself is not that important. What really counts are the practical skills and real-world knowledge you gain. My Tanzanian qualification might not turn heads, but the connections and insights I'm building here will be worth far more than any fancy certificate for my future Africa-focused career.

This pragmatic attitude reflects a broader shift in how students perceive the purpose of education, recognizing that the true value lies not in acquiring a degree for its own sake, but in developing skills and knowledge that are directly applicable to real-world challenges (Araki & Kariya, 2022). Credential inflation has prompted students to reassess the returns on educational investments, leading them to seek programs that offer more direct career benefits. In this context, Tanzania emerged as an attractive destination, offering opportunities to gain Africa-specific skills, cultural insights, and valuable local networks, all of which are considered more valuable and career-enhancing than simply pursuing a traditional, degree-driven educational path in Western countries.

Personal constraints

Several participants (e.g., Qian, Chao, Niu, and Tian) identified personal constraints related to finances and academic performance as key factors influencing their decision to study in Tanzania. These students come from less affluent backgrounds and have modest academic records compared to their peers. Considering these constraints, they

tend to make pragmatic choices that balance their aspirations with practical realities. The high competition and prohibitive costs associated with studying in developed countries present significant barriers for these students. In contrast, Tanzania emerges as a more viable option that accommodates their financial and academic realities. As Chao explained:

> With average grades and a modest family background, my study-abroad options are limited. Tanzania stands out as the perfect solution – affordable and achievable for someone like me.

This pragmatic approach to studying abroad reflects the students' understanding of their constraints and their strategic use of available resources. By choosing Tanzania, these students are able to align their educational ambitions with practical opportunities. Rather than being discouraged by their personal limitations, they demonstrate agency in selecting educational pathways that are both achievable and meaningful. Tanzania offers a feasible pathway for students to advance their educational and career goals within the confines of their current circumstances.

Discussion

The study explored factors motivating Chinese students to study in Tanzania. The findings illustrate various intertwined structural and individual factors making them to pioneer the less-taken path in Tanzania. On the one hand, Tanzania attract students through factors such as the growing China-Tanzania engagements, university alliance, governmental scholarships, and relatively low entry requirements. These conditions make Tanzania an appealing option for students seeking unique experiences and opportunities to accumulate Africa-related professional capital, which can distinguish them and enhance their future prospects. On the other hand, the study also identifies several push factors that drive students toward this less conventional choice. These include a saturated domestic job market, the high costs associated with Western-oriented education programs, and credential inflation, which collectively create a push for students to seek more accessible, cost-effective, and practical educational alternatives. These challenges force students to adopt a pragmatic approach when selecting study destinations that can provide better value and broader opportunities, especially given their individual constrains. While these factors are presented separately, it is noticeable that they are interconnected with one other rather than function independently (De Haas, 2021; Massey et al., 1993). In the discussion, we aim to further elucidate the intricate interplay between individual and structural factors through the lens of the modified push–pull model.

On the one hand, structural forces would influence and shape individual actions, considering individual choice as an intrinsic part of the social structure. In line with numerous prior studies emphasizing the profound influence of geopolitical power structures on ISM (e.g., Cantwell et al., 2009; Mulvey, 2021; Wen & Hu, 2019), the enhanced China-Tanzania engagement emerges as a fundamental structural pull factor in our research. Immersed in the bourgeoning China-Tanzania engagement, students gradually develop positive expectations towards African-related issues, which is crucial for their decision to study in Tanzania. These enhanced relations facilitate collaboration between Chinese and Tanzanian universities, leading to the emergence of joint programs

that make studying in Tanzania more accessible. Similar to existing research emphasizing the importance of scholarships (e.g., Ma, 2017; Oladipo et al., 2023), substantial governmental financial supports attract students to seize the opportunity. It not only alleviates their financial concerns but also provides them with a premium endorsement for their personal capabilities. Moreover, the relatively low entry requirements of Tanzanian educational programs further enhance the feasibility of studying in Tanzania. This contextual factor enables students to embrace the opportunity to realize personal aspirations such as gaining diverse personal experiences and accumulating Africa-related capitals. Different from previous research on reverse student flow, which emphasizes primarily the pursuit of personal experiences (Cantwell et al., 2009; Kondakci, 2011) or cosmopolitanism (Lee, 2022), this study enriches the understanding by highlighting the accumulation of specialized capital. Students are particularly focused on acquiring Africa-related expertise and credentials to distinguish themselves from their peers and enhance their competitive edge in the job market. This focus on specialized capital is informed by the expectation that the ongoing collaboration between China and Africa will generate an increasing demand for professionals skilled in African affairs. Consequently, the combination of strategic cooperation, university alliance, financial support, and low entry requirements structurally shapes students' rationale, making the prospect of studying in Africa inherently appealing to them.

On the other hand, the findings underscore the proactive role of individual agencies in responding to structural constraints. When confronted with the intensified competition within the domestic labor market, these students seek alternative pathways to escape the prevailing 'rat race' (Consoli, 2024). Viewing Africa as a promising alternative for future development, they perceive studying in Tanzania as a strategic move as a solution for current dilemma. This aligns with previous research emphasizing students' considerations of future personal development when deciding to study abroad (Kondakci, 2011; Li & Bray, 2007; Oladipo et al., 2023). Meanwhile, considering the structural limitation of high requirements and expenditures in developed countries, students recognize their academic and financial deficits and proactively adopt a more pragmatic attitude toward education. In contrast to previous findings that emphasized the value of credentials in developed countries (Consoli, 2024; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), the students in this study appear to be more critical of credentialism and more cautious about making significant investments in education with uncertain returns. Given the increasing credential inflation, these students prioritize the intrinsic value of their study abroad experiences and adopt a more realistic perspective on their personal development and the resources they can acquire to improve future prospects. As the competition for distinction in the labor market increasingly transcends the mere acquisition of credentials (Araki & Kariya, 2022; Lee, 2022), studying in Tanzania emerges as an optimal solution to these challenges. By embracing a pragmatic mindset, acknowledging personal constrains, and engaging with Tanzanian educational opportunities, these students demonstrate agency in navigating the structural constraints they face.

This study highlights several theoretical contributions and practical implications. Theoretically, previous research (e.g., Li & Bray, 2007; Oladipo et al., 2023) employing the traditional push–pull model has typically treated structural and individual factors as distinct and independent variables, often neglecting the potential interactions between them. The modified push–pull model proposed in this study provides a more

integrative analytical framework by explicitly accounting for the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency. By emphasizing their interconnection, the model moves beyond the limitations of a micro – macro dichotomy and offers a more dynamic and holistic interpretation of rationales behind student mobility. Rather than presenting straightforward, linear relationships that risk oversimplifying complex dynamics, this framework conceptualizes student mobility as the result of ongoing negotiations between external structures and personal decision-making processes. This theoretical refinement contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex, interconnected rationales that shape student mobility, especially in unconventional trajectories such as the China – Tanzania case. In doing so, it advance our understanding of how social structural factors shape individuals' actions, while also recognizing how individuals respond to, resist, or adapt to structural changes. Practically, it highlights the evolving landscape of ISM, where students are seeking educational opportunities beyond traditional destinations (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). There is a noticeable trend towards pragmatism among students when considering studying abroad. Within this context, seemingly unpopular destinations are gaining increasing attention as viable alternatives for students. These destinations are typically less competitive and more cost-efficient, yet they can equally offer unique rewards and opportunities for students' personal and professional growth. It is imperative for Chinese educational institutions and policymakers to adapt their strategies and offerings to meet this evolving demand. Educational institutions should expand program offerings, promote and provide tailored support services to address the evolving needs of students. Policymakers should acknowledge the diversified preferences of students and implement policies and funding mechanisms to support those who choose these unconventional destinations. By doing so, these relevant stakeholders can better adapt to the changing landscape and ensure continued growth and innovation in student mobility initiatives.

Conclusion

Overall, this study advances the understanding of the intricate motivations underlying reverse student mobility from China to Tanzania. Emphasizing the interaction between individual and structural factors, the modified push–pull model addresses some of the critiques and limitations of the traditional push–pull model, which often ignores the interplay between different layers. The findings also contribute to broadening the discourse on reverse international student mobility, particularly in the context of the Global South.

However, this study has its limitations. Due to the relatively small and homogeneous sample of interviewees, the collected data may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study did not include Chinese students pursuing STEM majors, which may provide a different perspective compared to those fields of our study. Moreover, all participants in this study were recipients of the CSC scholarship. While this funding structure plays a critical role in shaping students' decisions, it also introduces a structural uniformity that may overshadow the role of individual agency in the decision-making process. The motivations of self-financed students, who are not bound by the same incentives, may differ significantly and remain unexplored in this research. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods or large-scale quantitative

approach to incorporate a more diverse and representative sample (e.g., various academic disciplines and funding backgrounds) to achieve more comprehensive and generalizable findings.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the participants for sharing their experiences, which were invaluable to this study. We are also grateful to the editor and anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and insightful comments, which significantly enhanced the quality of our manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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