

From Enrollment to Employment: Motivations, Decadal Trends, and Career Outcomes of Tajik Students in China (2014-2024)

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Abstract

Against the rapid expansion of South-South international student mobility and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has become the world's third-largest destination for international students, hosting more than 500,000 students by 2024. Central Asian students, particularly those from Tajikistan, remain an under-investigated group: more than 5000 Tajik students are currently enrolled in Chinese universities, and the Confucius Institute at Tajik National University has trained over 42,000 Mandarin learners since 2008, yet empirical evidence on their motivations, capital accumulation, and career trajectories is limited. This qualitative case study examines evolving motivations, decadal trends, and post-graduation career outcomes among Tajik students in China between 2014 and 2024, drawing on 18 semi-structured interviews with alumni who had completed their degree programs, stratified into three cohorts: 2014-2018 (early BRI expansion), 2019-2021 (COVID-19 disruption), and 2022-2024 (post-pandemic recovery). Reflexive thematic analysis was guided by an integrated framework combining Bourdieu's capital theory and Tomlinson's graduate capital model. Findings show a clear progression in motivations, from scholarship access (80%, Cohort 1) to Mandarin as symbolic capital (83%, Cohort 2) to strategic, BRI-linked career planning (100%, Cohort 3). Participants accumulated substantial linguistic (100%), social (89%), cultural (83%), and psychological (78%) capital, yet structural barriers, chiefly a two-year work-experience visa requirement, limited long-term employment in China to 16.7% of participants ($n = 3$). Four mutually exclusive post-graduation career-outcome categories emerged: return migration to Tajikistan (66.7%), long-term employment in China (16.7%), transnational employment in third countries (11.1%), and cross-border entrepreneurship (5.6%). The study addresses geographical, temporal, and theoretical gaps in South-South mobility research by centering Tajik students, extending graduate capital theory to a non-Western context,

and proposing China as a capital incubation hub rather than a settlement destination. Findings offer policymakers and higher education institutions actionable evidence for strengthening BRI-related educational cooperation, reforming post-study visa policy, and improving international graduate employability and mobility outcomes.

Keywords

International Student Mobility, Graduate Employability, Belt and Road Initiative, Capital Accumulation, Tajikistan

1. Introduction

Global international student mobility has undergone profound structural transformation over the past two decades, shifting from a dominant North-South paradigm toward an increasingly diversified system featuring robust South-South flows (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022). As a major emerging economy and pivotal actor in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has risen rapidly to become the world's third-largest host country for international students, welcoming more than 500,000 learners by 2024. This expansion reflects broader geopolitical and economic realignments, as higher education has become a core instrument of soft power, talent development, and cross-national connectivity, and it raises pressing questions of educational equity and opportunity that fall squarely within contemporary debates on the internationalization of higher education.

Against this backdrop, Tajikistan represents a highly significant yet under-researched case. As a landlocked, lower-middle-income country in Central Asia, Tajikistan maintains strong political, economic, and cultural ties with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and long-term bilateral cooperation mechanisms. Official statistics indicate that more than 5000 Tajik students are currently pursuing degrees in Chinese universities, while the Confucius Institute at Tajik National University has trained over 42,000 Mandarin learners since its establishment in 2008. These figures underscore the deepening educational integration between the two countries, particularly within the framework of the BRI, which has prioritized people-to-people exchanges and talent cultivation.

Despite these developments, empirical research on Tajik students in China remains strikingly limited. Existing scholarship tends to focus on student cohorts from Southeast Asia, Africa, or Western countries, leaving Central Asian learners especially those from Tajikistan—largely absent from English-language academic discourse. This geographical gap restricts the generalizability of current theories of international student mobility and graduate employability, which were largely developed within Western or North-South contexts. Furthermore, most studies provide only static, cross-sectional snapshots of student experience, lacking a longitudinal perspective that captures motivational and behavioral change over time. Few studies have explored how global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or

policy shifts related to the BRI, have reshaped student decision-making, capital accumulation, and career trajectories a gap with direct relevance for institutions and policymakers seeking to design responsive, evidence-based educational cooperation.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating Tajik students' evolving motivations, decadal trends, and post-graduation career outcomes in China between 2014 and 2024. This ten-year period is divided into three phases: early BRI expansion (2014-2018), pandemic disruption (2019-2021), and post-pandemic recovery (2022-2024). Using a qualitative case study design and reflexive thematic analysis, the research draws on 18 semi-structured interviews with alumni who had completed their degree programs, analyzed through an integrated framework combining Bourdieu's theory of capital and Tomlinson's graduate capital model.

This study makes several contributions relevant to education research and practice. First, it fills a geographical gap by centering Tajik students, a group largely neglected in international education literature. Second, it provides a rare decadal, cohort-based analysis that reveals dynamic shifts in student motivations and behaviors, offering educators and policymakers a longitudinal evidence base rather than a single-point snapshot. Third, it extends graduate capital theory to South-South mobility contexts and introduces the concept of China as a capital incubation hub, challenging assumptions that international students primarily seek permanent settlement. Practically, the findings offer evidence-based guidance for policymakers, university administrators, and career-services practitioners seeking to strengthen educational cooperation, improve graduate employability, and align talent development with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities) agendas.

1.1. Research Questions

Guided by the research gaps and theoretical framework, this study addresses three questions:

- 1) How have the motivations of Tajik students for studying in China evolved between 2014 and 2024?
- 2) How do Tajik students perceive and describe their processes of capital accumulation during their studies in China?
- 3) What career pathways do Tajik graduates pursue after completing their education in China, and what structural factors shape these pathways?

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it advances scholarly understanding of South-South student mobility by validating non-Western models of educational migration and extending graduate capital theory to cross-cultural contexts, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of international student experience. Practically, the findings provide actionable insight for Chinese policymakers aiming to improve talent retention and interna-

tional education governance, and for Tajik authorities seeking to maximize the benefits of human-capital development. For universities, the results support the design of more targeted career services, language training, and cross-cultural support programs, strengthening the foundation for sustainable, mutually beneficial educational cooperation between China and Tajikistan within the BRI framework.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. International Student Mobility: From North-South to South-South Paradigms

Historically, international student mobility has been dominated by a North-South framework, in which students from developing countries migrate to advanced economies in North America, Western Europe, and Australia (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This model is rooted in push-pull theory, which explains mobility as a function of negative domestic conditions (limited educational capacity, economic instability, and poor labor prospects) and attractive host-country conditions (academic prestige, scholarships, and migration opportunities). However, since the early 2000s, the rise of emerging economies has reshaped global flows, giving rise to South-South mobility—student movement between developing and transitional economies (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022). China has emerged as a flagship destination in this new landscape: by 2024, China hosted over 500,000 international students, making it the third-largest receiving country worldwide (Li et al., 2025). A large share of these students originates from BRI countries, including those in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Unlike traditional North-South mobility, South-South flows are often characterized by shorter geographic distances, lower costs, cultural proximity, and stronger alignment with regional economic integration (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022), and students in these systems increasingly pursue education for skills acquisition and transnational employability rather than permanent settlement (Dai & Pham, 2024).

2.2. China as an International Education Hub and BRI Educational Governance

China's global education strategy is deeply embedded in state policy and diplomatic objectives. Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, educational exchange has been formally positioned as a pillar of people-to-people connectivity (Yang, 2022). Through government scholarships, Confucius Institutes, and bilateral agreements, China has systematically expanded recruitment of international students, especially from partner nations (Li et al., 2025; Mok & Xu, 2020). For Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, geographic proximity, cultural familiarity, and growing economic ties have further strengthened study-in-China trends (Xinhua News Agency, 2025). Structural barriers nonetheless remain prominent: post-graduation work-visa policies require two years of relevant work experience, severely limiting graduates' ability to work long-term in China (Dai & Pham, 2024). This mismatch between strong recruitment incentives and restrictive employment ac-

cess has become a key concern in international student research and, from a policy standpoint, a clear illustration of how admissions strategy and post-study labor-market governance can pull in opposite directions (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li et al., 2025).

2.3. Graduate Employability and the Capital Framework

Graduate employability is no longer viewed merely as human capital (knowledge and skills) but as a multidimensional capital process (Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson's graduate capital model identifies five interrelated forms: human capital (disciplinary knowledge, technical skills, and qualifications), social capital (professional networks, peer and faculty connections), cultural capital (norms, behaviors, and cultural competence valued by employers), psychological capital (resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy), and identity capital (career self-awareness and professional narrative). This model builds on Bourdieu's (1986) classic theory of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Recent empirical research in China confirms that international graduates accumulate linguistic capital (Mandarin), social capital via alumni networks, and psychological capital through cross-cultural adaptation (Dai & Pham, 2024); these capitals become especially valuable in BRI-related sectors such as trade, logistics, infrastructure, and cross-border services. In one of the few studies to apply the graduate capital model directly to international students in China, Dai and Pham (2024) found that graduates strategically combined human, social, cultural, psychological, identity, and agentic capital to navigate the Chinese labour market, but that the relative weight of each capital form differed from patterns documented in developed-country contexts, with informal networks and language-based cultural competence playing an outsized role. This reinforces the need for context-sensitive applications of graduate capital theory in developing-country host settings such as China.

2.4. South-South Mobility and Central Asian Students

Despite growing interest in South-South mobility, research on Central Asian students in China remains extremely limited. Existing studies focus heavily on African or Southeast Asian cohorts, leaving Tajik students largely unexamined (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022). Available evidence suggests that Central Asian students are motivated by scholarships, language acquisition, and employment prospects linked to Chinese investment (Li et al., 2025; Xinhua News Agency, 2025). Mandarin proficiency is increasingly recognized as symbolic capital that enhances social status and labor-market advantage in Central Asian countries (Xinhua News Agency, 2025). However, graduates face significant constraints, including limited recognition of foreign qualifications, weak domestic labor-market absorption, and visa barriers in China. These factors push graduates toward return migration, third-country employment, or cross-border entrepreneurship—pathways rarely addressed in conventional mobility literature (Dai & Pham, 2024). Recent scholarship on academic diplomacy further situates China's growing educational presence in Tajikistan within a wider geopolitical rivalry with Russia, showing that

Chinese scholarships, Confucius Institutes, and vocational Luban Workshops have expanded rapidly even though language barriers, visa regulations, and the cost of living continue to constrain the overall attractiveness of China as a study destination relative to Russia (Rashidov et al., 2024). This body of work underscores that Tajik students' engagement with China cannot be separated from broader state-level soft-power dynamics, even as individual students pursue personal and career-oriented goals.

2.5. Research Gaps

Three gaps justify the present study. A geographical gap reflects the lack of empirical research on Tajik students in China. A temporal gap reflects the absence of decadal, cohort-based analysis covering 2014–2024. A theoretical gap reflects the limited application of graduate capital theory to South-South mobility. This study addresses all three gaps by examining motivational change, capital accumulation, and career trajectories among Tajik students. **Figure 1** presents the integrated conceptual framework guiding this study, in which structural factors mediate the conversion of accumulated capital into employment outcomes.

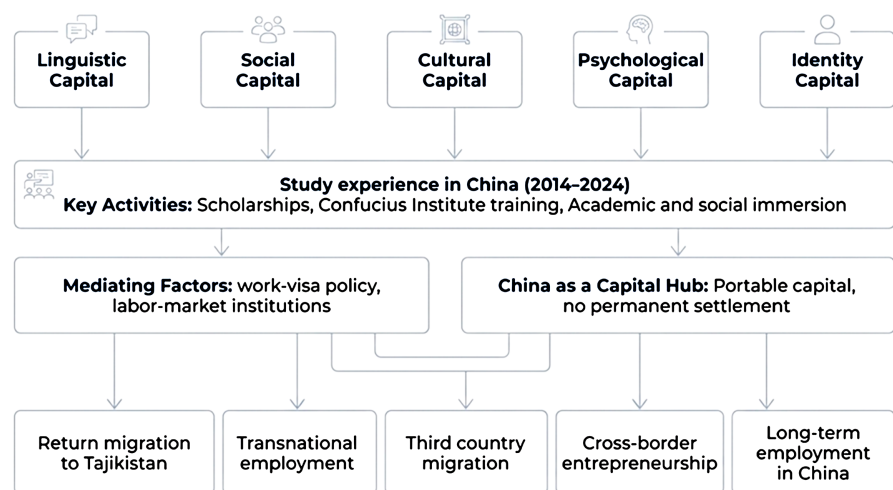


Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework of capital accumulation and mobilization among Tajik students in China. Structural factors, including work-visa policy and labor-market institutions, mediate the conversion of accumulated capital into employment outcomes.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design appropriate for exploring lived experiences, evolving motivations, capital-accumulation processes, and career trajectories of Tajik students in China from 2014 to 2024 (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). An interpretivist paradigm underpins the study, emphasizing socially constructed reality and meaning-making from participant perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To capture decadal change, the study uses temporal

stratification, dividing participants into three cohorts: Cohort 1, 2014-2018 (early BRI expansion); Cohort 2, 2019-2021 (COVID-19 disruption); and Cohort 3, 2022-2024 (post-pandemic recovery). This retrospective cross-sectional cohort comparison design enables systematic comparison of motivational shifts, capital formation, and career outcomes across cohorts (Li et al., 2025; Dai & Pham, 2024). Because each participant was interviewed once rather than followed over time, cross-cohort differences describe retrospective cohort narratives reconstructed at a single point in time rather than observed within-person change; comparisons across cohorts should therefore be read as cohort-specific patterns rather than as a record of individual trajectories evolving over the decade.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required Tajik nationals who pursued degree-level study (undergraduate or postgraduate) in China between 2014 and 2024, with at least one full academic year of enrollment; short-term exchange students and non-degree language learners were excluded. The final sample comprised 18 participants (10 male, 8 female), distributed as Cohort 1, n = 5; Cohort 2, n = 6; and Cohort 3, n = 7. Participants represented diverse disciplines including engineering, economics, business administration, Chinese language, and international relations. At the time of interview, participants resided in Tajikistan, China, the United Arab Emirates, or Türkiye. Cohort membership was defined by degree-completion (graduation) year rather than by year of enrollment, and all 18 participants had completed their degree programs prior to interview; this ensured that every participant was eligible for post-graduation career-pathway classification and that no in-progress students without observable career outcomes were included in the career-outcome analysis reported in Section 4.3. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants by cohort, and individual participant profiles are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants by cohort.

Cohort	n	Gender (M/F)	Academic Level	Major Fields	Current Location
2014-2018	5	4/1	Bachelor's/Master's	Engineering, Economics	Tajikistan, China
2019-2021	6	2/4	Bachelor's	Chinese Language, Business	Tajikistan, UAE
2022-2024	7	4/3	Bachelor's/Master's	Logistics, International Relations, Business	Tajikistan, China, Türkiye
Total	18	10/8	-	-	-

Note: n = 18. BRI = Belt and Road Initiative.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2026. Interviews lasted 45 - 60 minutes and were held online via Zoom

or WhatsApp to accommodate transnational participants, and were conducted in English, Russian, or Tajik according to participant preference to ensure linguistic comfort and accuracy. The interview protocol was structured around three sections: 1) pre-arrival motivations and decision-making, 2) in-China experiences and capital accumulation, and 3) post-graduation career pathways and structural constraints. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Pilot testing with two Tajik students ensured cultural appropriateness and logical flow.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), managed with NVivo 14 software, in six phases: 1) familiarization with transcripts, 2) initial open coding, 3) theme development, 4) cross-cohort comparison, 5) theme review and refinement, and 6) narrative reporting. Coding was guided deductively by the integrated framework of Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory and Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model, while allowing inductive themes to emerge from the data.

A coding note clarifies two frequently referenced terms. "Dominant motivation" (Table 2) refers to the single motivational code judged most salient in a participant's account of their decision to study in China; one dominant-motivation code was assigned per participant, so the cohort percentages in Table 2 are mutually exclusive and sum to the cohort n. "Strong capital gain" (Table 3) refers to a capital domain a participant described in clearly positive, high-magnitude terms during coding; because capital domains are conceptually independent, participants could receive multiple capital-gain codes, so percentages in that table are not mutually exclusive and do not sum to 100%. Linguistic (Mandarin) capital was coded as a distinct analytic category that cuts across Tomlinson's (2017) human capital (skills and qualifications) and cultural capital (competence and norms valued by employers) rather than as a separate, sixth form of capital; it is reported on its own because participants overwhelmingly described it as their single most consequential resource, combining technical/human-capital and cultural-capital properties in ways the broader categories did not fully capture. Counts are reported alongside percentages in Table 2 and Table 3 to make the underlying n transparent.

Table 2. Shifts in motivations by cohort (Percentage Summary).

Cohort	Dominant Motivation	Percentage	Key Quote Theme
2014-2018	Scholarship & economic necessity	80% (n = 4/5)	"Only affordable foreign degree"
2019-2021	Mandarin as symbolic capital	83% (n = 5/6)	"Chinese = new English"
2022-2024	BRI-focused career strategy	100% (n = 7/7)	"Choose China for jobs in trade & logistics"

Note: Percentages are derived from interview thematic prevalence. One dominant-motivation code was assigned per participant; counts are mutually exclusive within each cohort.

3.5. Trustworthiness

Four dimensions of trustworthiness were established following Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported through member checking with five participants and peer debriefing. Transferability was supported through thick contextual description and full demographic reporting. Dependability was supported through an audit trail of coding decisions and revisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling to reduce researcher bias.

4. Results

This section presents findings derived from 18 semi-structured interviews with Tajik alumni who had completed their studies in China between 2014 and 2024. Using reflexive thematic analysis, three overarching themes emerged: 1) evolving motivational patterns across three cohorts, 2) multi-dimensional capital accumulation during study in China, and 3) career pathways structured by institutional and policy constraints. Findings are supported by participant narratives and cross-cohort comparisons.

4.1. Theme 1: Evolving Motivations across Three Cohorts

Data reveal a cohort-specific pattern in Tajik students' motivations for choosing China as a study destination, broadly coinciding with the timing of BRI implementation, pandemic conditions, and regional labor-market expectations. Because the three cohorts also differ in gender balance, degree level, field of study, and recruitment accessibility (Table 1), and because participants were interviewed once rather than tracked over time, these motivational differences are interpreted as patterns that distinguish the cohorts as sampled rather than as evidence that BRI implementation or the pandemic caused change within individual students over time. Figure 2 summarizes the evolution of these dominant motivations across the three cohorts.

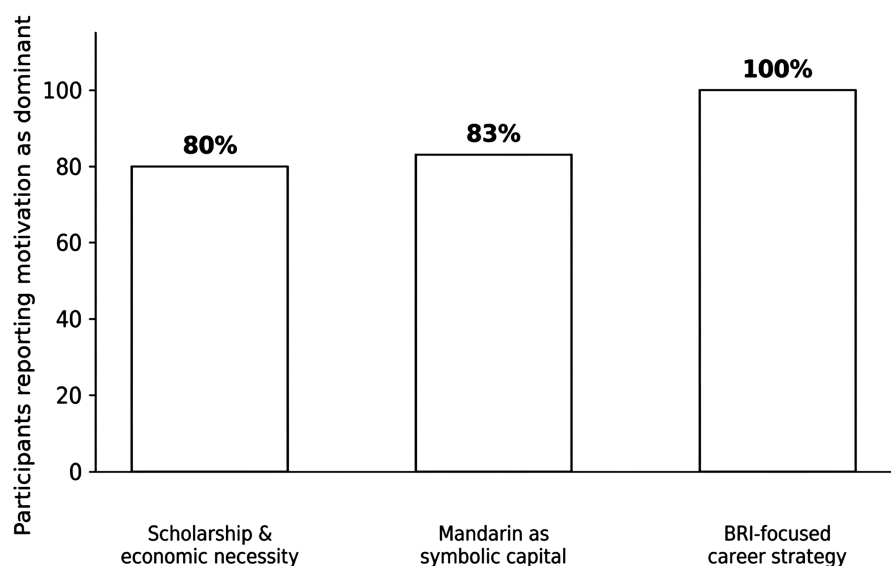


Figure 2. Evolution of dominant study motivations across cohorts, 2014-2024.

4.1.1. Cohort 1 (2014-2018): Scholarship-Driven Enrollment

Participants in Cohort 1 consistently identified scholarship availability and economic necessity as dominant drivers. Approximately 80% of this group indicated that limited domestic higher-education capacity and scarce Western scholarships left China as the most realistic pathway to a foreign degree; economic stability and family financial support were primary concerns.

“In Tajikistan, there were almost no scholarships for Europe or America. The Chinese scholarship covered everything—tuition, accommodation, living costs. For my family, this was the only real chance.”

-P3, male, engineering

Participants also noted early signs of China’s economic presence in Tajikistan but lacked clear career planning; motivations were largely reactive and opportunity-based rather than strategically employment-oriented.

4.1.2. Cohort 2 (2019-2021): Mandarin as Symbolic Capital

During the pandemic period, Mandarin language acquisition emerged as the central motivation, with approximately 83% of participants identifying language proficiency as a primary goal. Mandarin was increasingly viewed as a form of symbolic capital, consistent with Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualization of symbolic capital as a resource that enhances social status and instrumental advantage in both Tajikistan and regional labor markets.

“Choosing Chinese today is like choosing English before—it means a lot. Everyone knows China is investing in Tajikistan, so people who speak Chinese have big advantages.”

-P9, female, Chinese language

Pandemic disruptions reinforced the long-term value of language as a transferable skill independent of physical presence in China, further solidifying Mandarin’s role as a critical form of symbolic capital for this cohort.

4.1.3. Cohort 3 (2022-2024): Strategic, BRI-Oriented Career Planning

In the post-pandemic period, 100% of participants in the 2022-2024 cohort expressed explicit, career-driven motivations directly linked to BRI-related sectors including logistics, cross-border trade, infrastructure construction, and transnational business cooperation. Unlike the previous two cohorts, these students made deliberate, strategic choices to study in China with the primary goal of gaining competitive advantage in regional labor markets aligned with BRI development priorities.

“I didn’t choose China only for a degree. I chose it because I want to work in China-Tajik trade. Many companies need people who understand both languages and both business cultures.”

-P15, male, business administration

This cohort demonstrated strong awareness of transnational career opportunities beyond China and Tajikistan, particularly in the UAE, Türkiye, and Russia, reflecting a mature understanding of regional labor-market demand and a proac-

tive approach to leveraging capital accumulated in China for transnational career development.

4.2. Theme 2: Capital Accumulation during Study in China

Beyond motivational shifts across the three cohorts, all participants reported substantial gains across multiple forms of capital, consistent with Tomlinson’s (2017) graduate capital framework. Linguistic capital (Mandarin) was identified as the most valuable capital by 100% of participants, underscoring its central role in both symbolic and instrumental terms. Approximately 89% gained professional networks (social capital), 83% acquired cultural capital through cross-cultural immersion, and 78% reported growth in psychological capital, including resilience and cross-cultural adaptability. Figure 3 summarizes the relative prevalence of these capital forms across the full sample, and the exact counts and percentages for each capital type are shown in Table 3.

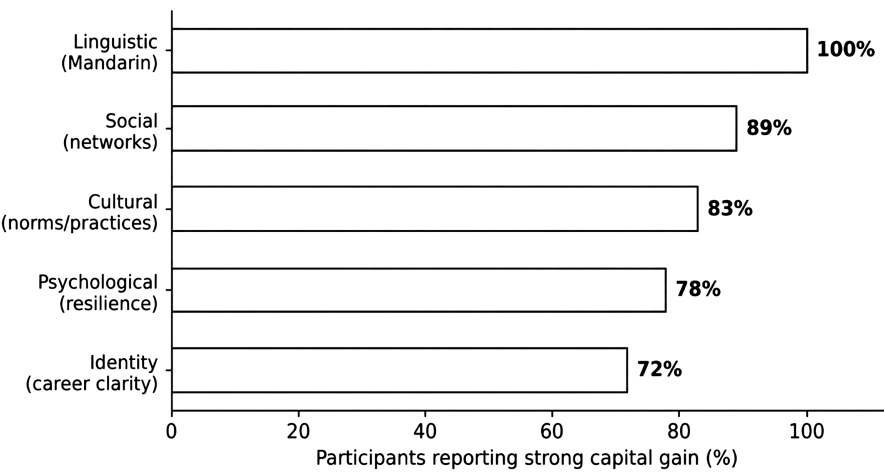


Figure 3. Forms of capital accumulated during study in China (n = 18).

Table 3. Capital accumulation prevalence.

Capital Type	Percentage Reporting Strong Gain
Linguistic (Mandarin)	100% (n = 18/18)
Social (networks)	89% (n = 16/18)
Cultural (norms/practices)	83% (n = 15/18)
Psychological (resilience)	78% (n = 14/18)
Identity (career clarity)	72% (n = 13/18)

Note: Based on participant self-reported capital gains. Participants could receive multiple capital-gain codes, so percentages are not mutually exclusive and do not sum to 100%.

4.3. Theme 3: Career Pathways and Structural Constraints

Despite substantial capital accumulation and strategic career planning among participants, structural barriers significantly limited long-term employment pro-

spects in China. Only 16.7% (3 of 18) of participants secured long-term employment in China, with the primary barrier being restrictive work-visa policies mandating two years of relevant professional experience prior to application.

In response to these constraints, four mutually exclusive post-graduation career-outcome categories emerged: return migration to Tajikistan (66.7%, $n = 12$), long-term employment in China (16.7%, $n = 3$), transnational employment in third countries (11.1%, $n = 2$), and cross-border entrepreneurship (5.6%, $n = 1$). These pathways collectively reflect how Tajik graduates mobilize the capital accumulated in China to navigate structural constraints and pursue sustainable career development. **Figure 4** displays the distribution of participants across these four career-outcome categories, and the exact counts and percentages are shown in **Table 4**. The employment status of each individual participant is shown in **Table A1** in the **Appendix**.

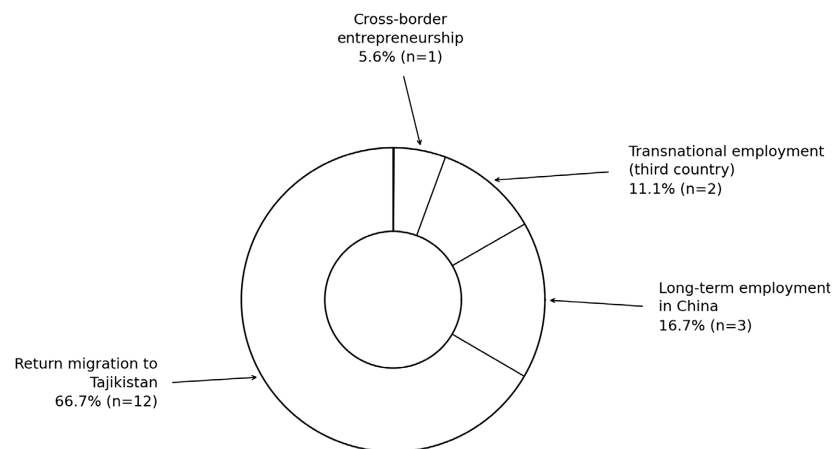


Figure 4. Post-graduation career pathway distribution ($n = 18$). The four career-outcome categories shown are mutually exclusive and together account for the full sample ($n = 18$): return migration to Tajikistan (66.7%), long-term employment in China (16.7%, $n = 3$), transnational employment in third countries (11.1%), and cross-border entrepreneurship (5.6%).

Table 4. Career pathway distribution ($n = 18$).

Career Pathway	n	Percentage
Return migration to Tajikistan	12	66.7%
Transnational employment (third country)	2	11.1%
Cross-border entrepreneurship	1	5.6%
Long-term employment in China	3	16.7%

Note. $n = 18$. The four pathway categories are mutually exclusive, defined by participants' primary post-graduation employment location and activity type, and together account for the full sample; percentages may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

4.4. Summary of Findings

Tajik students' experiences reflect a dynamic interaction between individual agency

and structural constraint. While China serves as a strong site for capital accumulation, visa limitations prevent most graduates from long-term employment there, channelling accumulated capital into alternative, transnational career pathways.

5. Discussion

This section interprets the study's findings against the integrated framework of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model, while engaging critically with existing literature on South-South student mobility, international graduate employability, and BRI educational governance. The discussion emphasizes theoretical advancement, empirical originality, contextual sensitivity, and relevance to education policy and practice.

5.1. Evolving Motivations and the Rise of Strategic Transnationalism

The findings reveal a clear, decade-long evolution in Tajik student motivations: from scholarship-driven survival (2014-2018), to language-focused symbolic accumulation (2019-2021), to fully strategic, career-oriented transnationalism (2022-2024). This trajectory aligns with broader transformations in South-South mobility but extends prior research by documenting a decadal, cohort-based shift within a single Central Asian national group (Li et al., 2025; Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022). Early-cohort motivations reflected classic push-pull dynamics (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002): limited domestic higher-education capacity, economic pressure, and scarce Western scholarships. By contrast, post-pandemic students treated education in China as a deliberate investment in BRI-related sectors, including logistics, trade, infrastructure, and cross-border business. This shift suggests that contemporary South-South mobility is no longer merely a substitute for Western education but a distinct, career-focused mobility project (Dai & Pham, 2024). The increased valuation of Mandarin as symbolic capital echoes empirical observations among Central Asian youth (Xinhua News Agency, 2025); for participants, mastering Mandarin was not merely linguistic skill-building but a pursuit of prestige, employability, and social recognition—core dimensions of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These findings refine push-pull theory by highlighting symbolic and future-oriented labor-market returns as increasingly powerful pull factors.

5.2. China as a “Capital Incubation Hub”: Theoretical Contribution

A central theoretical contribution of this study is the conceptualization of China as a capital incubation hub rather than a permanent migration destination. This concept challenges the dominant North-South assumption that international students pursue long-term settlement (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Instead, Tajik students use China to accumulate portable, transferable capital that is mobilized later in Tajikistan, third countries, or cross-border entrepreneurship. This framework extends graduate capital theory (Tomlinson, 2017) into a South-South context by

demonstrating that linguistic capital (Mandarin) becomes the most monetizable and influential form of human capital; social capital operates through informal networks rather than institutional career services (Dai & Pham, 2024); psychological capital (resilience, adaptability) becomes critical to cross-cultural navigation; and structural factors (visa policy, labor-market institutions) mediate whether accumulated capital can be converted into employment. By highlighting these dynamics, the study responds to calls for more contextually grounded theories of international student mobility (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022).

5.3. Structural Constraints and Policy Mismatch

The single most powerful structural barrier identified was China's post-graduation work-visa policy requiring two years of relevant professional experience. This restriction limited long-term employment in China to just 16.7% (3/18) of participants, creating a policy mismatch between China's large-scale investment in BRI scholarships and its talent-retention goals (Dai & Pham, 2024; Li et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been observed among African and Southeast Asian graduates in China, suggesting this is a systemic challenge rather than a Tajik-specific one. Because graduates cannot convert their newly acquired capital into local employment, they activate three further, mutually exclusive career-outcome pathways: return migration (66.7%, $n = 12$), third-country transnational employment (11.1%, $n = 2$), and cross-border entrepreneurship (5.6%, $n = 1$). These pathways represent agentic responses to structural constraint rather than passive failure, consistent with mobility scholarship emphasizing graduate agency amid restrictive migration regimes (Dai & Pham, 2024).

5.4. Contributions to Graduate Capital Theory

This study extends Tomlinson's (2017) model in two ways. First, linguistic capital is elevated to a distinct, primary dimension of employability in non-Western, non-English host contexts; among Tajik graduates, Mandarin proficiency often outweighed disciplinary knowledge in shaping career outcomes. Second, structural policy conditions—visa rules and labor-market recognition—are formalized as mediating variables between capital accumulation and capital mobilization. These refinements improve the explanatory power of graduate capital theory for South-South mobility contexts.

5.5. Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings both confirm and extend prior research. Consistent with Dai & Pham (2024), linguistic and social capital strongly predict employability among international graduates in China. Consistent with Li et al. (2025), BRI policy strongly shapes student destination choice but not necessarily post-study retention. In contrast to North-South mobility literature, permanent migration was neither typical nor desired among participants. By centering Tajik students, this study addresses a geographical gap in English-language scholarship, which has

historically focused on Southeast Asian and African student groups (Mok & Xu, 2020; Yang, 2022). The findings also resonate with Dai and Pham's (2024) study of international graduates across two Chinese universities, which similarly identified a multidimensional, agentic process of capital development among foreign students in China, lending cross-case support to the argument that developing-country host contexts generate distinctive employability dynamics not fully captured by graduate capital models developed in Western settings. At the same time, Tu's (2025) four-year longitudinal study of Pakistani students in China illustrates that South-South education mobility can carry uneven, gendered costs and benefits within a single national cohort, a dimension the present study's gender-balanced but aggregate analysis does not fully disaggregate; this suggests that future Tajik-focused research would benefit from examining whether motivations, capital accumulation, and career outcomes diverge systematically by gender.

5.6. Implications for Education Policy and Practice

For China, aligning scholarship policy with talent strategy would benefit from a post-study work visa comparable to systems in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom; reducing the two-year experience requirement would improve retention of skilled BRI graduates and strengthen long-term diplomatic and economic partnerships. For Tajikistan, priorities include establishing formal foreign-qualification recognition mechanisms, bilateral internship pipelines between Chinese firms and Tajik graduates, and national-level incentives for returnees entering BRI-related sectors. For universities in both countries, strengthening career services tailored to transnational employability—including Mandarin training, industry placements, and alumni-network building—would help translate accumulated capital into sustained career outcomes.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study provides a decadal qualitative analysis of Tajik students pursuing higher education in China between 2014 and 2024, examining motivational evolution, capital accumulation, and post-graduation career pathways. Based on 18 semi-structured interviews stratified into three temporal cohorts, three core findings emerge. First, student motivations differed systematically across the three cohorts, interpreted as cohort-specific patterns rather than within-person change over time (see Section 6.4): from scholarship and economic necessity in the early BRI expansion phase (2014-2018), to Mandarin language acquisition as symbolic capital during the COVID-19 disruption (2019-2021), to fully strategic, career-oriented decision-making linked to BRI-related employment in the post-pandemic recovery phase (2022-2024). Second, participants accumulated substantial and multifaceted capital during their studies in China, including linguistic capital (100%), social capital (89%), cultural capital (83%), psychological capital (78%), and identity capital (72%); Mandarin proficiency emerged as the most economically valuable resource supporting em-

employability in trade, logistics, infrastructure, and cross-border business sectors. Third, structural constraints—especially China’s post-graduation work-visa policy requiring two years of relevant professional experience—limited long-term employment in China to only 16.7% (3/18) of participants, giving rise to four mutually exclusive career-outcome pathways: return migration to Tajikistan (66.7%, $n = 12$), long-term employment in China (16.7%, $n = 3$), transnational employment in third countries (11.1%, $n = 2$), and cross-border entrepreneurship (5.6%, $n = 1$).

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions to international education and South-South student mobility literature. First, it delivers empirical evidence on Tajik students in China, a population largely absent from existing scholarship, which has historically focused on Southeast Asian or African student cohorts despite Central Asia’s strategic importance to the BRI. Second, it extends and validates graduate capital theory (Tomlinson, 2017) within a South-South mobility context, demonstrating that capital accumulation and mobilization operate differently when both sending and receiving countries are emerging economies; linguistic capital in Mandarin becomes a foundational, standalone component of employability, while psychological resilience and cross-cultural adaptability gain enhanced structural importance. Third, the study introduces the concept of China as a capital incubation hub, challenging the dominant North-South assumption that international students pursue permanent settlement; instead, Tajik students use China to accumulate portable, transferable capital that is subsequently mobilized across transnational labor markets.

6.3. Practical and Policy Implications

For China, closing the gap between heavy investment in BRI scholarships and restrictive post-graduation employment policy would involve introducing a simplified post-study work-visa scheme comparable to models in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia; reducing or waiving the two-year professional-experience requirement for recent international graduates; and expanding career services, internship pipelines, and Mandarin training tailored to international students. For Tajikistan, priorities include establishing a transparent national framework for recognition of Chinese academic qualifications, developing bilateral internship and employment programs between Tajik graduates and Chinese-funded enterprises, and strengthening linkages between domestic higher-education curricula and labor-market demand in BRI-related sectors. For higher education institutions in both countries, priorities include designing specialized career-support services for transnational employment rather than local jobs alone, strengthening alumni networks to support cross-border employment and entrepreneurship, and integrating cross-cultural competence, professional networking, and career planning into formal curricula.

6.4. Limitations

Consistent with standards of research transparency, several limitations are acknowledged. First, the sample size of 18 participants limits statistical generalizability, although purposive sampling of information-rich cases supports deep analytical generalization within a qualitative design (Patton, 2015). Second, reliance on retrospective, self-reported interview data introduces potential recall bias, particularly among earlier-cohort participants recounting decisions made up to a decade earlier; the cohort structure therefore reconstructs change through retrospective narrative rather than through prospective, real-time tracking of the same individuals over time. Third, the study excludes students who discontinued their studies or returned home early, which may understate the difficulties and risks embedded in the broader population of Tajik students in China. Fourth, purposive recruitment of accessible alumni may have favored participants with comparatively positive or resolved outcomes, introducing a possible self-selection bias that under-represents less successful or unresolved trajectories. Fifth, interviews conducted in English, Russian, or Tajik and subsequently analyzed by a single researcher raise the possibility that translation and cross-linguistic interpretation introduced subtle shifts in meaning, despite pilot testing for cultural appropriateness. Sixth, as a single-country, single-nationality case study, the findings may not transfer directly to other Central Asian or BRI-partner student populations in China, whose sending-country contexts, scholarship structures, and labour-market conditions differ (Rashidov et al., 2024); comparative research is needed to establish which patterns are Tajik-specific and which reflect broader South-South mobility dynamics. Taken together, these constraints do not undermine the study's central contributions but indicate that its findings are best read as an in-depth, contextually grounded account of one national case rather than a generalizable model of Central Asian student mobility.

6.5. Future Research Directions

Future research should employ mixed-methods designs combining qualitative narratives with large-scale survey data, conduct longitudinal tracking of graduate careers over five to ten years, include comparative analyses across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, investigate the impact of online and hybrid learning on capital accumulation and employability, and examine policy-implementation gaps in China-Central Asia educational cooperation.

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Data Availability Statement

The raw interview transcripts analyzed in this study are not publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality and comply with the terms of informed

consent. De-identified excerpts and coding materials supporting the reported findings may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional approval.

Ethics Statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Huzhou Normal University. The participants provided their written or verbal informed consent to participate in this study.

Generative AI Statement

The authors declares that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the analysis or interpretation of study data. AI-assisted tools were used only to support language editing and formatting of the manuscript; all substantive content, analysis, and conclusions are the author's own.

Author Contributions

S.F.R.: Writing—original draft, Methodology, Investigation; A.S.A.: Writing—review & editing, Formal analysis; G.Z.: Conceptualization, Investigation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table A1. Raw participant profiles (n = 18).

ID	Cohort	G	Level	Major	Location	Employment Status
P1	2014-2018	M	Master's	Engineering	Tajikistan	Trading Manager
P2	2014-2018	M	Bachelor's	Economics	Tajikistan	Government Officer
P3	2014-2018	M	Bachelor's	Engineering	China	Engineer (long-term)
P4	2014-2018	M	Master's	Civil Engineering	Tajikistan	Project Lead
P5	2014-2018	F	Bachelor's	Chinese Language	Tajikistan	Chinese Teacher
P6	2019-2021	F	Bachelor's	Chinese Language	Tajikistan	Translator
P7	2019-2021	F	Bachelor's	Business Admin.	Tajikistan	Chinese Firm Officer
P8	2019-2021	M	Bachelor's	Economics	Tajikistan	Trade Specialist
P9	2019-2021	F	Bachelor's	Chinese Language	Tajikistan	Language Trainer
P10	2019-2021	M	Bachelor's	Logistics	UAE	Logistics Officer
P11	2019-2021	F	Bachelor's	Business Admin.	Tajikistan	NGO Officer
P12	2022-2024	F	Master's	International Relations	Tajikistan	Foreign Affairs Officer
P13	2022-2024	M	Bachelor's	Logistics	Türkiye	Trade Coordinator
P14	2022-2024	F	Bachelor's	Business Admin.	Tajikistan	Cross-Border Entrepreneur
P15	2022-2024	M	Bachelor's	Engineering	China	Engineer (long-term)
P16	2022-2024	M	Bachelor's	Economics	Tajikistan	Import-Export Manager
P17	2022-2024	F	Bachelor's	Chinese Language	Tajikistan	Chinese Teacher
P18	2022-2024	M	Master's	Business Admin.	China	Business Analyst (long-term)

Note. F = Female; M = Male; UAE = United Arab Emirates.