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# ASIA AS METHOD IN KOREAN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARD TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES

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**Abstract:** This paper adapts Kuan-Hsing Chen’s Asia as Method to the Korean context to examine its potential for advancing social and epistemic justice in higher education. Drawing on two decades of teaching and research within English-medium instruction (EMI) in Korea, I employ a narrative autoethnographic approach to explore how decolonial thinking informs theory, pedagogy, and institutional practice. Through critical reflection, I analyze how long-term migration and academic engagement have reshaped my ontological and epistemological orientations, fostering decolonial moves in education. The findings reveal that sustained engagement in Korean EMI contexts can catalyze profound shifts in knowledge and practice, challenging Western epistemic dominance. By enacting Asia as Method within a Korean academic setting, this study offers a practical framework for international scholars to engage local intellectual traditions and reimagine EMI as a site of epistemic plurality, social justice, and transformative educational practice across Asia.

**Keywords:** Asia as method, Korea, autoethnography, English-medium instruction, comparative education

## Introduction

In recent years, teaching and learning through English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education (HE) has significantly gained traction, as evidenced by the increasing production of scholarly papers and books globally (Airey, 2020; Curle et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2021), including within this journal (Garner, 2024; Phan et al., 2013; Tay, 2025). In Korea specifically, though EMI represents only a small portion of the HE ecosystem, its influences spread across the country due to increasing numbers of domestic and international students learning in second languages as a result of globalization and trends in educational mobility (Wit et al., 2022). This is a phenomenon that is further intensified due to the decreasing birthrate in Korea that has initiated universities to restructure HE in order to attract a wider net of students (Choi, 2022). Yet, certain areas are still underexamined in the literature, such as how subject instructors understand and practice EMI (Airey, 2011; Yuan et al., 2020); how EMI could be reconceptualized from non-Western and non-Anglo-phonic scholarly lenses (Chen, 2010; Nandy, 1998; Takayama et al., 2018); the need to expand EMI beyond its state-centric orientations (Milligan & Tikly, 2016; Robertson, 2012); and EMI’s wider importance for mainstream HE (i.e., taught in the first language; Chang & Kester, 2025; Kester et al., 2020).

In response to these lacunae in the field, in this paper, I present autoethnographic reflections on my experiences within international English-taught HE in South Korean universities over the past two decades, drawing on Kuan-Hsing Chen’s (2010) concept of Asia as Method. As an international disciplinary educator – not a language instructor – I explore the boundaries and potentials of teaching disciplinary knowledge in English-taught academia in Korea, where the dominant societal language is Korean. I aim to answer the following research questions: How have my theoretical and pedagogical practices been informed by migration and long-term work in Korea? What sorts of ontological and epistemological transformations have I experienced? How have these transformations, particularly in relation to crossing languages and cultures, initiated decolonial moves in regard to my educational

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pedagogy, policy and practice? Here, decolonial moves refer to efforts to delink from coloniality – that is, to move away from modes of thinking, being, and managing resources and people in and through HE that reproduce relations of domination (Mignolo, 2011). Such moves may include implementing inclusive admissions practices; promoting the equitable distribution of resources; diversifying reading lists to foreground local scholarship; engaging local intellectual traditions; conducting multilingual literature reviews; employing contextually relevant theoretical lenses (such as Asia as Method in the case of this paper); and fostering shared representation and decision-making within educational spaces (Kester et al., 2021; Mackinlay & Barney, 2014).

As an overview, the structure of this article begins with a review of existing literature on EMI in HE and its specific contextualization to Korea, followed by detail of the autoethnographic methodology. I then discuss the theoretical framework of Asia as Method that informs my analysis. Finally, I share key insights from my professional experience in Korea since 2007, and discuss these before concluding. Overall, the paper provides new insights into EMI, addressing key questions on how disciplinary instructors understand and practice EMI, and exploring the potentiality of employing Asia as Method in the Korean educational landscape (and beyond) to re-conceptualize EMI from non-Western and non-state-centric perspectives (Shahjahan, 2025).

Yet, before proceeding, I must first provide a brief background on my positionality within Korean academia to enhance the reader's understanding of the background from which my commentary emerges. I am a US academic (from rural Kentucky) currently engaged in teaching and researching at the interchange of global education, conflict, peace, and development studies in various international contexts, particularly in conflict-affected areas. My career in HE spans East Asia – Japan, Korea, and Taiwan – as well as other global locations such as Somaliland, the UK, and the US, with a predominant focus on South Korean HE since 2007. I have additionally worked in a range of educational contexts with research and development teams in Afghanistan, Costa Rica, Croatia, and Pakistan. To be sure, my ability to navigate across and between cultures is pivotal to my work within EMI programs. I share this background as it helps inform my practical thinking on EMI, having taught and researched in a number of international English-medium settings over the past 20 years. I turn now to the literature.

### **EMI as English Teaching in Disguise?**

EMI is commonly defined as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2015, p. 2). In practice, EMI is often implemented in contexts where English operates as a taken-for-granted academic lingua franca (Jenkins, 2018). Despite this seemingly clear definition, substantial ambiguity remains regarding the scope and nature of EMI. It is frequently conflated with related fields such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), content-based learning, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), all of which prioritize language development rather than disciplinary knowledge per se (Richards & Pun, 2021). In addition, debates about language, pedagogy, and learning extend beyond English-focused fields to include disciplines such as Comparative Education (Milligan & Tikly, 2016) and International Studies (Kolb, 2009), further complicating how EMI is conceptualized and researched.

Even within Applied Linguistics, EMI is often intermixed with English teaching. Pecorari and Malmström (2018), Wingate (2022), and Galloway et al. (2020) treat EMI as a context where English is not an explicit curricular goal but is nonetheless expected to be acquired. As such, EMI paradoxically recenters English by naming the medium of instruction as the defining feature, even while claiming language is not the focus. This raises the question of whether disciplinary instructors should consider their teaching as EMI at all. More nuanced distinctions are offered by Macaro and Aizawa (2024), who highlight overlaps and differences between EMI, EAP, and ESP, underscoring the need for clearer boundaries. This lack of consensus is also mirrored in South Korean scholarship (Ahn et al., 2024; Given & Prinsloo, 2018; Lee & Lee, 2018). Such ambiguity fuels ongoing debate over whether EMI

constitutes a genuine mode of disciplinary education or merely another form of English language instruction (Yao et al., 2021). This tension may explain why many university faculty members regard EMI as peripheral to substantive subject teaching (Airey, 2020; Huang, 2019).

In South Korea, although no centralized governmental mandate enforces EMI in higher education, major initiatives such as Brain Korea 21 (BK21) and the Creative Korea University Specialization Project (CK-1) have strongly promoted its adoption (Bolton et al., 2023). Demographic pressures – often termed “the demographic cliff” (Choi, 2022) – further incentivize universities to adopt EMI to attract international students, enhance employability, and maintain competitiveness in a global knowledge economy (Lee, 2021). Korean scholarship has examined EMI largely in terms of educational outcomes, student satisfaction (J. S. Kim, 2022; Park et al., 2022), and the growing demand for faculty capable of teaching in English (Lee & Lee, 2018).

More recently, Korean scholarship has critically interrogated the intersections of neoliberal policy, epistemic injustice, and coloniality in EMI. Park (2017) critiques EMI’s neoliberal underpinnings, highlighting ideological tensions and anxieties among students and faculty, as well as its role in reinforcing linguistic hierarchies. Choi and Kim (2020) question EMI’s instrumental rationale of global competitiveness, critiquing ethnonationalistic motivations tied to outperforming other nations; and Kim (2024) critiques the Western-centric curricula embedded in EMI, while Kester et al. (2020) and Kester and Chang (2022) analyze its colonial dimensions. Other scholars have begun reevaluating their own theoretical and pedagogical assumptions about EMI in Korea and abroad (H. J. Kim, 2020; Saeji, 2018; Sherman, 2023). This paper contributes to this emerging critical literature by reflecting on experiences within Korean HE through the regionally situated framework of Asia as Method (Chen, 2010).

### **Toward Asia as Method in Korea**

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has advanced theoretical critiques of Western-centric HE, with particular attention to the ways HE has been historically entangled with colonial projects and their enduring epistemic legacies (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Swartz & Kallaway, 2018; Takayama et al., 2018). These critiques highlight how international academic mobility, cross-border knowledge circulation, and dominant languages of instruction – most notably English – have often functioned as conduits through which Western norms, values, and epistemologies are reproduced in global HE spaces. Responding to these critiques, scholars working in and from Asia call for educators and researchers to move beyond Western-centric lenses (Chen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2015). They caution against the uncritical circulation and localization of Western concepts across Asian HE systems, particularly when such concepts are mobilized by scholars or domestic political elites to consolidate institutional and epistemic power (Kenway, 2015).

At the same time, these scholars emphasize that HE is not shaped by a simple East-West divide; rather, it is constituted through uneven relations of mobility, translation, and cultural-linguistic negotiation that produce inequalities within both Western and non-Western contexts (Biraimah et al., 2024). Simultaneously, this body of work also resists wholesale rejection of Western knowledge, instead advocating for critical engagement that recognizes both its situatedness and its potential for dialogue (Enslin & Horsthemke, 2014; Hayhoe, 2001; Ryan & Louie, 2007). As such, a shared concern among these scholars is how HE might be reimagined through relational and contextually grounded perspectives from Asia that unsettle essentialist East-West binaries (Kim, 2024; Y. Lee, 2019). Here, Kuan-Hsing Chen’s (2010) concept of Asia as Method offers a framework for rethinking HE in (and beyond) East Asia – through a context-specific lens – by foregrounding inter-referencing, translation, and the ethical negotiation of difference across sites of academic mobility (Fang & Wang, 2024; Rhee, 2013; Takayama, 2016). Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), for example, states:

To confront the long-lasting impact of ‘leaving Asia for America’ (tuōyǎ rùměi) since the end of the Second World War in East Asia in general, and Taiwan in particular, [I] put forward ‘Asia as

Method' as a critical proposition to transform the existing knowledge structure and at the same time to transform ourselves. The potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. (p. 212)

From a critical perspective, some scholars caution that Asia as Method risks being read as culturally essentialist, positioning Asia as a homogeneous entity in opposition to the West (Cheong, 2017; Y.-Y. Lee, 2020; Park, 2015). Such dichotomous interpretations would obscure the significant differences and complex historical trajectories among Asian societies and cultures, and dismiss the agency with which Asian students and scholars make educational choices (Han et al., 2024; J. Lee, 2023; Y. Lee, 2019). However, as Chen emphasizes, Asia as Method does not entail a unified or static conception of Asia. Rather, it calls for inter-referencing among diverse Asian knowledge traditions as a means of decentering Western epistemic dominance and learning from Asia (Kester et al., 2023; Kim & Jung, 2025; Zhang & Chan, 2023). This approach is grounded in an explicit recognition of Asia's historical, cultural, political, and epistemic diversity (Lin, 2012). Moreover, Asia is neither fixed nor timeless but continually evolving. Embracing Asia as Method, therefore, does not involve romanticizing a static or traditional past; instead, it entails engaging with Asia's dynamic present and its shifting epistemic and ontological positions within it.

Having myself relocated from the "West" to Asia two decades ago – first to Japan and later to Korea and Taiwan – Chen's (2010) call to think through Asia as Method has catalyzed three interrelated transformations in how I understand and engage with EMI and international HE (as discussed elsewhere; see Kester, 2023a). First, it redirects scholarly attention away from the West and toward Asia, not merely as a site of empirical inquiry, but as an ontological and epistemic location from which theory can be generated. In the context of EMI, this shift challenges the assumption that Western institutions, languages, and academic norms serve as universal reference points. Second, Asia as Method provides a framework for engaging alternative modes of knowing, being, and relating – modes that are often marginalized within globally mobile academic spaces structured by English and Western epistemologies (Kester, 2023b). Third, it directly contests the geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production that privilege Western scholarship and academic bodies, instead foregrounding Asian-produced knowledge and worldviews as a means of addressing historical and ongoing injustices rooted in colonial legacies (Shani, 2022).

My own position is situated at the shifting borders between what are often labeled "West" and "East," shaped by long-term academic mobility and immersion in the histories, politics, cultures, and affective relations that constitute East Asia. In this regard, Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of *borderlands* is instructive. She describes borderlands as spaces where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch" (preface). While Anzaldúa powerfully theorizes this condition through the US-Mexico border – "an open wound where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 3) – the concept resonates strongly with experiences of cultural, linguistic, and epistemic negotiation in EMI and international HE in Korea. Borderlands, in this sense, capture the lived realities of internationally mobile academics and students who inhabit in-between spaces shaped by multiple languages, identities, and institutional expectations. Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) articulates a parallel sensibility from across East Asian contexts, emphasizing relationality, inter-referencing, and the decentering of Western epistemic authority (see Khoo & Lin, 2023, from a Chinese cultural perspective; and Yoshimizu, 2023, from a Japanese diasporic context). To be sure, engaging with diverse others – through Asia as Method – prompts a reevaluation of one's identity through new epistemological frameworks. Ultimately, drawing on Asia as Method (Chen, 2010), this approach treats Korean HE not as a derivative extension of Western models, but as a generative site from which alternative imaginaries of EMI – grounded in cultural and linguistic negotiation – can emerge. I turn now to describe the methodology.

## Methodology

In this paper, I adopt a methodology of autoethnography, informed by the conceptual lens of Asia as Method (as discussed above), to interrogate my experiences within Korean English-taught HE. Autoethnography has appeared in contemporary education scholarship as a method through which to examine practice in relation to broader social, cultural, and political contexts, while remaining attentive to questions of power, positionality, and knowledge production. The method has been used widely in the fields of education, anthropology, applied linguistics, and business (Grant, 2019; Thomas et al., 2023).

The method of autoethnography allows for close engagement with moments of professional transformation and dissonance arising from everyday academic work, not as personal narrative for its own sake, but as a site for theorizing EMI practice (Chang, 2008; Choi, 2016). Bochner and Ellis (2016) define autoethnography as a research method that recounts and methodically interrogates personal experience to understand the intersections of the personal and cultural. Further drawing on reflective traditions in comparative and international education (Brissett, 2020; Xu & Poole, 2024), I use my experiences as an internationally mobile educator to generate insights that speak beyond the individual case and contribute to wider debates on pedagogy, internationalization, and epistemic justice. Through this process, I critically examine how EMI and international HE in Korea is shaped by intersecting forces of language, culture, policy, and institutional expectation, and how these dynamics can be reinterpreted through the relational and decentering perspective offered by Asia as Method.

The study unfolded in three phases. First, I engaged with the research questions derived from the literature and reflected on them in relation to my professional experiences in Korean HE. This involved multiple rounds of structured reflective writing conducted over a six-month period. Second, I revisited these reflections through iterative rereading and dialogic engagement with colleagues, allowing alternative interpretations, tensions, and counter-examples to emerge (see Chang & Kester, 2025). Finally, I re-examined these reflections through the lens of Asia as Method to generate new insights into EMI as practiced in the Korean context. This approach is necessarily interpretive; however, the trustworthiness of the reflections is strengthened by systematically interweaving them with relevant literature and theory, thereby situating the analysis within broader scholarly debates. In doing so, the study enacts what Chen (2010) terms “critical syncretism,” a “cultural strategy of identification” (p. 99) through which solidarity and connection across cultural contexts – together with critical researcher reflexivity – help mitigate the limitations of any single epistemological orientation (Park, 2015; Sparkes, 2020). This approach also further disrupts the “exploitative power hierarchies endemic to colonial research traditions” (Tarisayi, 2023, p. 59).

Through this process, the reflections challenge three dominant tendencies in the literature on EMI: (1) the persistence of state-centric and Western-referential orientations, (2) the privileging of English and Anglo-centric academic norms, and (3) the disproportionate dominance of applied linguistics perspectives, which has left pedagogical viewpoints from other disciplines underexplored (Airey, 2011; Curle et al., 2024), a gap this paper seeks to address. By foregrounding critical reflection from a transnational perspective situated within Korea, this study offers new insights into the complexities of EMI as a negotiated, relational, and contextually grounded practice shaped by both global and local forces.

## Reflections on EMI in Korea

In this section, I examine my experience as an international faculty member in Korean EMI programs over the past two decades. Specifically, I highlight the following areas: 1) some reflections on migration and education, 2) EMI in different cultural settings, and 3) Korean EMI as a mediating space between East and West. Theoretical and pedagogical reflections are interwoven throughout.

To be sure, my reflections here are alternative perspectives on EMI. As a content instructor working within the domain of EMI, which is typically populated by language scholars, I am one of the few non-language educators writing about the topic. It is well acknowledged in the literature that disciplinary faculty do not research or seriously engage with EMI, seeing it as undermining their disciplinary identities (e.g., Airey, 2020; Curle et al., 2024; Jon et al., 2020; Kim & Suh, 2024). Moreover, as an international faculty member, I offer different perspectives than domestic faculty. Hence, the reflections herein are unique, and as I will show in the following sections, they hold implications for the growing field of English-taught HE in Korea and across East Asia.

### *Reflections on Migration and Education*

After graduating from university in the US, unlike most college graduates, I chose to explore employment overseas. While the most common path for many rural Americans – especially those from more economically deprived regions of the country, like myself – is to gain overseas experience by joining the US military, I instead opted for international education. Initially, I did not intend to pursue teaching as a full-time career; it was simply a means to an end, a way to travel the world and expand horizons of cultural understanding. However, several significant developments unfolded during my initial years in East Asia. First, in Japan, where I taught for two years in the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program between 2004 and 2006, I discovered a genuine joy for teaching through the connections made with students. I also began to realize at this time that economic opportunities in East Asia – as someone from an American working-class background – were much more promising for me (and others like me) compared to the US. This socioeconomic factor is also present in the extant literature (see, e.g., Collins, 2014; Lan, 2011). Together with travels and studies in Europe and Latin America, the *educational* aspects of this migratory journey are deeply intertwined with issues of economics, culture, politics, and the subjective becoming of an international educator through experience in East Asian contexts.

In the early years of my engagement with East Asia, I was intrigued by the fascination of East Asian societies with the US, such as in films screened in theaters, billboard advertisements, travel blogs, radio playlists, and HE enrollment statistics, all of which are reflective of deep geopolitical alliances and entangled histories (Choi & Nieminen, 2012; Nandy, 1998). This is reinforced in education when students aspire to pursue postgraduate education in the US, and in Korean academic circles, US norms are upheld as the global standard (Kwak et al., 2024). This widespread admiration for the US, and the West more generally, within Korean circles, has understandably been instrumental during my tenure in Korea, providing me with employment and research opportunities. Here, I am critically aware of the currency that my nationality, race/ethnicity, and gender afford me within this context, as has been well-documented in other literature (Lan, 2011; Moosavi, 2022; Song & Kim, 2024). Turning to education, my students and I theoretically and empirically examine how cross-cultural experiences may provide a critical distance on issues such as culture, politics, and economics, as well as how HE may play a key role in social justice or injustice, peace or conflict, mitigating or reinforcing social, cultural and institutional inequalities. This brings me to the second area.

### *EMI Across Settings*

Students in the EMI programs within which I have worked in the contexts of Korea, the UK, and Somaliland reflect different profiles. The students where I currently teach are mostly Korean (about 70%) with approximately 30% international degree-seeking students. They come from a variety of undergraduate disciplines, including Education, English, International Development, and Global Studies, among others. Moreover, a significant number of the students are concurrently working during their studies; they work at other Korean universities, in NGOs, and in government agencies, while still many others are on leave from primary and secondary schools. Linguistically, most speak Korean as their first language, although some speak Chinese, French, or Spanish, and a few are

English L1 speakers. Many of the international students also have Korean ancestry; some of these students speak Korean, some do not.

Though most of the students speak English as an additional language, their English level is advanced. Seldom do English-language capacities prevent advanced subject learning in the program. This makes the EMI program at my institution distinct from EMI programs in other Korean universities, particularly due to the differing socioeconomic backgrounds of students and the material resources of the institution. This challenges the state-based containers that are often used to discuss EMI (e.g., “EMI in China”, “EMI in Japan”, or “EMI in Thailand”; see Park, 2019). I have also taught in EMI programs at four other Korean universities – in cities outside Seoul – and in postgraduate EMI programs in Somaliland and the UK. Similar types of divisions occur in these programs, though with differing effects depending on the origins of international students (Kester, 2021; Kester et al., 2020). Namely, what is especially evident in these programs is that students’ success in EMI settings is often greatly influenced by their socioeconomic background and prior multilingual educational experiences (Louis et al., 2024).

Pedagogically, students in my EMI program expect all courses to be taught in English, the designated language of instruction. Because of this, my classes often attract students from other departments, mainly international students who arrive expecting their majors to offer more English-medium courses than they actually do. Many then seek out departments with English-taught options, enrolling in my courses even when these fall outside their field of study (a trend noted elsewhere, e.g., Doiz et al., 2011; Rakhshandehroo & Ivanova, 2020). Their presence enriches the cultural, linguistic, and interdisciplinary diversity of the classroom, which is a distinctive strength of EMI (Chang & Kester, 2025). Yet not everyone views this diversity positively; some faculty and students see it as a challenge, uncertain how to meet the needs of both domestic and international learners (Jon, 2012; J. Kim, 2020). To be sure, EMI brings with it many challenges. Statistics across my current university show that approximately 10% of courses are fully English-taught, 48% of courses in the institution employ the use of English textbooks, and 58% of PhD dissertations university-wide are written in English (Lee, 2025; see also Bolton et al., 2023), raising questions about context relevancy and linguistic accessibility. Thus, EMI across institutional contexts presents varying constraints and possibilities.

### *EMI as a Mediating Space Between East and West*

To be sure, I prioritize disciplinary learning and the development of cross-cultural competencies as a disciplinary instructor. I believe that language issues in the classroom should be acknowledged and addressed, but not to the point of distracting from subject learning. My primary teaching responsibilities encompass postgraduate courses on Comparative Education and International Development, Peace and Conflict, Qualitative Research, and running a Lab of 15 MA/PhD students. Though learning predominantly occurs in English, my students and I also frequently alternate between Korean and other languages, such as Chinese; and I encourage students to conduct their research multilingually where possible to enhance the diversity of perspectives covered. This is acknowledged as good practice in EMI (Chang, 2018; J. S. Kim, 2022; Zheng et al., 2024), as the inclusion of students’ linguistic backgrounds significantly enhances their learning experience and the overall engagement in courses.

Crossing between East and West also involves crossing disciplinary boundaries – linking education, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and TESOL/applied linguistics. As indicated throughout, EMI has hitherto been shaped by language scholars (Curle et al., 2024), but this dominance narrows the field, often reducing courses to language practice rather than disciplinary learning (Airey, 2020; Drljača Margić & Vodopija-Krstanović, 2017; Lee, 2025). Such framing can devalue courses, casting faculty as deficient – linguistically in the case of Korean professors or disciplinarily weak for international staff. Complicating matters, some professors advertise EMI

courses in English yet teach in Korean, excluding non-Korean speakers and raising ethical concerns (Kim & Tatar, 2017). This critique does not demand courses be taught entirely in English, but rather underscores how privileging language alone risks de-professionalizing disciplinary knowledge. Many faculty also resist the EMI label, neglecting students' linguistic needs – needs that, if engaged, could support deeper disciplinary learning (Airey, 2020).

From the lens of Asia as Method, such linguistic and cultural resources could provide a rich source for the investigation of local and regionally-situated knowledge offering counterpoints to Anglo- and linguistic-centric perspectives, a move that is not just a step toward context relevancy but an intentional disruption of the assumed superiority of Western, English-based, scientific, and rational forms of knowledge (Tarisayi, 2023). Korean EMI instead could be a space to explore the various possibilities of knowing and being differently (Chen, 2010; Kester, 2023b). I turn next to discuss the implications of these reflections.

### **Reframing EMI through Asia as Method**

I now come back to discuss the research questions posed in the paper, building on my reflections above: How have my theoretical and pedagogical practices been informed by migration and long-term work in Korea? What sorts of ontological and epistemological transformations have I experienced? How have these transformations, particularly in relation to crossing languages and cultures, initiated decolonial moves in regard to my educational pedagogy, policy and practice? I further diffract these reflections through the lens of Asia as Method, threading in relevant literature to highlight parallels and divergences with current perspectives on EMI. The Asia as Method framework initiates three shifts beyond Western-centricity, challenging strict disciplinary knowledge and practice, and contesting Anglo-centric HE. I present each of these points here.

The move toward Asia as Method in EMI means shifting away from the West (and indeed beyond the state) as the referent point (Kester, 2023a; Kloet et al., 2020). Comparisons with the East and lessons learned from states and cultures in the region should be further embraced in a move toward global understanding and diverse practices of education (Jackson, 2026; Jackson et al, 2026). But this move away from the normative West causes much disorientation (Takayama, 2011). Here, the environment where I teach, as I explained before, is shaped by a convergence of languages and their speakers – both educators and learners. This environment represents a potential opportunity to think and teach differently within HE, situated at the crossroads of cultures. According to Chen (2010), using East Asian cultures and languages as the reference point “transform(s) the existing knowledge structure and... ourselves” (p. 212). In this case, shifting the lens toward Korea and East Asia disrupts the usual centering of Western knowledge practices and raises further questions about disciplinary and scholarly boundaries (Alatas, 2000; Chen, 2010).

Such geographic, scholarly, and disciplinary confines often work against faculty and students who operate in “non-Western”, “interdisciplinary”, or “liberal arts” spaces within contemporary Korean HE. Thus, the move toward Asia as Method is in many ways a move toward interculturality and interdisciplinarity. Yet, this is a challenge, as resources (in my current institution, for example) are often not significantly provided for interdisciplinary programs, and students are anxious about career prospects post-graduation due to an interdisciplinary program's weak (disciplinary) identity. This is even more pronounced with a foreign language dimension to the program. The power of EMI, though, lies in its inherent global, interdisciplinary, multicultural and multilingual character (Robinson-Pant, 2005). To fully realize these affordances, EMI must deliberately cross cultural, linguistic, and epistemic boundaries (Zheng & Qiu, 2023) – moving beyond Western/state-centric approaches, disciplinary silos, and Anglo-centric education.

The implications for (de/re)constructing curriculum and pedagogy toward inclusivity are clear (De Costa et al., 2024). Curriculum should extend beyond Western, Korean, or single-state/disciplinary perspectives by engaging research from the East, West, South, and across languages and disciplines. As Sivasundaram (2010) notes, reading domestic/Indigenous and global literatures in parallel reveals

cultural, intellectual, and affective convergences and divergences. Classroom pedagogies should likewise facilitate cross-cultural and multi-epistemic engagement (Kim, 2024). From the standpoint of a subject (rather than language) instructor, even small shifts – through curriculum, pedagogy, and policy – that foreground linguistic and cultural differences can reshape content knowledge, empower students and faculty, and challenge entrenched colonial logics of knowledge (Chen, 2010; Freire, 1970). In this sense, EMI, approached through Asia as Method, offers an under-examined epistemic and multicultural space, not merely a linguistic one. This interdisciplinary value remains largely overlooked in EMI scholarship, which is still dominated by language-focused approaches. Overall, there remains a need to deepen understanding of how content professors conceptualize and enact EMI from within (and beyond) their disciplines, both to support content professors in addressing the language dimensions of their teaching and to prompt language scholars to engage more seriously with the disciplinary aspects of EMI.

## Conclusion

Drawing on my nearly twenty-year tenure in Korea and involvement in international academia, in this paper I have reflected on my accidental participation in the specialized and growing field of EMI in HE, particularly in the fields of comparative international education and peace studies. Despite not directly teaching English, I operate within an environment that requires a nuanced understanding of students' proficiency in the language. In this paper, I have argued that language sensitivity, while not the focus of the instruction, is nonetheless critical to excellent HE subject teaching (Airey, 2011). This is not just for language classes but more broadly for disciplinary education; examining this field through Asia as Method reveals important implications for the practice of EMI in Korea. In the end, the paper has posited that teaching from the periphery – beyond English core countries and beyond traditional disciplinary learning – initiates three key shifts: 1) a move from the Western gaze toward Eastern viewpoints, 2) toward alternative knowledge possibilities drawing on Korean and interdisciplinary cultural resources, and 3) theorizing the world from an East Asian perspective. All in all, Asia as Method has been a useful avenue from which to rethink theoretical, pedagogical, and research assumptions to move beyond Western-centric learning.

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# A LEARNING-BELIEF EVOLUTION MODEL OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

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**Abstract:** This study explores how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first academic year in Malaysia's culturally diverse classrooms. As part of a broader research project, it addresses the central question: How do learning beliefs develop over time in culturally diverse settings? Twelve first-year Chinese students, studying abroad for the first time, participated in semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. A two-stage thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) experimentation with new learning ways, (3) integration of new learning ways, and (4) becoming intercultural learners. These themes form the basis of a learning-belief evolution model, grounded in an integrated framework of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Mezirow's transformative learning theory. The model illustrates how students integrate familiar and new learning ways through the dual processes of social interaction and critical reflection, shaped by cognitive reflection, emotional challenges, and cultural interaction. The findings offer practical, culturally grounded insights for educators and institutions seeking to better support international students' learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Chinese international students; Learning belief; Culturally diverse classrooms; Transformative learning; Sociocultural theory

## Introduction

The rise of international higher education has brought increasing cultural diversity to universities worldwide, reshaping teaching practices and student-teacher dynamics (Kayashima et al., 2024). Chinese international students represent a significant portion of this global population, bringing culturally rooted learning beliefs that influence how they navigate unfamiliar academic environments (Li, 2003). These beliefs, often described as 'cultures of learning', are socially and culturally transmitted frameworks that shape students' perceptions of education and approaches to learning (Jin & Cortazzi, 2011). Cultural frameworks can create differences in educational values and expectations across contexts: while Western education often emphasises creativity and independence, East-Asian traditions tend to prioritise perseverance, moral growth, and respect for authority (Li, 2013). Consequently, Chinese students studying abroad often encounter practices and expectations that challenge their traditional beliefs about learning and academic success. Early cultural models framed cultures as fixed, but newer perspectives, such as Holliday's (2013) concept of small cultures and sociocultural approaches (Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007; Wang, 2010), emphasise that culture is evolving and shaped through social interaction.

Malaysian classrooms reflect Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous influences (Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum et al., 2015). Chinese students from Confucian backgrounds, where

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hierarchy and group harmony are valued (Li, 2003; Tan, 2018), may face new expectations around discussion and critical thinking. These differences can create dissonance, sometimes resulting in resistance or even shifts in beliefs (Mezirow, 1991). Despite this, research has rarely explored how such processes unfold in non-Western, culturally diverse contexts, meaning broader perspectives on Chinese students' learning beliefs can be overlooked. To address this gap, the present study investigates how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first year in Malaysia, focusing on the role of diverse classroom experiences. The central research question is: How do Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve during their first academic year in a culturally diverse setting?

## Literature Review

### *Definitions, Theoretical Perspectives, and Evolution of Learning Beliefs*

Learning beliefs are shaped by experience and influence how individuals approach learning tasks (Wenden, 1999; Benson & Lor, 1999). Early research found beliefs as a key factor in explaining individual differences in learning that general learning theories often overlook (Lee & Webb, 2005). While beliefs were once viewed as relatively stable aspects of metacognition (Bromme et al., 2010), later studies have shown that they are dynamic and responsive to context, varying across cultures, learning environments, and stages of development (Kalaja & Ferreira Barcelos, 2019; Yang & Kim, 2011; Lou & Noels, 2019).

In the early 2000s, researchers began to emphasise the cultural and social shaping of learning beliefs, particularly in relation to Chinese students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). These culturally grounded beliefs develop through interaction with teachers, peers, and classroom practices, and they influence how students prefer to learn (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Yang & Kim, 2011; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014). Understanding changes in learning preferences requires research into the ways students' beliefs about knowledge and learning develop and evolve over time. Such beliefs are shaped by prior educational experiences (Perry, 1968; Brownlee et al., 2002). Research shows that students' beliefs about learning influence how they regulate their learning and select strategies appropriate to different tasks (Hertel et al., 2024; Lawson et al., 2019). However, students do not consistently adopt deep approaches; instead, they adjust their strategies to task demands (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004).

While education can influence learning beliefs, they are usually stable and may shift only when challenged by new experiences (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Research shows that studying abroad often triggers such changes, with students gradually adapting their beliefs when given time and freedom to try new methods in different cultural settings (Wu, 2015; Nilemar & Brown, 2017; Gutierrez & Park, 2015). Diverse environments help students rethink their beliefs, making them more open-minded, supporting the evolution of learning beliefs over time (Reybold, 2002; Perry, 1970; Wang, 2010). Depending on context and experience, beliefs may remain stable or continue to develop (Trevors, 2023; Yoon & Maeng, 2024).

Existing research mostly focuses on Chinese students learning English in Western contexts (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Yang & Kim, 2011), but more research is needed on how learning beliefs change over time in other contexts (Fazilatfar et al., 2015). Since definitions of beliefs shape how research is done (Kalaja et al., 2018) and current ones are inadequate, this study defines learning beliefs as students' culturally shaped views of learning, influenced by values, traditions, and expectations and not just thinking processes (Li, 2003).

### *Chinese International Students in Culturally Diverse Classrooms in Malaysia*

Nearer regional destinations like Malaysia and Singapore have recently gained growing attention among Mainland Chinese students (Zhao et al., 2023). The increasing recognition of Malaysia as an education hub in Asia (Singh & Jack, 2022) has resulted in Malaysia emerging as a leading destination

for Chinese international students, who now constitute the largest source country group by a significant margin. Education Malaysia Global Services data shows that Chinese students were the largest international student group by a significant margin, submitting 75,434 applications in 2025 (EMGS, 2026). As a multi-ethnic country with three dominant ethnic groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019), Malaysia features a harmonious society with diverse sociocultural backgrounds (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2003). Within this context, Xiao et al. (2024) note that Chinese international students in Malaysian universities face academic and cultural challenges as they adapt to new educational and sociocultural environments, highlighting the importance of institutional support in helping them adjust. Despite some cultural similarities, these students still experience culture shock (Dongqi et al., 2020), including difficulties with integrating with locals, language barriers, classroom participation, and limited English proficiency. Additional challenges involve speaking anxiety, vocabulary gaps, unfamiliar accents, and academic writing struggles (Zhai & Razali, 2022; Zhang & Hasim, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), which can be attributed to unfamiliar learning styles and limited knowledge of the host culture (Xue & Singh, 2025).

According to Chiu and Hong (2007), culture shapes how students behave and learn. Cortazzi and Jin (1997) describe 'cultures of learning' as a set of beliefs and practices that define 'good learning,' which may clash with local expectations. Students from different background communities may have different preferences, expectations, interpretations, values and beliefs about how to learn, and these differences may affect the teaching and learning process within the classroom (Assis Hornay, 2020). In fact, studies suggest that Chinese students find it difficult to adjust to Malaysia's student-centred ways of learning, which focus on participation and critical thinking (Ma & Ismail, 2022; Zhang & Wahab, 2022). Such ways contrast with China's teacher-dominated classrooms and Confucian ideals of 'silence and respect for teachers' (Cao et al., 2018; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022).

Indeed, a plethora of literature which addresses Chinese students' challenges in Malaysia exists, but they rarely investigate how their learning beliefs evolve in response to these challenges. There are also a few practical guidelines provided in literature for the development of the Chinese cultures of learning within Malaysian classrooms in Higher Education, highlighting a need for research on how Chinese students reshape their learning beliefs through interaction and reflection in culturally diverse classrooms.

## Theoretical Framework

### *An Integrated Lens: Sociocultural and Transformative Learning Theories*

Understanding how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve in Malaysia's multicultural classrooms requires a framework capable of explaining how beliefs are shaped through classroom interaction and how learners internally reconstruct those beliefs through critical reflection. No single theory fully captures this dual process. Therefore, this study integrates Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Mezirow's (1997, 2000) transformative learning theory as complementary lenses for analysing how culturally mediated classroom interaction creates conditions for reflective belief over time.

Sociocultural theory emphasises that learning is fundamentally shaped by participation in socially organised activities and culturally structured environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, while key concepts like the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978) explain how learners encounter new academic practices through interaction with lecturers and peers, they are less explicit in explaining how individuals internally reinterpret and reconstruct their existing beliefs about learning.

Conversely, transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals revise 'frames of reference' through critical reflection, particularly when confronted with 'disorienting dilemmas',

experiences that challenge prior or existing beliefs (Mezirow, 1991; Feng et al., 2025). This perspective explains how belief change happens at the cognitive level, but taken alone, it underplays the socially mediated classroom processes that generate such challenging experiences in the first place.

For this study, neither perspective alone suffices. Sociocultural theory explains how students are exposed to new academic norms and supported through interactions with lecturers and peers, while transformative learning theory explains how these socially mediated encounters can lead them to reflect on and reshape their beliefs about learning. Together, they offer a more complete explanation of how learning beliefs evolve.

Therefore, in this study, sociocultural and transformative perspectives are treated as analytically interconnected. Classroom interaction generates the structured encounters that expose students to unfamiliar expectations; transformative processes explain how these encounters trigger reflective reassessment and belief restructuring. Importantly, transformation here does not mean abandoning beliefs for new ones (Mezirow, 1991). Rather, students develop what Li (2018) terms a “third space”, a blended learning orientation drawing on both prior educational experiences and newly encountered practices. For example, a student who initially believed public questioning is disrespectful may, through scaffolded participation and critical reflection, come to see questioning as legitimate engagement while retaining Confucian-influenced values of diligence and respect. Belief evolution thus becomes expansion rather than replacement, a broadening of the learner’s interpretive toolkit in response to new cultural contexts.

This integrated framework is particularly appropriate to this study because it captures both sides of adaptation: participating in new classroom practices and rethinking prior beliefs. Rather than assuming students replace old ways with new ones, it helps show how they selectively blend both, forming flexible approaches that shift with context. While Berry’s (1997) acculturation model and Kim’s (2017) cross-cultural adaptation theory help explain cultural adjustment, they focus mainly on identity and communication rather than on learning *belief transformation*, the central concern of this study.

Using this integrated lens, the study examines how Chinese students’ learning beliefs evolved during their first year in Malaysia through classroom interaction, academic challenges, and reflection. It builds on previous work combining these lenses in international education contexts (Gamal El Din, 2021; Li, 2018) and extends it to a non-Western, culturally diverse setting, responding to calls for more contextualised understandings of international student adaptation beyond Western host countries (Kettle, 2017; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how Chinese international students’ learning beliefs evolved during their first academic year in Malaysia’s culturally diverse classrooms. A case study approach is appropriate as it allows for in-depth, contextualised examination of a bounded phenomenon (Yin, 2018), in this instance, the learning-belief trajectories of a specific group of students within a particular institutional setting.

The research participants were twelve first-year Mainland Chinese undergraduates, recruited through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: first-year students, no prior overseas study experience, enrolment in culturally diverse programmes, and sufficient English proficiency to participate in interviews and focus groups. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached; new categories ceased to emerge by the 10th interview, with the final two confirming thematic saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used throughout.

Data were collected in two phases over one academic year (June 2022–June 2023) using three methods for triangulation: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. In Phase 1 (June 2022), semi-structured interviews with all 12 participants explored participants’ initial assumptions, beliefs and expectations of teaching and learning and their responses to

unfamiliar teaching practices in Malaysia. Example questions included, “*What is a good student to you?*” “*What were effective ways of learning for you in China?*” Interviews lasted 40–60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Focus groups (six participants per session) were built on interview findings, with questions including “*What is successful learning to all of you based on your experiences in China?*” Participant observations consisting of 11 sessions were conducted during lectures, study and tutorial sessions to better understand the learning culture and ways of mainland Chinese students. Observations included observing classroom behaviour and interactions, instances of confusion or disengagement. Field notes were recorded during observations and expanded immediately afterwards.

In Phase 2 (June 2023), all 12 participants were re-interviewed to capture current beliefs and retrospective accounts of change. Interview questions were designed to elicit reflective narratives of change, consistent with approaches commonly used in transformative learning research (Taylor, 2007). Questions include “*Has your idea of what it means to be a ‘good student’ changed? Describe experiences that make you say that.*” “*Looking back over the year, can you tell me about a time when you realised your old ways of learning were not working?*” Participants naturally used temporal language (“*at first,*” “*later I realised,*” “*now I understand*”), which was systematically noted during transcription and became central to the analysis of change over time. Follow-up focus groups explored how learning beliefs had developed, with adapted questions like “*How has your understanding of successful learning changed?*” and “*What learning ways do you now find most effective?*” A second round of 11 participant observations using the same protocol allowed comparison of behaviour and classroom dynamics across the year.

Data were analysed in two stages. First, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of all transcripts and field notes was conducted manually through iterative familiarisation, coding, and theme development, yielding four themes: (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Intercultural learning competence. Second, trajectory-based interpretation examined how beliefs evolved over time using retrospective accounts (Spencer et al., 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003). Following Saldaña’s (2015) guidance on temporal coding, all instances of temporal markers (e.g., “*at first,*” “*later,*” “*now I realise*”) were identified in Phase 2 data. These markers distinguished between early (initial experiences, uncertainty), middle (reflecting on effectiveness, trying new ways), and later (transformed understanding, intercultural awareness) periods in participants’ narrated trajectories. This approach treats retrospective meaning-making as valid data about how change is experienced (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and is established in longitudinal qualitative research that reconstructs trajectories from retrospective accounts when real-time data collection is limited (Thomson & Holland, 2003; McKibben & Breheny, 2023).

The four themes were then re-examined through this temporal lens. A consistent pattern emerged: the language participants used signalled where they were in their learning journey. When participants used words like “*at first,*” they tended to describe confusion and unmet expectations (Theme 1). When they used words like “*later,*” they often talked about trying out new ways to study (Theme 2). Descriptions of developing regular habits and thinking critically about how they were learning corresponded to the third theme: Integration (Theme 3). Finally, phrases like “*now I realise*” pointed to a deeper understanding of what learning really is. (Theme 4).

This analysis did not assume linear progression. In fact, a few participants showed signs of multiple themes in a single interview, while others understood one aspect of a new culture but continued to struggle with another. Despite this variation, the same patterns appeared across many participants. This consistency confirmed that the four themes are distinct but connected parts of how learning beliefs develop over time. To improve trustworthiness, themes were cross-checked across interviews, focus groups, and observations. For example, early confusion reported in interviews matched observed withdrawal in Phase 1, while later confidence aligned with more active participation in Phase 2.

## Findings

The findings emerged from the two phases of data and showed how twelve Chinese participants' learning beliefs evolved over their first academic year in a multicultural context. The themes are (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Becoming intercultural learners.

### *Learning Shock and Expectation Gaps*

Most Phase 1 data showed growing discomfort in the early weeks after arrival. Participants' pre-conceived beliefs, shaped by China's teacher-centred, memorisation-based system, conflicted with the more interactive, student-centred approach in Malaysian classrooms.

Participants expected structured, exam-oriented learning where knowledge was transmitted straight from lecturer to student with little room for questioning. Participant 3 explained, '*For our gaokao, we only need our textbooks and teachers, they are enough.*' Participant 9 added, '*Chinese teacher explained everything in detail, we need remember only because there is correct answer for every question.*'

Staying quiet and not asking questions was seen as expected behaviour. Participant 11 said, '*...in China, we don't ask questions, especially publicly, as it is disrespectful to teacher, like you didn't study hard enough.*' During a focus group, Participant 9 shared, '*We Chinese students feel it's strange to interrupt teacher in class even when they ask us to speak.*' This was visible during an initial participant observation, where, despite the class lecturer repeatedly asking for input, most Chinese students kept their eyes down and avoided initiating questions.

In the early stages of arrival, unfamiliar teaching ways unsettled the participants. Group discussions, open-ended questions, and the idea that knowledge could be debated felt strange. Participant 9 expressed uncertainty regarding sharing opinions in class, '*In China, the teacher explains everything, we just follow. Here, the lecturer asks us to share our opinions, but I'm not sure what to say.*' Participant 10 added, '*Why do lecturers here always ask us questions? They should tell us the answers, not us, I think.*' Participant 12 asked, '*Does it mean the new theory is more accurate?*', a question that reflected the struggle to accept knowledge as something open to change rather than fixed. Similarly, Participant 8 also questioned the credibility of sources for the first time, noting, '*I think e-books, Google Scholar, and websites are ok, but lecturers always asked us to check their reliability, why?*'

Participant 9 shared a moment of disillusionment: '*Last week, I wrote a long essay, but got low marks. Lecturer said I didn't apply the content; I seriously don't understand this.*' Participant 11 was observed to have approached her lecturer and asked softly, '*I put all the points down, why my marks are so low?*' These early moments of confusion marked the beginning of a shift, as participants encountered expectations that challenged beliefs they had previously taken for granted.

### *Experimentation with New Learning Ways*

After the initial shock, Phase 2 data showed participants attempting to engage with more interactive, self-directed learning. Over time, they reflected on the limits of their previous ways, like reliance on memorisation, the belief that hard work almost always guarantees success, and reluctance to ask questions publicly.

Having come from educational backgrounds where success was closely tied to the ability to remember everything in textbooks, participants admitted that this approach quickly fell short in classrooms that valued group discussion and critical thinking. Participant 3 said, '*My first exam here, I forgot a lot of information, and couldn't logically figure the problem! In the next test, I didn't memorise so much anymore, but I don't know if it'll work.*' Participant 12 recounted, '*At first, I memorised everything but test questions that appeared, I couldn't even answer one of them! It's a bit useless to memorise, so now I'm trying to understand what lecturers teach rather than just remember.*' During

a focus group, one participant reflected, *'In beginning, we studied PowerPoint slides, but it seems they are not tested in exams here!'* Yet Participant 3 admitted they were still unsure how to rely less on memorisation. Participant 11 said, *'even when I tried to take notes to help me understand, I still go back to remember all lecture notes.'* Her comments indicate the tension between adopting new ways, such as taking notes, and defaulting to familiar habits like memorisation.

The belief that long hours and discipline guarantee achievement was also challenged. Participant 4 recalled, *'I usually studied until 2am, but I still didn't get good marks in my first test. Nowadays, I study only 2 hours but I really make sure it goes in my brain, not sure if it works!'* Participant 11 said, *'In China, if you work hard, you pass well. But here, even I worked hard, it may not be, so I'm learning to apply what I learn here, but it's difficult.'*

Asking questions in class had been discouraged in China, as Participant 5 explained, *'In my first weeks here, like in China, I didn't dare to ask questions in class, in case I say something wrong.'* But in the Malaysian classroom, however, participants encountered a different approach, one that encouraged participation. Participant 5 reflected, *'lecturers here keep asking us to ask questions saying it's important to do that, I try sometimes but it's a bit weird because I feel shy!'* Participant 4 echoed, *'Lecturers always encourage us ask questions, but even I think asking questions publicly here is fine, I still don't dare to do it often.'*

During an observation of participants, participant 11 kept glancing at the lecturer before giving hesitant, rehearsed responses. Participants 9 and 12 volunteered opinions but hesitantly, saying *'... but I'm not sure'*, *'...maybe you don't think so'*, then falling silent when asked further questions. In group activities, participants 10 and 12 took notes and answered when directly asked, but avoided initiating ideas. Participants' behaviours and reflections showed uncertainty or inconsistent use of more student-centred ways of learning because they sometimes reverted to familiar teacher-centred ways. Although they realised that old habits like memorising or staying silent were no longer enough, they were still unsure, trying new ways through trial and error. At this point, learning was more exploratory but still inconsistent.

### *Integration of New Learning Ways*

As participants grew more confident, they blended familiar ways of learning with new ones. Moving from Theme 2 to Theme 3, participants' responses shifted from *'At first, I tried...'* or *'But even when I tried...'* to *'Later I found what worked...'*, showing how they gradually adapted and made new learning ways their own.

The researcher used temporal markers as evidence of movement between themes, even though the movement is retrospectively described, not all were directly observed. In Stage 3, evidence showed participants applying new learning ways intentionally, whereas Stage 2 reflected sporadic or tentative attempts.

Participant 3 noted *'In China, I studied everything before exam'*, however, after several months in Malaysia, she realised that *'questions here require analyse, not just remember facts, so these days, I must understand concepts first'*. Participant 7 explained, *'I still memorise a lot, but not as much as I did when I first came here. Now, instead of just repeating ideas, I put them together like a picture, it works!'* These comments suggest participants did not abandon memorisation entirely; rather, they integrated it with conceptual understanding. Memorisation became a foundation for critical thinking rather than the only method of learning.

Participant observations reflected these changes. In Phase 1, most participants sat quietly and avoided eye contact. By Phase 2, many could raise thoughtful questions and debate ideas. As Participant 2 shared, *'At first, I spoke because lecturers asked us to, but now, I myself think it really helps me understand better'*. Participant 6 added, *'Mostly, during discussions, I felt I had no choice but by the second semester, I realise speaking aloud indeed made my head clearer'*. In one English literature class, Participant 5, who had usually stayed silent, confidently shared a story about her identity, sparking an open discussion. Participant 6 remarked, *'Somehow, I came to love arguing... lecturers' instructions made me start to know the meaning of thinking critically.'*

Participants also moved from studying alone to learning with peers. Participant 11 shared, *'I always studied alone, even many months after coming here, but nowadays, I want to study with friends because I can understand more.'* Participant 6 added, *'I felt forced to join group discussions at first, but now I actually prefer this way because classmates see things differently.'* Participant 9 said, *'When we discuss things together, I often realise what I missed before.'* Group study was no longer just a useful experiment, but a regular, cognitively enriching learning way. Participant 7 explained, *'I still study myself but I realised when I study with others, even I make mistakes, my classmates can point out to me. I'm more confident, it's good.'* The phrase 'study with others' reflects a change from prior, more individualistic study habits, where the participant had begun experimenting with learning with peers, corresponding with Stage 2. Meanwhile, the outcome, 'more confident', indicates that this approach has had a positive and internalised effect on her self-perception as a learner. This sense of confidence suggests that group study is no longer just a trial strategy, but has been accepted and integrated into the participant's belief system as a meaningful and effective learning way, which is a clear indicator of Stage 3.

By Stage 3, most students had developed a hybrid learning way, blending solitary practices with more interactive, group-based methods and had begun to internalise these approaches.

### *Becoming Intercultural Learners*

At this stage, participants showed conscious awareness of cultural differences in learning and began to value them. Participant 6 shared, *'I used to be angry when people didn't understand me, but now I'm politer, I try to understand others first.'* Participant 4 confided, *'I used to speak too directly and made people angry without knowing. Nowadays, I adjust my tone.'* Along similar lines, participant 2 recalled, *'Many times, I got angry in group projects, these days, I'm more patient. A year ago, no way!'*

Some changes went even deeper, touching on values and beliefs. Participant 5 reflected, *'Even being here for many months, I still believed there was only one right way to do thing, however, something happened two months ago, making me realise things are not always black or white.'* This shift in moral reasoning was echoed by participant 10, who said, *'Studying international case studies lately make me know ethics is not the same everywhere. It depends on culture.'* In the same vein, participant 12 added, *'I used to think Chinese ways are always correct, but then, I think now, other countries have their own logic too, it's not wrong, just different.'*

Even as they became more culturally aware, they faced challenges that tested their resilience and confidence. Participant 4 said, *'Sometimes, we find classmates didn't want to work with us, thinking our English is bad, but nowadays, I don't care much, I just do my best.'* She also said, *'I was very impatient with classmates who were often slow in their work...but nowadays, I have become a better listener.'*

Supportive classrooms helped them build confidence, as participant 2 said, *'I learned here making mistakes are ok, nowadays, I'm dare to speak up more.'* Participant 7 added, *'Lecturers here are kind so I slowly become braver to speak.'* Inclusive approaches by lecturers made participants feel comfortable enough to speak up and participate. Being around culturally diverse classmates was helpful in making participants feel more comfortable in groups. Participant 9 noted, *'I felt strange in first few months, but now I feel fine!'* Malaysia's multicultural setting also made a difference. As Participant 12 claimed, *'It's easier here, because its mixed, not just one culture!'*

Group work remained challenging but slowly improved. Participant 3 said, *'Malaysian classmates always submitted things last minute. I used to get angry. But nowadays, I just adjust myself and remind them earlier.'* Participant 5 described, *'In China, teachers don't criticise students in front of everyone. Here, they do. At first, I felt ashamed. But now I feel it's normal, it's not bad meaning.'* Likewise, participant 10 admitted, *'In the first semester, I was confused with most lecturers' accents! Now, I can even use Malaysian accent! It doesn't bother me anymore.'* For these participants, progress did not come overnight, as it took time, repeated exposure, and a lot of awareness and patience.

Participant 2 summed up with, *'Before coming here, I never talked to foreigners. It's my first time to a classroom with so many different cultures, I was so nervous! Now, I can talk to anybody'*. For the research participants, it was their first time in a diverse learning environment. Being surrounded by such diversity led to new ways of thinking, not just about how to study, but about how to relate to others and find their place in a shared space.

## Discussion

### *An Emergent Framework: A Learning Belief Evolution Model*

This study explored how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolved during their first year in Malaysia's classrooms. Analysis of interviews, focus groups, and observations revealed four interconnected themes: (1) Learning shock and expectation gaps, (2) Experimentation with new learning ways, (3) Integration of new learning ways, and (4) Intercultural learning competence. These themes are presented sequentially for clarity, although participants described them as overlapping and recursive, and not in a straight line. The process is better understood as a spiral, where participants may revisit earlier challenges, but with growing insight each time.

#### *Theme 1: Learning Shock and Expectation Gaps*

The foundation of this theme came from data collected at the beginning of the year, which showed participants' initial reactions when their expectations (Lam, 2024; Lin, 2022) were confronted with unfamiliar pedagogical practices. They were confused, anxious, and struggled with open discussions and critical thinking in Malaysia's more participatory classrooms (Dongqi et al., 2020; Ma & Ismail, 2022). As one participant remarked, *"I felt lost when lecturer asked us to debate; I didn't know how to argue without disrespecting others. I should learn such skills before coming here!"*

Similar adjustment issues have been reported among Chinese students in other Western contexts (Holliman et al., 2023), aligning with Li's (2003) assertion that culturally shaped learning beliefs influence how students perceive effective learning. While Zhou et al. (2008) describe this phenomenon as cultural learning shock, the present study frames it not just as stress but as a catalyst for change. From a Mezirowian perspective, these moments represent the "disorienting dilemmas" that can trigger transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Research shows that students' learning beliefs are closely linked to how they experience and respond to educational environments, with dissonance often serving as a catalyst for reflection and change (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Lee & Branch, 2022; Stolk, 2024). However, the data suggest this process does not happen in isolation. Participants who moved through their initial shock often described peers or lecturers who normalised their confusion or offered guidance, pointing to what Vygotsky (1978) calls "mediated assistance." This suggests that disorienting dilemmas alone may not be enough for transformation; they require social support. Wu (2015) similarly found that culture shock paired with reflective support can catalyse growth, reinforcing the interdependence of social interaction and internal reflection. These findings extend Prawat's (1992) observation that dissatisfaction with current beliefs is the first step toward transformation, by showing that students need socially supported dissonance, not just dissatisfaction.

#### *Theme 2: Experimentation with New Learning Ways*

When classroom practices challenged their existing approaches, participants felt pushed to begin experimenting with unfamiliar ways of learning, such as mind-mapping, group discussion, and self-monitoring. One participant captured the tentative nature of this theme: *"I started making mind maps when I saw copying every word didn't help me understand, but I don't know if it'll succeed."* This supports the view that beliefs are dynamic and responsive to new environments (Yang & Kim, 2011). As Reybold (2002) suggests, discomfort can create openings for growth. In

line with Prawat's (1992) argument, belief change occurred when learners became dissatisfied with previous methods, saw alternatives, and gradually integrated new ideas with what they already knew. This theme highlights the interplay between Vygotskian scaffolding and Mezirowian reflection in ways neither theory alone fully explains. Experimentation occurred within the Zone of Proximal Development as participants tried new ways of learning. They were supported by peers and lecturers who showed alternative approaches (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling them to experiment with more confidence. However, Vygotsky's framework explains what students do, but not why they persist when outcomes are uncertain. Mezirow's (2000) concept of critical reflection fills this gap and explains that participants are not merely copying behaviours but evaluating whether new strategies resolved the dilemmas of Theme 1. The participant's uncertainty (*"I don't know if it'll succeed"*) was not hesitation but more thinking in action and assessing whether new approaches are worth integrating. This finding complicates Prawat's (1992) three conditions for belief change (dissatisfaction, alternatives, continuity) by showing that dissatisfaction alone does not automatically lead to experimentation. Students needed encouragement from lecturers and peers to try what felt unfamiliar, implying that belief change is not just cognitive; it depends on social conditions that make experimentation feel safe. The process of reflection and gradual adjustment observed here aligns with broader research on Chinese learners' adaptability in new educational contexts (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2021; Kember, 2016).

### Theme 3: Integration of New Learning Ways

As noted in the methodological preface, Themes 2–4 were distinguished through temporal coding. Theme 3 captures how participants moved beyond trial to deliberate integration, blending memorisation with conceptual discussion, balancing individual study with collaborative learning, and reflecting on what worked. One participant still memorised information but now talked it through with peers to deepen understanding. Such integration reflects Prawat's (1992) third condition for belief change: continuity, where new beliefs are integrated alongside existing ones rather than replacing them. Instead of abandoning Confucian values, students developed a hybrid orientation, retaining diligence and respect for teachers while embracing autonomy and critical thinking, consistent with research on Chinese learner adaptation (Li, 2013; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015).

This theme offers the clearest evidence of how Vygotskian and Mezirowian processes converge. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalisation, social experiences becoming part of individual thinking, was visible as participants appropriated classroom practices into personal study routines. Over time, these social experiences shaped their internal thinking. However, internalisation alone does not explain why students retained some practices and discarded others. Mezirow's theory fills the missing gap by showing that learners drive their own change when they stop, reflect on their results, and assess whether blended approaches resolved the dilemmas of Theme 1 better than old or new approaches alone.

Such a reflective act shows that learning involves adapting existing practices, not replacing them, a view consistent with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). The data also challenge Vygotsky's assumption of straightforward internalisation and Mezirow's assumption of frame replacement. Neither fully accounts for the "hybrid adaptation" (Tran, 2011) found in this study. Participants maintained dual orientations, like memorising in some contexts and discussions in others. They were not "between" cultures, but had developed an understanding of when each approach was appropriate. These findings challenge deficit narratives about Chinese learners (Lyu et al., 2021; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013). The issue is not whether students can adapt to Western-style classrooms, but whether adaptation is framed as replacement (losing one culture to gain another) or expansion (adding tools while retaining existing ones). The data support expansion, adding tools while retaining existing ones, suggesting that transformative learning theory may need to accommodate multiple frames of reference, not just transformation (Holdo, 2023; Mezirow, 2000).

#### Theme 4: Intercultural Learning Competence

Theme 4 captures the most complex orientation observed in participants' later reflections: a reframed understanding of learning itself as culturally situated. As one participant explained, *"It's not just about learning for marks but also, when I work with others, I see learning differently."* Participants' reflections revealed a shift toward deeper intercultural understanding, not just trying new methods, but rethinking their whole approach to learning (Markey et al., 2023). This suggests Chinese students have a capacity for intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), aligning with Deardorff's (2006) conception of navigating difference through openness and empathy.

Participants began to act differently, too, corresponding with Mezirow's (2000) "action phase," where new perspectives are put into practice. Unlike past research suggesting Chinese students struggle in student-centred classrooms (Lyu et al., 2021; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013), participants in this study made conscious choices about when to adapt and when to retain aspects of their own learning culture.

Theme 4 reflects what Mezirow (1991) terms "transformation of frames of reference", a shift in how participants understood learning itself. Over one year, encounters with differences made them more reflective and culturally aware, gradually reshaping old beliefs to fit new academic contexts (Wu & Cosnefroy, 2025; De Leersnyder, 2017). Similar findings by O'Dea, Wang, and O'Dea (2023) show that exposure to diverse environments leads students to question habitual practices and develop more flexible approaches.

However, the data revealed something Mezirow's theory underplays, that this transformed frame is inherently intercultural. Participants developed an awareness that their familiar approaches suited certain contexts, while Malaysian approaches were right for others. This goes beyond Perry's (1970) "commitment within relativism." Participants did not simply commit to one perspective among many. Instead, they held multiple perspectives simultaneously and chose among them based on context. This finding extends existing intercultural competence models (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 1993) by suggesting an additional dimension: epistemological intercultural competence, the recognition that ways of learning are culturally shaped, and that competent learners move between them intentionally, rather than simply adapting to the host culture.

Importantly, the four themes are not discrete stages. Participants followed different paths; some experimented while still disoriented, others integrated strategies before fully reflecting, and some reached intercultural awareness in certain areas while remaining in earlier orientations in others. The themes are therefore overlapping dimensions, not sequential steps. While presented in order for clarity, the process itself is non-linear: sometimes new experiences shift beliefs first; other times, trying new approaches leads to deeper reflection. This iterative, bidirectional relationship (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Hong, 2006) means that as students apply expanded beliefs, they gradually shape future learning ways. These findings align with research showing that learning is influenced by cognitive, emotional, and cultural factors (Reybold, 2002; Prawat, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978; Tang, 2022; Chen & Chen, 2021; Kember, 2016), reflecting the non-linear nature of belief evolution in cross-cultural contexts.

#### **Study's Contributions, Limitations, and Future Work**

This study offers three main theoretical contributions. First, it shows that learning beliefs evolve through the interplay of social interaction and critical reflection, meaning Vygotsky and Mezirow are complementary rather than competing frameworks. Second, it reconceptualises adaptation as expansion rather than replacement. Participants did not abandon existing beliefs but developed what Li (2018) terms a "third space", a place where different ways of learning coexist and can be used flexibly depending on context. Third, it reveals the non-linear, recursive nature of belief evolution, where beliefs and learning ways shape each other over time, suggesting that interventions must address both at the same time.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for scaffolded support, peer interaction, and reflective activities. Early orientation workshops can help set realistic expectations. During the experimentation phase, low-risk group tasks where there are minimal consequences if mistakes occur allow students to try new approaches safely. As students' progress, assignments that combine memorisation with critical thinking can support integration.

For policy, Malaysian higher education should recognise learning adaptation as dynamic and culturally mediated, using culturally sensitive methods and creating opportunities for reflection and peer interaction to support international students' academic and intercultural development. Together, the study's contributions provide a research-based explanation of how Chinese international students' learning beliefs evolve in diverse classrooms, highlighting this as growth rather than a weakness.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the model relies on participants' retrospective accounts collected at only two time points. While this captured significant shifts in learning beliefs, it may not fully catch the subtle, continuous changes between these points. Second, as with all self-reported data, participants' accounts may involve some bias, as past experiences can be selectively remembered or reconstructed. Nevertheless, the depth and richness of their reflections still provide strong insight into how beliefs developed over the year. Third, peer review was conducted on only 10% of the coded data. While this helped check coding consistency, a higher percentage would have further strengthened dependability. Future research could address these limitations by employing more frequent longitudinal data collection (e.g., mid-year points) and more extensive peer review throughout.

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# INSTITUTIONALISING CHINA-AFRICA COOPERATION IN BASIC EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF CHINA'S POLICY DOCUMENTS

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**Abstract:** Most research on China's education cooperation with Africa has focused on tertiary education, with basic education remaining underexplored. This article addresses this gap by reviewing 18 of China's policy documents related to education cooperation with Africa, with a specific focus on basic education and its institutionalisation. The analysis examines three dimensions: China's core cooperation principles and objectives; the initiatives and mechanisms supporting basic education; and the evolution and institutionalisation of these strategies over time. The findings reveal that China consistently emphasises equality, mutual benefit, and partnership, framing its engagement as "cooperation" rather than traditional "aid". Key initiatives include human resource development programmes, Confucius Classrooms, educational infrastructure provision, school and youth exchanges, and targeted assistance projects. China's approach has evolved through three stages: from sporadic exchanges before 2000, to structured and institutionalised cooperation under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) from 2000 to the mid-2010s, and to comprehensive and systematic engagement from the mid-2010s to the present, strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative (2013) and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (2018). The study concludes by highlighting the need for further empirical research to examine implementation processes, outcomes, and the roles of African stakeholders, thereby contributing to broader debates on South-South education cooperation.

**Keywords:** Basic Education, China, Africa, Cooperation, Institutionalisation

## Introduction

According to UNESCO, basic education comprises primary education and lower secondary education, along with a diverse variety of non-formal and informal activities, both public and private, intended to meet the basic learning needs of people of all ages (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Its definition and scope vary from country to country, and even region to region. For example, in China, basic education includes early childhood education (typically 3-5 years old), compulsory education (typically 6-15 years old), secondary education (typically 16-19 years old), and adult literacy education (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2007); while the Department of Basic Education in South Africa views basic education as education from Grade R (also called the Reception Year, typically 6 years old) to Grade 12 (typically 17-18 years old), including adult literacy programmes (South African Department of Basic Education, 2021).

Basic education is regarded as a priority for all countries. While countries in the Global North have largely achieved widespread access to basic education, many developing nations continue to pursue this objective, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Fredriksen & Brar, 2015). According to UNESCO (2023a), the youth literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 77%, and the adult literacy rate reached 87% in 2016, but progress has since stagnated, remaining considerably lower than the global average of 91%. The World Bank (2025) reports an even lower figure, estimating that the adult literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 69% in 2024, the highest since 1985. Primary school net

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enrolment rates have improved but remain concerning: progress has stalled since 2010, plateauing at just under 80% in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with near-universal enrolment above 95% in North America and Western Europe (Our World in Data, 2024).

Moreover, stark disparities persist across African regions and within countries, with rural areas and poorer households experiencing significantly lower enrolment and completion rates. Only one-third of countries with recent data have achieved parity between rural and urban areas in primary completion, and in some countries, secondary school completion rates among rural youth are up to 20 percentage points lower than those of their urban counterparts (UNESCO, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, only 65 of the poorest children attend school for every 100 of the richest (UNESCO, 2016a). Educational infrastructure also remains inadequate, with many African countries experiencing severe shortages of trained teachers, learning materials, and suitable school facilities. Approximately 20% of primary school-aged children and nearly 60% of upper secondary school-aged children in sub-Saharan Africa are currently not attending school (The Borgen Project, 2024).

Since the 1980s, major multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have been committed to financing basic education in developing countries (King, 1993). International conferences, including the 1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, and its subsequent World Declaration on Education for All, followed by the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar and the Dakar Framework for Action, have highlighted the global consensus on the importance of basic education as a foundation for sustainable development and poverty reduction.

For China, key policy documents, such as the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration and the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, reinforce the importance of prioritising basic education in developing nations (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005; CIDCA, 2021). Despite these widespread commitments, academic research on China's international cooperation in the field of basic education remains minimal.

In examining China's educational cooperation with Africa, it can be observed that the majority of existing research has focused on higher education (Niu, 2013; King, 2014; Gonondo, 2017; Bouchaib, 2023; Hodzi & Amoah, 2023; Knight & Zhang, 2024). As King (2019, p. 13) observes, China has "not focused very much on basic education or on Education for All, but much more on higher education". Similarly, Nordtveit (2011, p. 104), through his case study of China's education aid in Cameroon, notes that "the Chinese were not much involved in basic education." However, a closer examination reveals various forms of cooperation in basic education dating back to the 1950s, highlighting an apparent research gap.

Against this backdrop of Africa's persistent challenges in basic education and the limited scholarly attention to China's role in addressing them, this article investigates how China has engaged in basic education cooperation with Africa. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What core principles and objectives underpin China's basic education cooperation with Africa?
- 2) Through what initiatives and mechanisms has this cooperation been implemented?
- 3) How have these cooperation strategies evolved and become institutionalised over time?

This article aims to answer these questions through a review of Chinese policy documents related to basic education cooperation with Africa, with particular attention to how these policies have shaped the institutionalisation of such cooperation.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

Following the research questions outlined above, this study employs a qualitative document analysis to examine the institutionalisation of China's cooperation with Africa in basic education.

The analysis focuses on official Chinese policy documents issued after the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, a milestone that marks the shift from ad hoc bilateral engagement to a formalised, cyclical, and multilateral policy architecture for China-Africa relations. FOCAC is a triennial forum jointly convened by China and African states at the ministerial or summit level, with each meeting producing an action plan that codifies shared priorities and implementation mechanisms across multiple sectors, including education.

Since 2013, China's education cooperation with Africa has increasingly been aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global development framework launched by China that promotes connectivity and cooperation through infrastructure, trade, people-to-people exchanges, and education. As of January 2026, 52 African countries have joined this initiative. Only two African countries had not signed a formal BRI Memorandum of Understanding: Eswatini (which has no diplomatic relations with China) and Mauritius (which maintains close relations with China but has not concluded a formal BRI MoU). Together, FOCAC and the BRI constitute the principal institutional channels through which China-Africa education cooperation is articulated, normalised, and coordinated.

To interpret the findings, this study adopts the analytical perspective of institutionalisation, a concept widely discussed in policy and organisational studies (Brett, 2024; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Li, 2023; Li & Zhong, 2025). In this research, institutionalisation refers to the process by which China's education cooperation policies have evolved from sporadic, fragmented initiatives into a more structured and systematic framework. This transformation is particularly evident in the creation of formal institutions and mechanisms for policy implementation. It reflects not only China's growing commitment to long-term partnerships but also its strategic alignment with Africa's development priorities, especially in basic education. Moreover, this perspective provides a useful lens for analysing how China's education cooperation policies have become increasingly embedded within national and international development frameworks, aligning with broader initiatives such as the BRI and the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035.

### *Document Selection*

In total, 18 key policy documents were reviewed. These include the China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration (2005), China's Africa Policy Papers (2006 and 2015), China's Foreign Aid White Papers (2011 and 2014), the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016), the White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021), the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 (2021a), the Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development (2023), and the nine FOCAC Action Plans issued following each FOCAC summit (the first titled Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development, with subsequent documents referred to as Action Plans).

The selection of documents was guided by three criteria: authenticity, authority, and representativeness. In terms of authenticity, all 18 documents were officially issued by the Chinese government or its official institutions, ensuring their reliability as primary policy sources. Each document is available in both Chinese and English, and both versions were consulted to support accurate interpretation.

In terms of authority, the selected documents occupy the highest level of the Chinese policy hierarchy. The FOCAC Action Plans, for instance, represent the central institutional mechanism governing China-Africa cooperation and contain explicit commitments to education cooperation.

In terms of representativeness, the corpus captures the breadth and depth of China's education cooperation policy. It includes high-level strategic texts (Africa Policy Papers; Foreign Aid White Papers), sector-specific frameworks (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative; Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development), and the FOCAC Action Plans, which translate these principles into operational mechanisms. Together, these texts form a coherent and representative

corpus reflecting both the evolution and institutionalisation of China's basic education cooperation with Africa.

While this study focuses on formal policy documents, other potential sources, such as bilateral agreements, implementation reports, and leaders' speeches, were not systematically included for methodological and practical reasons. Most bilateral agreements are inaccessible to the public and vary widely in form and scope, making a comprehensive comparison difficult. Speeches and implementation reports, although valuable for understanding political discourse and practice, are often rhetorical in nature and lack the formal status of policy documents (Martin, 2022; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005).

It should be noted that before the 2000s, few formal Chinese policy documents specifically addressed China-Africa education cooperation. Nevertheless, the discussion of the historical background later in the paper draws on secondary data to trace earlier developments from the 1950s to 2000, offering a broader historical perspective on the evolution of China's educational engagement with Africa.

### *Analytical Approach*

In this study, policy documents are not treated as neutral descriptions of practice; rather, they are analysed as authoritative texts that actively construct policy problems, rationales for cooperation, and institutional arrangements (Bacchi, 2009; Yanow, 2000). This perspective is particularly relevant in the China-Africa cooperation context, where official documents are central to producing a coherent narrative of South-South cooperation, mutual benefit, and development partnership.

Document analysis offers several methodological strengths for this study. First, it enables longitudinal tracing of continuity and change by comparing recurring commitments and shifting emphases across successive FOCAC cycles and related strategic texts. Second, it provides access to formalised mechanisms, such as forums, plans, and implementation channels, that are core indicators of institutionalisation. Third, it allows examination of how basic education is positioned within broader development agendas and how cooperation is legitimised through policy language and framing.

However, official documents impose epistemic limits. As normative and strategic texts, they are often written to signal alignment, legitimacy, and commitment, and may understate uncertainty, disagreement, or implementation constraints (Ball, 1993; Rapley, 2018). Documents also contain "silences", such as tensions and trade-offs, and actors whose perspectives are marginalised or absent, such as local implementers and communities, which can be analytically meaningful but cannot be filled in without additional data (Bacchi, 2009; Prior, 2003). For these reasons, documents-as-data can illuminate policy intent, institutional priorities, and official mechanisms, but cannot on their own establish causal impact, implementation fidelity, or stakeholder experience (Yanow, 2000; Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, this study's claims are bound to what the corpus can support: the evolution of formal policy framing and institutional structuring of cooperation, rather than outcome evaluation.

Beyond these general considerations, the bilingual nature of the corpus requires specific analytical attention. Cross-language policy texts may differ not only in wording but also in emphasis, scope, and the pragmatic force of commitments, particularly when key concepts carry culturally and politically situated meanings across language versions (van Nes et al., 2010).

Although full back-translation is commonly used in interview- or survey-based research (Brislin, 1970; Behr, 2017), it is rarely applied to large corpora of official policy texts, where both language versions are publicly available as authoritative documents. Rather than back-translating entire documents, this study adopted a guided bilingual comparison approach. Following principles recommended in cross-language qualitative research, such as prioritising conceptual over literal equivalence, documenting interpretive decisions, and carefully handling politically or institutionally loaded terms (Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010; Squires, 2009), key analytical terms were tracked across both language versions. These included: 合作 (cooperation), 援助 (aid), 互利 (mutual

benefit), and related policy concepts. When passages were central to coding or interpretation, the Chinese and English versions were examined side-by-side to identify meaningful discrepancies. Where differences in emphasis, scope, or framing emerged, the Chinese text was treated as the semantic reference point, given its status as the original policy formulation, and interpretive decisions were recorded to ensure consistency across the corpus.

A clear example is the translation of aid-related terminology in FOCAC documents. In the English version of FOCAC IX's Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), for instance, the word "aid" appears only three times, whereas the corresponding Chinese term "援助 (yuanzhu)" appears 26 times in the Chinese version. In standard development discourse, "援助" is conventionally translated as "aid"; however, in the official English versions of the FOCAC Action Plans, it is often translated as "assistance" or "assist" rather than "aid". This is not a neutral linguistic substitution but a deliberate lexical choice that avoids donor-style terminology and reframes China's engagement as cooperation rather than aid. This pattern is discussed further in the following section and illustrated in Table 1. Although absolute term frequencies differ across languages, the overall temporal trends remain comparable, allowing both versions to be analysed as parallel representations of policy framing for different audiences.

### *Coding Procedure*

Drawing on Bowen (2009)'s guidelines for using documents as data sources in qualitative research, this study employed a systematic, iterative process to analyse the selected policy documents. Consistent with a critical document analysis approach, the procedure combined thematic coding with attention to policy framing, repetition, and omission, treating documents as both sources of content and instruments of institutional meaning-making (Bacchi, 2009; Prior, 2003; Rapley, 2018). Guided by the research questions outlined above, the thematic analysis was organised around three preliminary codes corresponding to the study's key analytical dimensions: principles and objectives, initiatives and mechanisms, and evolution and transformation.

The coding process involved several stages: 1) All 18 documents were read carefully to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content, context, and policy framing. 2) Each document was re-read in detail, and passages relevant to the three preliminary codes were identified and annotated. 3) All documents were uploaded into NVivo, where the data were coded according to the established framework. 4) Emergent codes such as human resources development, education facilities provision, Confucius Classrooms, and education assistance projects were identified. As new ideas and insights appeared during the coding process, additional emergent codes were incorporated into the codebook. 5) These codes were then reviewed to identify and resolve redundancies or overlaps, and overly broad codes were refined into sub-codes to capture more nuanced meanings. 6) The coding continued until no new or redundant codes emerged, ensuring saturation. 7) All codes were re-examined for hierarchy and relevance, allowing the analysis to be organised into three main analytical sections below.

## **China's Core Cooperation Principles and Objectives**

### *Equality and Mutuality as the Guiding Norm*

Since China began providing aid to African nations in 1956, Africa has been a primary recipient of China's foreign assistance. According to China's Foreign Aid White Papers, Africa received 45.7% of all Chinese foreign aid in 2009, and 51.8% between 2010 and 2012 (Central People's Government of PRC, 2014; CIDCA, 2018). However, as King (2019) argues, this pattern contrasts with the donor-recipient relationships typically seen between Western countries and African nations. Unlike Western donors, which often position themselves as benefactors, China advocates for South-South Cooperation, a philosophy grounded in mutual development and equality. Within this framework, both China

and Africa are seen as equal partners working together for common advancement. But in practice, achieving such mutuality is challenging, given China's growing economic and political power and the imbalance between China's significant presence in Africa and the relatively limited African presence in China. As Jiang and Holst (2025) note, this mutuality is not precisely equal or symmetrical, yet stakeholders in China's international aid initiatives perceive their work as fostering mutual benefit.

These guiding principles were first articulated in 1964 by Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit to Ghana through the Eight Principles of Chinese Economic and Technological Aid. The first two principles underscore China's commitment to fostering reciprocal relationships in its foreign aid initiatives:

1. Equality and mutual benefit: China views foreign aid not as unilateral charity but as mutual assistance where both parties gain.
2. Respect for sovereignty: China ensures that its aid does not come with conditions or political demands, emphasizing respect for the recipient country's sovereignty (Xinhua Net, np, 2016).

Although these principles were initially articulated when China was economically weak and in urgent need of political allies during the Cold War, they have since become the cornerstone of China's foreign policy towards Africa, including its educational initiatives, and have been consistently upheld by successive Chinese governments. Notably, China rarely uses the term "aid" in its policy documents. Instead, China prefers terms such as "cooperation" to reflect the mutual aspect of the relationship (Mawdsley, 2012; King, 2014). For instance, in FOCAC action plans (English versions), the word "cooperation" appears far more frequently than "aid" or "assistance" (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Occurrences of the Words "Aid," "Assistance," and "Cooperation" in FOCAC Action Plans**

Year	FOCAC Number	FOCAC Documents	Aid	Assistance	Cooperation
2000	I	Program for China-Africa Cooperation in Economic and Social Development	1	3	51
2003	II	Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004-2006)	0	9	79
2006	III	Beijing Action Plan (2007-2009)	0	14	88
2009	IV	Sharm El Sheikh Action Plan (2010-2012)	0	7	84
2012	V	Beijing Action Plan (2013-2015)	1	13	141
2015	VI	Johannesburg Action Plan (2016-2018)	0	14	151
2018	VII	Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021)	4	17	211
2021	VIII	Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)	1	23	293
2024	IX	Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027)	3	20	312

Note: This table reports term frequencies from the official English-language versions of the FOCAC Action Plans. Differences between "aid" and "assistance" in the English texts are interpreted through comparison with the corresponding Chinese term 援助 (see Methodology for details).

Sources: FOCAC (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2021, 2024).

As demonstrated, the term "cooperation" dominates FOCAC action plans, reflecting a partnership-oriented approach that contrasts with the hierarchical connotations of traditional aid. When the term "assistance" is used, it sometimes refers to mutual support, such as the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund or mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, as outlined in the clauses of the FOCAC VII's Action Plan, rather than to one-sided aid transfers. The 2021 White Paper on China and Africa in the New Era reinforces this framing by adopting "A Partnership of Equals" as its subtitle, underscoring the Chinese government's consistent emphasis on reciprocity and equality in its engagement with African countries. King (2020) similarly observes that FOCAC documents use the phrase "both sides" when referring to cooperation projects, whereas "the Chinese government"

is more commonly used in reference to aid-related initiatives, indicating a deliberate linguistic distinction between mutual engagement and unilateral assistance.

It is noteworthy that China's preference for the term "cooperation" over "aid" in its official development discourse also mirrors a broader discursive shift among traditional Northern donors. In recent years, countries such as Sweden and Denmark, while remaining members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Development Assistance Committee (DAC), have increasingly adopted the term "development cooperation" to project a more equal and partnership-based model of engagement (OECD, 2019; King, 2019). However, a key difference lies in the institutional and normative frameworks behind the terminology. OECD-DAC members are required to report detailed aid flows and conform to internationally agreed standards, often coordinated through the OECD headquarters in Paris. China, by contrast, does not participate in the DAC and is not subject to its reporting obligations or policy guidelines (Brautigam, 2011; Mawdsley, 2012). This reflects China's desire to distance itself from the traditional donor community and to define its role instead as a South-South cooperation partner (Li, 2026).

In line with this positioning, China favours flexible, bilateral arrangements that emphasise mutual benefit, non-conditionality, and respect for national sovereignty. This approach distinguishes it from DAC donors, even those that have rhetorically embraced more horizontal partnerships. As a result, China's persistent use of the term "cooperation" not only signals a political and ideological distinction from the traditional donor system but also contributes to the increasing blurring of boundaries between aid, trade, and diplomacy in contemporary development engagements.

### *Objectives of China-Africa Cooperation in Basic Education*

A foundational document outlining the objectives of China's cooperation with Africa in basic education is the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration. This official document, dedicated to China-Africa education cooperation, asserts that:

We believe that free compulsory primary education is a fundamental human right... Developing countries should spare no effort to prioritise the development of basic education, ensuring that children, regardless of gender, have access to a certain number of years of education... High-quality primary education is the solid foundation of the educational system (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005, paras. 5, 8 and 9).

This idealistic vision, however, contrasts with the educational realities in some African countries, where free and compulsory primary education remains far from universal. As Bray (2021) observes, large numbers of families continue to rely on private education, and in some parts of Africa, particularly in Francophone countries, free primary education is still lacking. To address such challenges, the Beijing Declaration outlines a set of strategic measures aimed at achieving high-quality basic education. These include improving teacher quality, enhancing teaching methods, upgrading facilities, developing appropriate curricula and teaching models, adopting flexible management systems, and leveraging distance education (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2005). These proposed approaches are later operationalised in the FOCAC Action Plans through specific initiatives and mechanisms, which serve as policy instruments for realising the goals set out in the Declaration. These will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

An important development in China's educational engagement with Africa is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under President Xi. The 2016 Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative further expanded the scope of basic education cooperation by encouraging sister-school partnerships, multilingual and foreign-language teacher development, the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, full-time and volunteer Mandarin teacher training, teacher and student exchanges, international understanding education, Silk Road cultural heritage protection, curriculum-related cooperation, and the export of teaching equipment, courseware, and

“full-package teaching solutions” to support more balanced educational development across Belt and Road countries (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2016, paras. 14–16, 20, 29).

The BRI has significantly expanded China’s educational outreach and influence among participating countries, including those in Africa. It has fostered institutional partnerships, supported teacher and student exchanges, enhanced access to multilingual education, and, in some cases, contributed to improving perceptions of China through educational initiatives (d’Hooghe, 2021; Romadhoni et al., 2024; Yue et al., 2024; King, 2020). These institutions, projects and mechanisms are examined in the subsequent sections.

More recently, the White Paper on China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021) places basic education within the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the fourth section, titled “Promote the Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, Supporting Basic Education is identified as the first task under the subsection on Ensuring Quality Education, which states that “education is the foundation of development” and that.

China enhances the educational development level of other developing countries and provides people with better and more educational opportunities by building schools, training teachers, and expanding the scale of scholarships (CIDCA, 2021, paras. 77 and 78).

Similarly, the 2023 Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development emphasises that:

China supports efforts to improve the education levels of all Africans, particularly women, children, and adolescents, and is willing to continue providing high-quality education to African countries through various scholarships and training programmes (FOCAC, 2023, para. 8).

Although both documents frame their commitments under “cooperation”, the language used – emphasising building schools, training teachers, and providing scholarships – clearly indicates the provision of aid-like support to address Africa’s basic education challenges. What remains less clear, however, is how these high-level commitments are implemented at the country level. How are the broad and aspirational goals articulated in FOCAC declarations and white papers translated into concrete action? How can we assess whether they are being realised on the ground? A number of such initiatives and mechanisms are, in fact, outlined in China’s policy documents. These are examined in detail in the following section, which explores how China’s cooperation with Africa in basic education is operationalised and institutionalised.

## **Supportive Initiatives and Mechanisms**

Before 2000, China’s cooperation with Africa in the field of basic education was characterised by sporadic and fragmented projects, which is examined in greater detail later in the paper. Since the founding of FOCAC in 2000, basic education has emerged as an important area of cooperation. Several key initiatives and mechanisms can be identified in the policy documents.

### *Initiatives of Human Resources Development*

Since the establishment of FOCAC, China has focused on supporting human resources development in Africa (King, 2020), particularly in basic education. The African Human Resources Development Fund (AHRDF), launched at FOCAC I in 2000, plays a key role in training African personnel, including those in the education sector. Successive FOCAC action plans have underscored China’s commitment to this cause. For example, FOCAC II’s Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004–2006) pledged that, “China will,

in the next three years, further increase its financial contribution to the African Human Resources Development Fund for the training of up to 10,000 African personnel in different fields" (FOCAC, 2003, para. 51). Chinese institutions have actively collaborated with the AHRDF to implement programmes aimed at improving basic education in Africa. For example, between 2002 and 2011, Zhejiang Normal University's African Basic Education Management Training Program trained 602 individuals from 48 countries (China Youth Daily, 2011). Similarly, Northeast Normal University conducted five basic education training workshops for African education personnel from 2004 to 2007 (Chen et al., 2016).

China has also made significant contributions to international education initiatives, particularly through its partnership with UNESCO. On 22 November 2012, the Chinese government launched the UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust (CFIT) project with an initial donation of 8 million US Dollars to support teacher development in basic education across Africa (UNESCO, 2023b). Three phases have been implemented to date. Phase 1 (2012–2016) supported teacher training in eight countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Namibia, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Tanzania, and Uganda (UNESCO, 2017). In Phase 2 (2017–2018), China contributed an additional 4 million US Dollars, expanding the programme to include Togo and Zambia (UNESCO, 2016b). While Phase 3, launched in October 2019, shifted its focus to higher technical education (UNESCO, n.d.-b), the earlier phases of CFIT are particularly noteworthy as they represent the first large-scale initiative led by the Chinese government to directly support the professional development of basic education teachers across Africa.

It is important to note that the CFIT project's design emphasises local ownership and country-driven implementation. According to the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "local stakeholders in each of the 10 beneficiary countries were able to set priorities and design strategies to meet national and local needs" (UN DESA, n.d., para. 5). In each participating country, national education ministries collaborated with UNESCO field offices to conduct needs assessments and identify priority areas. Local institutions, such as teacher training colleges and education resource centres, acted as implementing partners by providing facilities, administrative support, and follow-up mentoring for trained teachers (UN DESA, n.d.). UNESCO (2016c, para. 10) further noted that the project's success was largely due to "strong ownership of the development and implementation by the beneficiary countries, the high engagement of relevant ministries and institutions, and the alignment with country priorities and the global SDGs." This collaborative structure ensured that training programmes were aligned with national curricula and certification frameworks, thereby enhancing the sustainability of outcomes.

More recently, FOCAC IX (2024)'s action plan initiates the China-Africa Cooperation Programme for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Teacher Training, aiming to provide training in the next three years for African teachers tutoring STEM subjects. These efforts reflect China's long-standing commitment to addressing the critical shortage of trained teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, as highlighted by Fredriksen and Fossberg (2014), and to enhancing the quality of basic education on the continent.

### *Cooperation through Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Classrooms (CCs)*

Launched in 2004, the CI and CC initiative aims to promote Chinese language and culture globally. Central to China's basic education cooperation with Africa, the CCs are mainly partnerships between Chinese schools and African schools, while the CIs are usually joint ventures between Chinese universities and local higher education institutions. As of October 2025, the CIs and CCs operate in 49 African countries. While the current number of African CIs is 69, the number of CCs is harder to pinpoint. The CI website lists ten CCs in Africa (Confucius Institute, n.d.), while other reports suggest there were 48 CCs by mid-2020 (FOCAC, 2022). In many cases, the CIs establish multiple teaching centres or branches under the CC banner in local schools. For instance, the CI at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana has established 14 teaching centres, including three under the banner of CC (Confucius Institute, 2023).

Since FOCAC III (2006), support for the CIs and CCs in Africa has been emphasised in FOCAC action plans. Beyond offering Chinese language courses, these institutions play broader educational and cultural roles, including facilitating student exchanges, offering scholarships, supporting curriculum integration at both higher and basic education levels, and promoting local employment opportunities (Li, 2021). However, most existing research focuses on the CIs (King, 2013; King, 2017; Procopio, 2015; Wheeler, 2013; Repnikova, 2022; Li, 2023), with very few studies dedicated to the CCs. Yet, the CCs play a critical role in advancing Chinese language teaching in Africa and in deepening China–Africa cooperation at the basic education level.

For instance, Li and Zhong (2025) provide empirical evidence from Uganda, showing that the country's only CC played an essential role in implementing the Local School Chinese Language Teacher Training Programme. The institutionalisation of Chinese language teaching in Ugandan schools resulted from collaboration among multiple actors: the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Curriculum Development Centre, the Uganda National Examinations Board, the Chinese Ministry of Education, the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (formerly Hanban/CI Headquarters), and the Chinese Embassy, with the CC serving as the central training venue. This case illustrates the often-overlooked yet crucial function of CCs in embedding Chinese language teaching within African education systems and institutionalising China–Africa cooperation in basic education.

### *Provision of Basic Education Facilities*

China has been providing aid to Africa since 1956, initially aimed at strengthening political ties and securing support on the global stage (Song, 2015). Major initiatives, such as the Tan-Zam Railway, exemplified these early efforts. From the 1980s to the 2000s, as China's economy grew following the Reform and Opening-up, aid continued, though educational support was modest and sporadic. For example, in response to Botswana's shortage of qualified teachers during the rapid expansion of basic education in the early 1990s, China sent three groups of over 40 university teachers to teach in secondary schools (Chen & Zhang, 2015). Between the 1980s and the early 21st century, China also donated educational supplies, such as books, sports equipment, laboratory instruments and computers, to 24 African countries (Luo & Lu, 2005).

Under the framework of FOCAC, China has steadily increased its support for basic education infrastructure and school facilities across Africa. Successive FOCAC Action Plans have included concrete pledges to build or upgrade schools: 100 schools under FOCAC III (2006), 50 schools under FOCAC IV (2009), 10 schools under FOCAC VIII (2021), and 20 schools under FOCAC IX (2024). In addition to school construction, China has also committed to donating books and educational equipment, as outlined in FOCAC VI (2015), FOCAC VII (2018), and FOCAC IX (2024). As China's economic power continues to expand, particularly after it became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, this trend of supporting basic education through infrastructure and resource provision is likely to deepen. While FOCAC documents pledge school construction, publicly available sources provide limited detail on how African governments participate in site selection and design decisions, representing a gap in transparency that merits further research.

### *Inter-School Cooperation and Youth Activities*

Apart from the Confucius Classroom project discussed above, FOCAC VIII (2021)'s action plan marks the first inclusion of a specific China–Africa basic education cooperation initiative: the CubeSat Middle School Student Science Project. This initiative aims to establish a China–Africa Youth Space Alliance to facilitate space-related exchanges between Chinese and African middle school students and promote the popularisation of science in the context of space cooperation (FOCAC, 2021b). This initiative was also included in FOCAC IX (2024)'s action plan.

Under this initiative, the HOPE (Hyperspace Opportunity for Pioneering Education) project, a collaboration between China, African, and Arab countries, was proposed by Beijing 101 Middle School and China Spacesat Co., Ltd in 2021. During the first meeting of the HOPE project, officials from the aerospace and education departments of China, Egypt, and Ethiopia, as well as students and teachers from four schools in the three countries, discussed the basic information and applications of the CubeSat project. The focus was on the "101 Science Popularisation Mini-Satellite" from Beijing 101 Middle School, which was successfully launched into space in December 2021. Future activities include joint aerospace education camps, forums, and collaborations with universities and industries (Beijing 101 Middle School, 2021).

Moreover, events such as the Tiangong Dialogue, which invited school students from Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and South Africa to participate in a live online session with Chinese astronauts aboard China's Tiangong Space Station (Xinhua Net, 2022), and the My Dream Painting Competition, which engaged over 2,000 youth from 42 African countries with China's space program and exhibited the winning paintings in the Tianhe core module of the Tiangong space station (People Net, 2023), are prominent examples of basic education exchange projects. While these initiatives showcase China's advanced capabilities in space technology, their effectiveness in addressing broader educational priorities, such as equitable access, teacher training, and curriculum development, remains uncertain. Moreover, the extent of African stakeholder participation and ownership is unclear, particularly in contexts where national capacity in space technology is limited.

### *Comprehensive Education Assistance Projects*

A notable term in the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016) is "full-package teaching solutions," as seen in "we will facilitate the exportation of high-quality teaching equipment, courseware, and full-package teaching solutions from countries along the routes" (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2016, para. 20). A prominent example of this is the South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project, launched in January 2017. Led by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce and managed by China South Publishing & Media Group, the project aims to modernise South Sudan's education system. Its components include curriculum development, teacher training, textbook production, and the establishment of an ICT teacher training centre. The project specifically focuses on creating curriculum standards and textbooks for primary school subjects such as mathematics, English, and science (China South Publishing & Media Group, 2018).

Over 22 months, the project produced and distributed 1.29 million textbooks for first-grade students in these subjects and trained 200 South Sudanese teachers (China Daily, 2019). This project was also highlighted in the "Supporting Basic Education" section of the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation, representing China's first comprehensive education assistance initiative and its first attempt to establish an education system abroad. Considering China's position as South Sudan's largest trading partner and its significant economic presence in this country, particularly in the oil sector (Patey, 2017), the project also strengthens bilateral ties. This initiative highlights China's capability to implement large-scale education projects and provides a model for future education assistance, particularly in strengthening basic education systems in developing nations. However, the limited availability of public documentation makes it difficult to evaluate the extent of South Sudanese stakeholder participation in the project's design and implementation. This limitation underscores the need for further empirical research to examine local ownership, decision-making processes, and the on-the-ground impacts of such cooperation initiatives.

### *Establishment of China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)*

Most nations in the North have dedicated aid agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, founded in 1961) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency

(JICA, established in 1974). In contrast, before 2018, China's foreign aid system was fragmented across approximately 30 agencies, with the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Foreign Aid playing a central but uncoordinated role. This decentralised structure resulted in overlapping responsibilities, project duplication, weak strategic oversight, and the absence of a unified evaluation framework (Zhao and Jing, 2019; Zhang and Smith, 2017).

To address these issues, China established the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in March 2018, under the direct supervision of the State Council. The agency was created to centralise and streamline China's foreign aid efforts. It assumed many of the responsibilities previously held by the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Foreign Aid, and it is also tasked with integrating the objectives of foreign aid into the broader diplomatic policy framework, as designated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Specifically, CIDCA is responsible for:

(f) formulating strategic guidelines, plans, and policies for foreign aid; coordinating major issues related to foreign assistance and providing recommendations; promoting reforms in foreign aid modalities; developing foreign aid schemes and plans; identifying foreign aid projects and supervising and evaluating their implementation (CIDCA, n.d.).

It can be gauged that since its inception, CIDCA has played a key role in shaping China's development cooperation strategy. Notable examples include the 2021 White Paper on China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era and the 2023 Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development, both of which underscore China's growing emphasis on supporting basic education in partner countries. However, despite its central role in coordinating Chinese foreign aid, CIDCA does not directly implement aid projects, a responsibility that remains within the remit of ministries such as the Ministry of Commerce (Rudyak, 2019). This structure, which mirrors the Japanese aid model (King and Buchert, 1999), may present challenges in terms of effective coordination and oversight in project delivery.

## **Evolution and Transformation of China's Cooperation with Africa in Basic Education**

China's education cooperation with Africa has undergone significant changes over the past seven decades, particularly since 2000. This evolution is characterised by distinct phases, each marked by different approaches and priorities, reflecting China's growing commitment to institutionalising its education cooperation with Africa.

### *Sporadic Exchanges and Gradual Diversification (1950s – 2000)*

From the 1950s to the 1970s, China's education cooperation with Africa primarily focused on teacher exchanges, with Chinese teachers sent to African countries to teach Mandarin and science subjects at the basic education level; at the same time, African students and educators were invited to China under bilateral agreements (He, 2007). The scope and scale of these exchanges were limited, and their primary goal was political solidarity rather than addressing the educational challenges faced by either China or African countries.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China's foreign aid activities, including education cooperation, were severely disrupted. No formal educational aid programmes were carried out during this period, and many existing agreements with African countries were suspended or abandoned. In fact, some African students in China during the 1960s and 1970s faced harsh living conditions and ideological indoctrination, leading to critical accounts of their experiences (King, 2019; Hevi, 1963).

In the post-Cultural Revolution era (1980s–2000), China began to rebuild and diversify its education cooperation with other countries, although efforts remained largely concentrated in higher education. The expansion of Chinese universities and the country's economic reforms facilitated the establishment of partnerships between Chinese and African universities. During this period,

scholarships for African students to study in China increased, and China sent university teachers to address specific educational needs. While the scope of cooperation expanded, the absence of a formalised institutional framework meant that these efforts lacked coherence and were limited in addressing the basic education challenges faced by Africa.

### *Institutionalisation through FOCAC (2000 – Mid-2010s)*

The establishment of FOCAC in 2000 marked a crucial moment in the institutionalisation of China's education cooperation with Africa. FOCAC created a structured and formalised platform for China to expand and coordinate its educational engagement with African countries, with basic education emerging as an important area of focus. As discussed above, through initiatives such as the AHRDF, the UNESCO–China Funds-in-Trust (CFIT) Project, and the STEM teacher training programme, China began to prioritise teacher training and human resource development in Africa. Additionally, the expansion of CIs and CCs across Africa further strengthened China's educational presence, particularly through the CCs, which contributed to the institutionalisation of Chinese language teaching within the basic education systems of African countries.

Policy documents such as the 2005 China-Africa Education Ministers Forum Beijing Declaration and successive FOCAC Action Plans emphasised the importance of basic education, outlining specific initiatives aimed at enhancing teacher training, improving educational infrastructure, and strengthening capacity-building efforts. These documents formalised China's commitment to supporting basic education in Africa, providing a coherent institutional framework for the implementation of structured initiatives, as discussed in the analysis below.

The institutionalisation of China's education cooperation with Africa through FOCAC occurred against the backdrop of major global shifts in education and development policy. The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2000, particularly MDG 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education, established a global framework that placed basic education at the centre of strategies for poverty reduction and sustainable development (UN, 2000). Sub-Saharan Africa, identified as the region "furthest behind in progress" towards achieving the MDGs (Commission for Africa, 2005), became a key focus of international development efforts.

Between 2000 and 2015, primary school net enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa rose from approximately 60% to 80%, reflecting accelerated progress, in part, driven by the MDG framework (UN, 2015a). China's expanding educational cooperation through FOCAC closely aligns with these global priorities, positioning China as an active contributor to international development goals while advancing its own foreign policy objectives. Furthermore, China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 and its sustained economic growth, averaging around 10% annually throughout the 2000s (World Bank, n.d.), provided both the financial capacity and diplomatic impetus for deeper engagement with Africa, including in the education sector.

Although the 2008 global financial crisis severely affected the global economy, China's economy remained relatively resilient. Its GDP growth rate, though slowing from over 10% to 6.8% in late 2008, rebounded quickly to average 9.7% between 2008 and 2010 (US Congressional Research Service, 2018). This resilience enhanced China's reputation as a stable and reliable development partner in Africa, particularly through institutional mechanisms such as FOCAC, including in the field of basic education.

### *Comprehensive and Systematic Engagement (Mid-2010s – Present)*

The mid-2010s marked the beginning of a more comprehensive and systematic phase in China's education cooperation with Africa. These developments unfolded within a changing global policy context. The 2015 adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", succeeded the MDGs and broadened the international education agenda beyond primary

enrolment to include quality, equity, and lifelong learning (UN, 2015b). Unlike the narrower MDG 2, SDG 4 explicitly covers all levels of education, from early childhood to adult learning, thereby aligning with China's own emphasis on comprehensive and lifelong education cooperation.

The BRI provided a strategic framework for expanding China's educational engagement through initiatives such as the 2016 Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, which promoted inter-school cooperation, teacher and student exchanges, and multilingual education (King, 2020). The establishment of CIDCA in 2018 further centralised and streamlined China's foreign aid system, likely enhancing the efficiency, coordination, and sustainability of education-related projects, given the priority of education in China's overall aid architecture.

The Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (2016) and successive FOCAC Action Plans expanded the policy framework for China's education cooperation, supporting initiatives such as the HOPE CubeSat Project and the South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project. These documents not only formalised China's commitment to strengthening basic education in Africa but also provided a roadmap for implementing structured, sustainable initiatives. Continued support through programmes such as the AHRDF, CFIT Project, CIs and CCs, and the STEM teacher training programme further demonstrates China's deepening and diversified engagement in the education sector. However, empirical studies examining the actual outcomes of these initiatives remain limited, making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness, scale, and long-term impact.

China's enhanced engagement during this period was also shaped by economic and geopolitical factors. The deteriorating China-US relationship, particularly after the Obama administration's 2011 "pivot to Asia" strategy aimed at rebalancing or even containing China's growing influence (De Castro, 2018), and subsequent trade tensions under the Trump administration, prompted China to strengthen ties with the Global South, including Africa. As Kuo (2024, para. 5) notes, "Where U.S. diplomatic bandwidth was often absorbed by issues in the Middle East and Europe, China increased its engagement in the Indo-Pacific and Global South." China's deepening cooperation with Africa can thus be understood partly as a strategic response to intensifying Western pressure, as Beijing sought to diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships and consolidate support in multilateral forums.

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020, further disrupted global education systems and development cooperation, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners worldwide and disproportionately impacting sub-Saharan Africa (UN SDG, 2020). In response, China launched digital education initiatives and continued to support basic education infrastructure, as reflected in FOCAC IX Action Plan (2024), which pledged to "promote the implementation of digital education in more African countries" (item 8.1.5).

This phase has also seen increased emphasis on local ownership and participation, with policy statements encouraging closer collaboration with African governments and educational institutions to tailor projects to local contexts. For example, FOCAC VI (2015) pledged to "train 200,000 vocational and technical professionals locally in Africa" (item 4.3.6), yet it remains unclear how many individuals were actually trained, in which countries, and in what fields. Similarly, FOCAC VII (2018) called for the training of local Chinese language teachers (item 4.3.4), and FOCAC IX (2024) reiterated this focus by again committing to expanding digital education initiatives, though public documentation of these efforts' scope and outcomes is limited. While the emphasis on local participation aligns with international best practices and may enhance the long-term impact of aid efforts, a lack of monitoring and reporting mechanisms continues to hinder a comprehensive evaluation of China's contributions to basic education in Africa.

Finally, China's economic deceleration, with growth slowing from an average of 10% in the 2000s to below 8% in the 2010s, and further to around 4% in the early 2020s (World Bank, n.d.), may constrain the scale of future education cooperation initiatives, even as the institutionalised frameworks established through FOCAC and the BRI remain firmly in place.

## Concluding Remarks

This article has examined China's cooperation with Africa in basic education through a systematic analysis of 18 key Chinese policy documents, focusing on cooperation principles and objectives, supportive initiatives and mechanisms, and the evolution of policy over time.

The analysis yields three principal findings. First, China's cooperation discourse foregrounds partnership rather than traditional aid hierarchies. The consistent use of "cooperation" over "aid" and the emphasis on equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference distinguish China's approach from OECD-DAC donors. Yet, tensions persist between these rhetorical commitments and the asymmetries in resources and decision-making authority. Second, China has developed a range of mechanisms, including teacher training programmes (AHRDF, UNESCO-China CFIT Project), education partnerships (Confucius Classrooms), infrastructure projects, youth/school exchanges, and full-package education assistance projects (South Sudan Education Technology Cooperation Project). The establishment of CIDCA in 2018 marked a significant institutional reform, centralising coordination and aligning education cooperation with broader initiatives such as the BRI. Third, policy evolution has proceeded through three phases: sporadic exchanges (1950s–2000), institutionalised cooperation through FOCAC (2000–mid-2010s), and comprehensive engagement (mid-2010s–present), shaped by both domestic factors, such as economic growth and institutional reforms, and external influences, including MDGs/SDGs, China-US tensions, and COVID-19.

Viewed through the lens of institutionalisation, these findings reveal three dimensions of institutionalisation: normative institutionalisation, reflected in the articulation of consistent principles and objectives across policy documents; structural institutionalisation, through the creation of formal mechanisms such as FOCAC, CIDCA, and Confucius Classrooms; and operational institutionalisation, through the introduction of standardised implementation procedures, notably the triennial FOCAC action plans. However, the analysis also reveals incomplete institutionalisation, particularly in relation to transparency, accountability, and meaningful participation by African stakeholders. This indicates that while institutional forms and discursive commitments have stabilised, their translation into genuinely reciprocal governance practices remains uneven.

Building on these insights, several recommendations can be made. Policymakers should improve transparency by establishing open monitoring and evaluation systems and by strengthening mechanisms for meaningful African participation in programme design and implementation. Chinese policymakers, in particular, should align education cooperation more closely with African national strategies and the objectives of SDG 4. Educators and practitioners are encouraged to document and share partnership experiences to facilitate policy learning and mutual understanding. Future research should move beyond policy analysis to investigate implementation processes, outcomes, and African stakeholder perspectives, as well as to conduct comparative studies that situate China's cooperation within the wider landscape of emerging donors.

This study acknowledges its limitation as a document-based analysis, which cannot fully capture on-the-ground dynamics. Future mixed-method and longitudinal research could assess sustainability, impact, and African agency in greater depth.

In sum, China has made notable progress in institutionalising basic education cooperation with Africa through diverse mechanisms and formalised commitments. Yet the central issue is not whether cooperation has been institutionalised, but how power, voice, and accountability are configured within these institutional arrangements. As China positions itself as a development partner to Africa and the wider Global South, the key question is whether its cooperation model can move beyond symbolic partnership towards substantively shared governance, rather than reproducing existing asymmetries in new forms.

## Notes

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# THE IMPACT OF IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION ON INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTIVE CAREER SUCCESS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY BASED ON CFPS (2020)

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**Abstract:** Ideological and Political Education (IPE) in higher education is a key course for fulfilling the fundamental task of moral education. Using individual-level data from the 2020 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), this study employs a binary logit model to examine the effects of IPE on individuals' subjective career success (SCS), including intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. The results show that IPE significantly shapes both dimensions of SCS, while the influence on extrinsic success is comparatively weaker. Building on the benchmark regression, this study further explores the role of higher education reform and variations in IPE systems across institutions, and conducts heterogeneity analyses based on Party membership, Internet participation, marital status, and family size. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of IPE is sensitive to heterogeneous factors, particularly family-related conditions. Overall, IPE exerts a stronger influence on intrinsic career success, and theoretically oriented IPE approaches are more effective in fostering intrinsic success.

**Keywords:** Subjective Career Success (SCS); China Family Panel Studies (CFPS); Logit Model; Ideological and Political Education(IPE)

## Introduction

With the rapid socio-economic development, Chinese youth are increasingly embedded in a highly competitive environment shaped by emerging economic forms, diverse external ideologies, and fragmented information landscapes (Lian, 2025). Coupled with the utilitarian orientation of prevailing social evaluation systems, these conditions may distort individuals' psychological and value cognition, fostering short-term and instrumental approaches to career values (Zhuang, 2023). In response, the Chinese government has placed great emphasis on the Ideological and Political Education (IPE) function of higher education, issuing policy documents such as the "Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Higher Education under the New Situation" (关于加强和改进新形势下高校思想政治工作的意见) and the "Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era" (深化新时代教育评价改革总体方案). These policies have highlighted the role of IPE in talent cultivation, seeking to correct the overemphasis on technical and professional training at the expense of moral and character development in some universities (Wang, 2024). In this context, IPE is expected to play a normative and guiding role in shaping students' career values (Zhang, 2025). Accordingly, a clearer understanding of the extent and mechanisms through

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which IPE influences individuals' perceptions of subjective career success (SCS) is essential, both for assessing its effectiveness in guiding career cognition and for advancing the core educational mission of moral cultivation in higher education.

## Literature Review

This study primarily reviews research on the impacts of ideological education. O'Neill (1981) has emphasized that the ideological character of education is unavoidable, although its effects remain contested. Many scholars emphasize the role of ideological education in fostering critical thinking, civic responsibility, and moral judgment, thereby contributing to social cohesion and public engagement (Alexander, 2005; Glaeser et al., 2007). Other scholars argue that ideological education primarily operates as an instrument of state ideology, aimed at maintaining social order rather than enhancing individuals' value cognition (Apple & Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2024). Research on the impact of IPE in China similarly emphasizes the effectiveness in enhancing individuals' political awareness and civic engagement (Yu & Wang, 2025; Zhao & Zhang, 2024). Meanwhile, given the unique requirements of Chinese policies, scholars have increasingly examined the connection between IPE and university students' employment and career planning (Cheng et al., 2023; Guo, 2024).

Although existing research has generated substantial insights into political identity and social responsibility, comparatively little attention has been devoted to career-related cognition. In practice, IPE not only cultivates political identity and civic responsibility but also plays an important role in shaping individuals' career values. Moreover, while prior studies have offered limited analysis of IPE as a deeper socialization mechanism that shapes individuals' SCS through value formation.

This study draws on individual microdata to examine, at the micro-level, how IPE influences students' perceptions of SCS and its differentiated mechanisms. Specifically, the study aims to contribute in four ways: (1) building an empirical model based on household survey data to analyze the strength and mechanisms of IPE's influence on SCS; (2) distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of career success to compare the pathways through which IPE shapes students' perceptions; (3) conducting heterogeneity analyses across key value-related factors, including Party membership, online participation, marital status, and family size; (4) situating the analysis within the broader trajectory of IPE in Chinese higher education, with attention to expansion policies and curricular reforms.

## Theoretical Analysis

In Chinese higher education, IPE extends beyond the development of students' academic abilities and communication skills, and also aims to foster social responsibility, civic awareness, and moral judgment (Hong et al., 2018). The influence of IPE on individual value cognition operates primarily through two mechanisms: knowledge transmission and the embedding of power and values (Ekehammar et al., 1987; Gramsci, 2020).

First, IPE enhances individuals' reflective and critical thinking by deepening the depth of value cognition through knowledge transmission. At the university stage, students' cognitive development typically reaches the formal operational stage, which is characterized by abstract reasoning and reflective thinking (Babakr et al., 2019). Within this context, IPE integrates disciplines such as philosophy, politics, law, and public administration into the curriculum, providing students with systematic knowledge of social processes, value judgments, and theoretical reasoning (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020). Such training strengthens students' capacity for critical analysis and reflection on social issues (Su et al., 2022), thereby fostering higher-order value cognition.

Second, IPE enhances individuals' judgment capacity by broadening the breadth of value cognition through the embedding of power relations and normative values. Beyond formal instruction, IPE responds to domestic and international political contexts to shape students' moral quality, social responsibility, and historical consciousness (Li et al., 2022). Through diverse pedagogical

practices, IPE influences students' value orientations and behavioral patterns (Zhao, 2017), thereby fostering appropriate life goals, coherent value orientations, and civic awareness (Svensson, 2023). This process enhances the precision of students' value judgments by embedding political awareness and normative expectations.

Thus, IPE strengthens students' dialectical thinking and value discernment, thereby shaping their perceptions of career success. Therefore, the paper proposes Hypothesis 1.

*Hypothesis 1: IPE has a positive influence on individuals' SCS cognition.*

At the same time, the formation of personal values is the result of the mutual construction between self-awareness and the social environment, which constitutes a stable system constructed by individuals through the dual mechanisms of internalizing social norms and realizing self-worth during the socialization process (Zhang et al., 2017). From the perspective of cognitive learning theory, value guidance in higher education ideological and political education is fundamentally a process where individuals transform societal demands into internalized value recognition through dialectical thinking (Kong & Guo, 2023). This process is influenced by multiple factors:

First, educational environmental factors exert a significant moderating effect. Exposure to role models and political education can enhance value cognition (Liu & Ren, 2019), whereas the fragmented online environment and "post-truth" discourses may erode students' ability to filter accurate information (Chen, 2020). This cognitive dilemma is particularly pronounced among contemporary university students, with some exhibiting "disengaged learning" and weakened civic responsibility (Wu & Chen, 2022). Second, individual characteristic variables exert differentiated influences. Social role transitions and family structures reshape individuals' value acceptance thresholds through the self-concept system (Tan, 2019), subsequently influencing subjective initiative and leading to divergent cognitive awareness among individuals.

Thus, an individual's SCS is influenced by personal characteristics and educational environments, leading to distinct characteristics in the guidance provided by IPE in higher education. Therefore, the paper proposes Hypothesis 2.

*Hypothesis 2: The magnitude of the effect of IPE on individuals' SCS cognition varies across different individual characteristics and contextual conditions.*

## **Empirical Analysis**

### *Data Sources*

The China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) is a nationally representative social survey project that has been updated biennially since its inception in 2010, with data from six waves currently available to the public (available at: <http://www.issf.pku.edu.cn>). The CFPS features extensive population coverage, high data reliability, and a large sample size, effectively addressing common challenges in individual-level micro research, such as limited sample sizes, non-standardized sampling procedures, and measurement inconsistency. As a result, CFPS has become a widely used and authoritative data source for analyzing micro-level individual behaviors in China. Given the relatively stable nature of individuals' social value perceptions over short time horizons, this study does not construct inter-temporal panel data. Instead, the 2020 CFPS individual dataset is employed as the primary data source to ensure the robustness and reliability of the empirical analysis. The dataset was cleaned and processed according to CFPS guidelines and technical documentation, applying rational methods and retaining as much valid data as possible, resulting in 22,746 sample records.

### *Research Model*

Given that the variables in this study are binary, a binary logit model is employed, as it is more appropriate for modeling discrete choice outcomes than the conventional Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model. The model specification is presented as follows:

$$\text{logit}(Y_i) = \ln\left(\frac{P_i}{1-p_i}\right) = \hat{a}_0 + \hat{a}_1 IPE_i + \hat{a}_2 \text{control}_i + \hat{a}_i$$

In the model, where  $i$  refers to the respondent, and  $P_i$  denotes the probability of choosing the dependent variable. The explained variable ( $Y_i$ ) captures individuals' SCS, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. The explanatory variable (IPE) indicates whether the respondent received IPE during higher education. The control variables include health status (health), employment (employ), military experience (military), family size (counts), household type (urban), household income level (income), and ethnicity (ethnicity), where  $\hat{a}_i$  denotes the random error term.

### *Variable Definition and Measurement*

#### *Explained Variable ( $Y_i$ )*

Subjective career success (SCS) refers to an individual's self-evaluation of employment-related value, shaped by cognitive level, age, career stage, personal aspirations, and the perceived evaluations of others (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Judge et al., 1995). Gattiker and Larwood (1986) further conceptualize SCS as encompassing both intrinsic success, reflected in the perceived value of interpersonal relationships, and extrinsic success, reflected in perceptions of material rewards and wealth. Accordingly, this study selects two items from the CFPS value-perception module. The item "Wealth reflects personal value" (财富就可以反映个人价值) is used to capture extrinsic success, while the item "Social relationships are more important than personal ability" (社会关系比个人能力更为重要) is used to capture intrinsic success.

After variable adjustment, responses are coded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree 1 to strongly agree 5, with higher values indicating stronger agreement with the statements. To facilitate empirical analysis, this study follows Zhou et al. (2014) by transforming the original data into dichotomous variables (where 1-3 are coded as 0 and 4-5 as 1) and trichotomous variables (where 1-2 are coded as 0, 3 as 1, and 4-5 as 2) for benchmark regression analysis and robustness checks. Moreover, the use of single-item measures to operationalize perceptions of SCS is justified for two reasons. First, the selected items provide precise representations of the theoretical constructs, whereas other items in the module exhibit limited conceptual relevance. Second, aggregating multiple items into composite indices may obscure the interpretability of the empirical results.

#### *Explanatory Variable (IPE)*

As a distinctive form of education in China, IPE functions as a cultural site for ideological transmission and is inevitably characterized by ideological attributes (Huang, 2025). It constitutes an educational practice guided by political purposes and characterized by ideological, political, and value-oriented dimensions (Dong, 2019). The primary aim of IPE is to guide students toward appropriate value orientations while transmitting and internalizing the dominant ideology (Li et al., 2004). In the CFPS database, information on educational attainment is derived from both the current stage of study of enrolled students and the highest degree obtained by graduates. Given that IPE in Chinese higher education is primarily concentrated in the first two years of undergraduate study, and that the data were collected during the summer vacation, this study treats enrolled students who have not yet obtained the corresponding degree as having already completed IPE. Consequently, this study constructs an education variable by combining graduates' highest degree attainment with the current stage of study of enrolled students, assigning a value of 1 to individuals who are pursuing or have attained a junior college degree or higher. To address potential endogeneity, this study employs

individual intellectual level as an instrumental variable, defining respondents with an intellectual level exceeding 3 as having relatively high cognitive ability and assigning them a value of 1.

### Control Variables

Since perceptions of SCS are shaped by a range of social factors and individual experiences, this study incorporates control variables at both the individual and family levels to enhance the accuracy and robustness of the baseline regression analysis. This approach helps mitigate potential endogeneity arising from omitted variables. The specific control variables are defined as follows. At the individual level, three variables are included: health status, work experience, and military service experience. Health status is coded as a binary variable following Cheng et al. (2014), with respondents reporting “healthy” or “very healthy” coded as 1. Work experience is measured as a binary variable based on respondents’ self-reported employment history. Military service experience is coded as 1 if the respondent has served in the military or is a veteran. At the family level, control variables include family size, household registration type, and ethnicity. Ethnic minority status is coded as 1 in the ethnicity variable. Family size is measured as the total number of individuals residing in the respondent’s household. Urban household registration is coded as 1. Furthermore, regional fixed effects are incorporated account for unobserved regional-level control variables in the study.

### Extended Research Variables

This study further examines the impact of IPE in higher education institutions on SCS from both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions.

In terms of educational factors, two key aspects are examined: higher education reform and differences in moral education systems across universities. Following Wu et al. (2022), year of birth is used to construct a binary variable indicating whether an individual reached college-entry age after the 1999 higher education reform, thereby enabling a comparative analysis of university reforms. In addition, a binary variable is constructed based on variations in ideological and political curriculum structures across higher education institutions to capture differences in curriculum systems.

To examine heterogeneous effects, four moderating variables are selected from two dimensions. First, at the intra-individual level, relatively stable personal characteristics are considered. Married or remarried respondents are classified as being in a marital union and coded as 1. Family size is defined following Wu et al. (2022), with households comprising more than four members classified as large families and assigned a value of 1. Second, from the external dimension of the individual, this study examines how SCS is influenced by broader social factors. Party membership is defined as affiliation with the Communist Party of China and coded as 1, indicating exposure to party-related education. Respondents who habitually watch short videos are classified as having high levels of Internet participation and assigned a value of 1. Detailed coding criteria for all variables are reported in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Variable Definitions**

<i>Variable Category</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Dependent Variables	Y1	Extrinsic Success	Identification with the idea that wealth reflects personal value (1-0)
	Y2	Intrinsic Success	Identification with the notion that social relationships are more important than personal abilities (1-0)
Independent Variable	IPE	Experience in Ideological and Political Education in Higher Education	whether the individual has received post-secondary education or higher (1-0)

**Table 1. Variable Definitions (continued)**

<i>Variable Category</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Control Variables	urban	household Type	Type of household registration (urban = 1, rural = 0)
	counts	Family Size	The number of people in the household (continuous variable)
	ethnicity	Ethnicity	Whether the individual belongs to an ethnic minority (1-0)
	income	Household Income	Whether the household income is above average in the region (1-0)
	employ	Employment	Whether the individual has full-time employment (1-0)
	health	Health Status	Whether the individual is in good physical health (1-0)
	military	Military Experience	Whether the individual has military service experience (1-0)
Extended Analysis Variables	fam	Family Size	Large family (1 = Yes, 0 = No)
	cpc	Party Membership	Member of the Communist Party of China (1 = Yes, 0 = No)
	net	Internet Participation	Use of short video platforms (1 = Yes, 0 = No)
	marriage	Marital Status	Currently in a legally recognized marriage (1 = Yes, 0 = No)
	bachelor	Undergraduate Moral Education System	Received undergraduate education and above (1-0)
reform	Higher Education Reform	Higher education after college expansion (1-0)	
Mediating Variable	IQ	Intellectual Level	Intellectual assessment above the average level (1 = Yes, 0 = No)

### *Descriptive Analysis*

The results of the variable data description in Table 2 show that the descriptive statistics for each variable align with the current state of Chinese society, with dispersion levels within a reasonable range. This effectively prevents extreme values from interfering with the regression analysis. Accordingly, this study employs a binary discrete model to analyze the effect of IPE experiences in higher education on individuals' SCS. This provides a more rigorous analysis of how IPE shapes perceptions of both intrinsic and extrinsic success.

**Table 2. Variable Description**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Minimum Value</i>	<i>Maximum Value</i>
Y1	22746	0.764	0	1
Y2	22746	0.7	0	1
urban	22746	0.514	0	1
counts	22746	4.259	1	15

**Table 2. Variable Description (continued)**

<i>Variable Name</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Minimum Value</i>	<i>Maximum Value</i>
employ	22746	0.659	0	1
health	22746	0.783	0	1
military	22746	0.029	0	1
ethnicity	22746	0.087	0	1
income	22746	0.193	0	1

## *Empirical Regression Results*

### *Baseline Regression and Marginal Effect Analysis*

This study employs a binary logit model to examine the effect of IPE experience on individuals' SCS. To improve the accuracy and internal validity of the benchmark regression results and to mitigate potential endogeneity arising from omitted variables, regional fixed effects are incorporated alongside individual- and family-level control variables. In terms of result interpretation, since the regression coefficients of the binary logit model primarily indicate the direction of influence rather than directly representing the marginal effect of explanatory variables on the dependent variable, the probability of an event occurring must be calculated using  $e^{\beta}$ . Additionally, to better analyze causality, this paper calculates the arithmetic mean of the model's marginal effects, using the average marginal effect to represent the marginal effect. The relevant results presented in Appendix A indicate that:

The effect of IPE on perceptions of extrinsic success in higher education is presented as follows. As shown in Regression Result (1), the coefficient for IPE is -0.170 and remains statistically significant at the 1% level, indicating that individuals with IPE experience are less likely to equate wealth with personal value. This finding suggests that IPE contributes to a more accurate understanding of extrinsic success. Further analysis shows that the proportion of higher-educated individuals holding a positive perception differs by more than 18% compared with those without IPE experience. Additionally, Marginal Result (3) indicates a coefficient of -0.030 for the effect of IPE experience, which indicating that IPE effectively reduces cognitive bias and yields a positive marginal effect of 0.03 units on extrinsic success.

The impact of IPE on perceptions of intrinsic success is presented as follows. Regression Result (2) reports a coefficient of -0.287 for IPE, which is statistically significant, indicating that individuals with IPE experience are less likely to believe that social relationships are more important than personal ability. This finding suggests that IPE contributes to a clearer understanding of intrinsic success. Further results show that the proportion of individuals with higher education who hold a positive perception of intrinsic success is more than 33% higher than that of individuals without IPE experience. Additionally, Marginal Effect Result (4) highlights a coefficient of -0.059, which indicates that IPE effectively reduces cognitive bias and yields a positive marginal effect of 0.059 units on intrinsic success.

The correlation coefficients indicate that IPE in higher education exerts a significant positive influence on individuals' perceptions of SCS, with a stronger effect on intrinsic success than on extrinsic success.

### *Robustness Test*

To assess the robustness of the baseline regression results (see Appendix B), this study conducts a series of robustness checks using three commonly employed approaches: replacing the primary explanatory variable, the empirical model, and adjusting the sample.

The primary explanatory variable is replacement. This paper transforms the dependent variable from a binary to a ternary ordinal variable. In the context of analyzing ordinal variables, the ordered logit regression model is more scientifically sound than the traditional logit regression. Because the model variables cannot be paralleled through data trends, this study references Gao and Du (2019) and constructs a generalized ordered logit model for analysis. As shown in Regression Results (5)-(8), the estimated effects of IPE on both intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions of career success remain robust in terms of statistical significance, direction, and magnitude. These findings are consistent with the baseline regression results.

Empirical model replacement. The Probit and logit models are frequently employed for binary discrete empirical analysis. This study performs a robustness check on the benchmark regression model using the Probit model. According to the regression results (9) and (10), the impact of college IPE on perceptions of extrinsic and intrinsic success remains consistent with the benchmark model in terms of significance, direction, and relative coefficient magnitude. Therefore, the regression results align with those of the benchmark model, providing empirical support through the robustness test by substituting the main explanatory variable.

Sample replacement analysis. This study analyzes data from 2018, retaining 28,256 samples through consistent variable processing methods. According to regression results (11) and (12), the effects of IPE on both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of SCS remain stable compared to the baseline model, in terms of statistical significance, direction, and coefficient values. These findings confirm the robustness of the benchmark regression through sample substitution.

Taken together, robustness checks conducted through alternative variable specifications, model substitution, and sample replacement consistently support the baseline findings. This provides robust evidence supporting the reliability and validity of the empirical findings from the benchmark regression in this study.

### *Endogeneity Test*

This study addresses potential endogeneity concerns arising from omitted variables and reverse causality by employing an instrumental variable approach. Specifically, an IV-Probit model is applied following Luo et al. (2020). Although previous studies have frequently used parental educational attainment as an instrumental variable for individual education, this approach may violate the exogeneity assumption in the present context, as SCS is itself significantly shaped by parental education (Min et al., 2012). Accordingly, individual intelligence is adopted as an instrumental variable, given its strong correlation with educational attainment and its absence of direct association with perceptions of SCS. The validity of the instrumental variable is evaluated using the Wald test for exogeneity and the AR test for weak instrument concerns (Yin et al., 2019). The regression results (see Appendix C) indicate that the instrumental variables passed the validity test. Therefore, the estimated coefficient of IPE remains consistent with the baseline model in both direction and statistical significance, further reinforcing the robustness of the conclusion that higher education IPE exerts a positive influence on individuals' SCS.

### **Further Analysis**

Building on the baseline regression model, this section will conduct a deeper analysis of how IPE in higher education cultivates individuals' SCS, which will primarily expand in three directions: higher education reform, the IPE systems of different higher education institutions, and heterogeneity analysis.

## *Analysis of Differences within China's IPE System*

### Higher Education Reform

In the early 21st century, China launched the Action Plan for the Revitalization of Education in the 21st Century, which triggered a large-scale expansion of higher education. Beginning in 1999, the enrollment expansion rate exceeded 47%, and the number of students in regular higher education institutions increased from 1.084 million in 1998 to 5.659 million in 2007, representing a growth of 422% (Ministry of Education, 2019). This expansion marked the beginning of a new stage in the development of Chinese higher education. Against this backdrop, this study conducts a comparative analysis of SCS across different cohorts exposed to IPE before and after the enrollment expansion. Separate regression models are estimated for the pre- and post-expansion periods to examine how the effects of IPE on SCS vary across stages of higher education development. The results reported in Appendix D indicate that:

Regression results (15) and (17) show that the coefficients for university-level IPE are negative in both the pre- and post-reform periods. The effect is stronger and more statistically significant before the higher education reform, with a coefficient of -0.56, compared to -0.096 after the reform. These results indicate that individuals exposed to IPE in both periods are less likely to equate material wealth with personal value, although this tendency is more pronounced among pre-reform cohorts. Consistent with this pattern, the marginal effect estimates reveal larger magnitudes and higher significance prior to the reform, underscoring the stronger role of IPE in shaping perceptions of extrinsic career success in the pre-reform period.

Regression results (16) and (18) indicate that the coefficients for IPE are negative in both the pre- and post-reform periods, with stronger statistical significance observed after the reform. The effect of IPE is stronger and more statistically significant after the higher education reform, with a coefficient of -0.331, compared to -0.183 before the reform. These results indicate that individuals who received IPE, regardless of the reform period, consistently reject the view that social relationships outweigh individual ability, although this tendency is more pronounced in the post-reform cohort. Marginal effect analysis further confirms this pattern, showing greater magnitude and significance for the post-reform group, which highlights the enhanced role of contemporary IPE in fostering intrinsic success values.

### Different Systems of IPE Curriculum

China's IPE system in higher education designs corresponding curricula for junior college, bachelor's, and higher-degree levels. The notable difference is that bachelor's and above levels include more theory-oriented courses, such as philosophy and modern Chinese history. Accordingly, this study defines a new higher education variable based on a bachelor's degree or higher to compare the effects of different IPE systems on SCS. Postgraduate education is not analyzed separately due to its relatively limited IPE content and the small number of postgraduate respondents in the database.

Compared with the baseline regression, the results indicate that the direction and significance of the impact remain consistent across curriculum levels, although the significance for extrinsic success is slightly lower. This suggests that IPE at the bachelor's degree level or higher positively influences both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of SCS.

The regression result (19) in Appendix D shows that the coefficient for IPE above the undergraduate level is -0.118, which is lower than in the baseline regression. The proportion of individuals with positive extrinsic success perceptions is also reduced compared to the baseline group. According to the marginal effect analysis, the significance levels and coefficients are slightly lower than those in the baseline model. These findings suggest that the undergraduate-level and higher IPE system does not substantially enhance extrinsic success cognition.

The regression result (20) indicates that the coefficient for IPE at the bachelor's degree level or higher is -0.462, larger than in the baseline model. The proportion of individuals with positive intrinsic success perceptions is also higher. Marginal effect analysis confirms consistent significance levels, with a greater marginal effect than in the baseline regression. These findings suggest that IPE exerts a stronger influence on intrinsic success when combined with courses such as philosophy and modern Chinese history.

### *Heterogeneity Analysis*

Building on the robustness tests of the benchmark regression, this study further explores the heterogeneity of IPE's effect. By constructing interaction terms with the primary explanatory variable, the study assesses whether university IPE differentially influences individuals' SCS across four dimensions: Party membership, Internet participation, marital status, and family size. This analysis seeks to reveal more nuanced policy implications.

#### *Party Membership*

The Communist Party of China cultivates members' ideological awareness through regular theoretical study and guidance on Party values, providing a prime example of value-based learning outside formal educational settings. Regression results (21) and (25) in Appendix E indicate that Party membership significantly strengthens the effect of higher education IPE on SCS. This heightened effect arises because Party members undergo systematic ideological training, progressing from development activists to probationary members and then to full members. According to Party regulations, members engage in systematically organized learning activities, including ideological reports, dialogue sessions, and democratic life meetings. These activities embed values, ideological beliefs, and behavioral norms into each member's ideological framework, distinguishing Party members from non-members (Marquis & Qiao, 2020). Consequently, Party member education effectively shapes individuals' perceptions of career success through extracurricular engagement, illustrating that expanding channels for value education enhances the overall effectiveness of moral education.

#### *Level of Internet Participation*

With the rise of new media platforms, such as short-video applications and online communities, individuals' online engagement and dependency have been increasing steadily. Consequently, the online environment has emerged as a key contextual factor shaping value perceptions. Regression results (22) and (26) (Appendix E) indicate that online engagement significantly and negatively moderates the impact of IPE on both extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions of career success in higher education. This finding suggests that a fragmented and high-velocity online environment may significantly undermine the capacity of IPE to shape perceptions of extrinsic success (Zhao, 2018). Accordingly, recognizing the role of online participation is crucial for emphasizing IPE's guidance of individuals' perceptions of SCS.

#### *Family Size*

The family constitutes a critical context for value formation, with family size serving as a proxy for variations in parental attention, sibling competition, and family culture. Regression results from Equations (23) and (27) indicate that family size strengthens the positive role of IPE in cultivating extrinsic success, while exerting no significant impact on intrinsic success. This pattern is likely driven by constraints in family resource allocation and intensified intra-family competition, which foster stronger materialistic needs among individuals from larger families (Li et al., 2020). Accordingly, recognizing the heterogeneous role of family size is essential for IPE to effectively shape SCS.

### Marital Status

Individual perceptions of social roles influence value cognition, with marital status serving as a key indicator of such roles. As shown by regression results (24) and (28), marital status strengthens the positive role of IPE in cultivating extrinsic success, while exerting no significant impact on intrinsic success. This finding is consistent with prior studies suggesting that marriage reshapes social roles and life pressures, enhances responsibility and social experience, and thereby promotes individuals' recognition of extrinsic success (Carr et al., 2014). Accordingly, enhancing individuals' accurate understanding of different social roles can enhance the effectiveness of IPE in guiding SCS.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Analysis of individual microdata reveals that IPE in higher education functions as an important mechanism for shaping individuals' competencies and perceptions of SCS. This finding fully corroborates prior theoretical research: higher education, through functions such as knowledge transmission and value embedding, effectively promotes individuals' perception of career success. These results provide empirical support for Hypothesis 1. Meanwhile, from the summary of empirical results (see Appendix F), this study also uncovers the following findings:

IPE in higher education has consistently promoted SCS across both pre-reform and post-reform periods, though its effects vary across periods. Regarding intrinsic success, educational modernization and internationalization have prompted IPE to focus more on cultivating students' innovation and perseverance. This shift encourages a transition from relationship-based to competence-oriented values, thereby enhancing human capital for a market-oriented economy (Xie & Ma, 2025). As a result, the influence of IPE on intrinsic success perception is stronger in the post-reform era. In contrast, for extrinsic success, the market-oriented nature of higher education reform has reduced the role of ideological and moral guidance (Zhu & Lou, 2011). Consequently, IPE's effect on extrinsic success perception has weakened, reflecting the tendency of current evaluations to emphasize economic outcomes over broader value formation.

Different IPE systems exhibit distinct patterns in shaping SCS. First, IPE in undergraduate and higher education institutions appears to have limited effectiveness in guiding individuals' perceptions of extrinsic success. Although the IPE system at the undergraduate level and above is relatively well-established, there is a lack of integrated curricular design centered on individuals' understanding of extrinsic success, with a greater emphasis placed on formal alignment rather than systematic and logical coordination across courses (Zhang & Gao, 2026). Moreover, value guidance within these courses continues to focus primarily on theoretical exposition and the cultivation of political identification (Liu et al., 2023), while paying insufficient attention to how individuals negotiate material success, wealth, and related concerns. As a result, the curriculum struggles to provide robust normative support for shaping perceptions of extrinsic success. Second, the inclusion of theoretically oriented disciplines such as philosophy and modern history contributes to the development of students' critical thinking capacities. By strengthening value judgment and reflective reasoning, these disciplines enhance students' understanding of the intrinsic meaning of career development. Therefore, educational systems that place greater emphasis on theoretical subjects are more conducive to fostering perceptions of intrinsic success.

The comparative analysis of individual characteristics provides substantial support for Hypothesis 2. Heterogeneity analyses based on Party membership, Internet engagement, marital status, and family size reveal two key findings. First, extrinsic success is most prominently influenced by individual-level characteristics, particularly family-related factors, which help explain the relatively limited capacity of IPE in Chinese higher education to shape perceptions of extrinsic success. Second, intrinsic success is more susceptible to influences from the educational environment, suggesting that the incorporation of enhanced online guidance and second-classroom activities in contemporary IPE may more effectively foster students' perceptions of intrinsic success.

Based on the conclusions, this study proposes the following policy recommendations: This study finds that the limited impact of IPE on extrinsic success is largely due to the strong influence of individual and family factors, revealing the limitations of traditional education in shaping such perceptions. Hence, Chinese higher education should optimize curricula by integrating theoretical learning, field research, and lectures to enhance students' resilience and practical competence.

The findings also show that the guiding effect of IPE on extrinsic success has weakened after higher education reforms, highlighting a critical challenge of the current era. Chinese higher education should gradually strengthen students' understanding of extrinsic success through independent IPE curricula and the integration of IPE with professional courses. Furthermore, the findings indicate that highly theoretical curricula significantly weaken perceptions of extrinsic success, suggesting that an excessive emphasis on theory may impede students' recognition of career-related values. Therefore, it is necessary for Chinese higher education to adjust curricular structures and incorporate more practice-oriented teaching approaches to foster appropriate value orientations.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the measurement of SCS is constrained by the structure of the available survey items. Second, due to confidentiality restrictions of the CFPS database, research on socioeconomic factors influencing individuals' SCS remains insufficient. Future research could build on these findings to conduct more in-depth studies aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of IPE in China on young students.

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**Appendix A. Baseline Regression Results**

	<i>Regression Coefficients</i>		<i>Marginal Effects</i>	
	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
IPE	-0.170*** (-3.94)	-0.287*** (-7.23)	-0.030*** (-3.95)	-0.059*** (-7.25)
urban	-0.107*** (-3.21)	0.031 (1.02)	-0.019*** (-3.21)	0.007 (1.02)
counts	0.008 (1.08)	0.003 (0.40)	0.001 (1.08)	0.001 (0.40)
employ	0.422*** (12.97)	0.411*** (13.50)	0.075*** (13.09)	0.085*** (13.69)
health	0.175*** (4.62)	-0.175*** (-4.77)	0.031*** (4.62)	-0.036*** (-4.78)
military	0.093 (0.96)	0.083 (0.93)	0.016 (0.96)	0.017 (0.93)
ethnicity	-0.036 (-0.63)	-0.142*** (-2.69)	-0.006 (-0.63)	-0.029*** (-2.69)
income	0.291*** (6.77)	0.151*** (3.94)	0.052*** (6.78)	0.031*** (3.94)
cons	0.712*** (12.61)	0.703*** (13.16)	NA	NA
N	22746	22746	22746	22746
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.013	0.011	0.013	0.011

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses \* *p* < 0.1, \*\* *p* < 0.05, \*\*\* *p* < 0.01

**Appendix B. Robustness Test Results**

	<i>Ordered Logit (alternative dependent variable)</i>				<i>Probit</i>		<i>2018 Sample</i>	
	Extrinsic Success		Intrinsic Success		Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success
	$\beta_1$	$\beta_2$	$\beta_1$	$\beta_2$				
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
IPE	-0.214*** (-4.82)	-0.176*** (-4.10)	-0.288*** (-7.34)	-0.288*** (-7.34)	-0.102*** (-4.04)	-0.175*** (-7.25)	-0.311*** (-7.78)	-0.271*** (-7.11)
Individual Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Household Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Regional Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
N	22746		22746		22746	22746	28256	28256
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.016		0.013		0.013	0.011	0.012	0.007

## Appendix C. IV-Probit Regression Results

	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success
IPE	-0.476*** (-2.88)	-0.569*** (-3.59)
Individual Control Variables	YES	YES
Household Control Variables	YES	YES
Regional Fixed Effects	YES	YES
N	22746	22746
Wald test	12.21***	8.36***
AR	15.44***	15.44***

## Appendix D. Comparative Analysis of China's IPE System

	<i>Expansion of Higher Education Enrollment</i>				<i>Different Systems of IPE Curriculum</i>	
	<i>After the reform (after 1999)</i>		<i>Before the reform (before 1999)</i>		Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success
	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success	Extrinsic Success	Intrinsic Success		
	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)
IPE	-0.096* (-1.86)	-0.331*** (-6.96)	-0.560*** (-5.98)	-0.183* (-1.95)	-0.118** (-2.06)	-0.462*** (-8.99)
margin-IPE	-0.017* (-1.86)	-0.070*** (-7.00)	-0.096*** (-6.01)	-0.037* (-1.95)	-0.021** (-2.06)	-0.095*** (-9.04)
Individual Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Household Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Regional Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
N	11557	11557	11189	11189	22746	22746
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.014	0.022	0.016	0.004	0.012	0.012

**Appendix E. Heterogeneity and Marginal Effect Analysis**

	<i>Extrinsic Success</i>				<i>Intrinsic Success</i>			
	cpc (21)	net (22)	fam (23)	marriage (24)	cpc (25)	net (26)	fam (27)	marriage (28)
IPE	-0.104** (-2.16)	-0.227*** (-4.43)	-0.442*** (-5.62)	0.119* (1.79)	-0.210*** (-4.73)	-0.371*** (-7.83)	-0.361*** (-4.81)	-0.193*** (-3.17)
Interaction	-0.275** (-2.46)	0.186** (2.07)	0.377*** (4.09)	-0.417*** (-4.94)	-0.215** (-2.10)	0.266*** (3.22)	0.099 (1.14)	-0.084 (-1.08)
margin- Interaction	-0.069*** (-3.89)	-0.007 (-0.54)	-0.012 (-1.27)	-0.051*** (-5.41)	-0.094*** (-4.73)	-0.021 (-1.52)	-0.054*** (-5.70)	-0.056*** (-5.41)
N	22746	22746	22746	22746	22746	22746	22746	22746
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.013	0.013	0.013	0.015	0.012	0.012	0.011	0.013

**Appendix F. Summary of Empirical Results**

	<i>Extrinsic Success</i>	<i>Intrinsic Success</i>
IPE	+++	+++
reform	+++/+	+ /+++
bachelor	++	+++
cpc	++	+++▲
net	++	---▲
fam	---▲	NA
marriage	+++▲	NA

Note: +(-) means positive (negative) association, +++, ++, + mean significant at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively, -signs are similar; ▲ means maximum impact; NA means no association.)



# BOOK REVIEW

**20 Years of Quality Assurance in Vietnamese Higher Education: Retrospective Analysis and Trends for the Future.** By Cuong Huu Nguyen and Thanh Quy Nguyen (Eds) (2025). 351 pages. ISBN: 978-981-96-6548-8 (print). Singapore: Springer. 149.99 (EUR) (hardcover)

This volume constitutes a significant contribution to the study of higher education reform in Southeast Asia. It provides both a retrospective examination of Vietnam's trajectory in quality assurance (QA) and a forward-looking analysis of its prospective directions. By situating Vietnam's experience within broader regional and global contexts, the work offers a valuable resource for academics, policymakers, and QA practitioners engaged in reforming higher education systems.

The book systematically traces the evolution of QA in Vietnam over the past two decades, documenting major achievements, persistent challenges, and critical policy developments. Particular attention is devoted to milestones such as the establishment of accreditation agencies, the progressive adoption of international standards, and the increasing institutionalization of internal QA mechanisms within universities. In addition, the volume delineates future priorities, emphasizing sustainability of policies and practice, addressing internationalization, and responsiveness to stakeholder needs. The book advances understanding of the dynamics of higher education quality assurance in Vietnam and its implications for the wider Southeast Asian region.

The volume's principal strength lies in its historical depth. The editors present a chronology of reforms initiated since the early 2000s, enabling readers to discern the incremental yet substantive progress Vietnam has achieved in institutionalizing QA. Equally noteworthy is the policy analysis, which offers a critical examination of how governmental regulations have shaped QA practices. The authors draw attention to the persistent tensions between centralized state authority and the expanding demand for institutional autonomy, a dynamic that resonates across higher education systems in the region.

The chapter on quality assurance (QA) in national and regional universities in Vietnam offers valuable insights for practitioners beyond Vietnam, elucidating the diverse modes of QA implementation across these institutional types. The section on stakeholder engagement constitutes a particularly valuable contribution for QA practitioners, as it provides a detailed examination of the extent to which stakeholder feedback is incorporated into QA processes and leveraged to enhance teaching and learning within Vietnamese universities. However, moving from feedback from satisfaction surveys to quantitative measurement of learning outcomes will be more meaningful for improving program delivery and resource assessments.

Finally, the book advances forward-looking perspectives, with its concluding chapters articulating strategies for aligning QA with digital transformation, transnational education, and graduate employability. These recommendations are particularly salient in light of the rapid and ongoing transformations confronting higher education worldwide. The final article attempts to contextualize higher education trends within the current higher education and QA realities in Vietnam (e.g., aging population, emphasis on metrics vs learning outcomes measurement, responding to evolving types of higher education delivery, variable resources and capability across Vietnam universities, QA compliance vs QA culture, etc.). Scenarios for the future of QA in Vietnam's higher education are presented.

The scholarly contribution of this volume is considerable. It addresses a notable gap in the literature by providing the first comprehensive retrospective on quality assurance (QA) in Vietnam, a

context frequently marginalized in comparative higher education research. The integration of policy analysis, case studies, and statistical evidence enhances the methodological rigor of the book's chapters and lends credibility to its conclusions.

The volume adopts a predominantly inward-looking perspective. A more extensive comparative analysis of Vietnam's higher education quality assurance (QA) policies and practices vis-à-vis those of other ASEAN systems would substantially enhance the value of the studies presented. Such comparisons could be conducted at multiple levels—broadly across countries, universities, or programs, and more specifically at the level of academic processes and QA best practices.

While this book addresses many aspects of quality assurance, the specific effects of QA processes on degree programs and higher education remain underexplored. This volume does not examine the issue in depth, likely because universities are still preoccupied with meeting mandated QA requirements and adapting to rapid changes in higher education both locally and globally. Nevertheless, research into the impact of quality assurance on Vietnam's higher education system is needed in order to strengthen existing practices and ensure their relevance in an evolving academic landscape.

The relatively fast integration of quality assurance into Vietnam's higher education system has been largely state-driven, with laws and policies established from the outset to guide its development. As universities have reached a greater level of maturity in their QA practices and global trends in higher education continue to evolve, the imperative to reassess and recalibrate state policies has become increasingly salient. A central challenge moving forward will be achieving an appropriate balance between institutional autonomy, the allocation of resources—both financial and human—and the delivery of educational outcomes that prioritize learner-centered approaches. Over the past two decades, the volume systematically documents and analyzes these reference points, thereby providing a foundation for ongoing reforms and future projections.

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