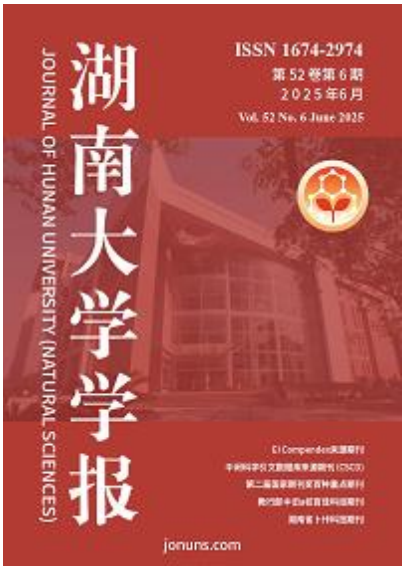

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Push–Pull Determinants of Chinese Undergraduates' Intentions and Decisions to Study in Asia: Evidence from Anhui Province

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Abstract: This study investigates how domestic "push" pressures and destination "pull" attractions shape Chinese undergraduates' intentions and final decisions to study elsewhere in Asia. Grounded in push–pull theory, we specified a mediation model in which study-abroad intention transmits the effects of push/pull factors to the ultimate decision. A cross-sectional survey of 513 students from 25 universities in Anhui Province, China, was analyzed using structural equation modeling. Push factors such as competitive postgraduate entrance pressure and employment challenges and pull factors including university conditions, social security, costs, and geographic proximity were positively associated with intention ($\beta_{push}=0.515$, $p<0.001$; $\beta_{pull}=0.232$, $p<0.001$). Intention, in turn, significantly predicted the decision to study abroad. Indirect effects via intention were significant for both push and pull constructs; the direct path from pull to the decision remained significant, whereas the direct path from push to the decision was not, indicating full mediation for push factors and partial mediation for pull factors. This is the first empirical test of push–pull mechanisms for intra-Asian student mobility in a developing regional context of China. We outline actionable implications for regional higher education stakeholders, including cross-border university partnerships, curriculum alignment with regional labor-market needs, and improvements to student-facing infrastructure and safety, to enhance Asia's attractiveness as a study destination.

Keywords: Push–pull theory; International student mobility; Study-abroad intention; Decision-making; Structural equation modeling; Intra-Asian mobility; China; Anhui Province.

影响中国大学生留学亚洲的推拉因素——以安徽省为例

摘要：本研究考察了国内推动因素（研究生入学竞争压力、就业挑战）和目的地拉动因素（**大学条件、社会保障、成本、**邻近性）如何影响中国大学生在亚洲学习的意愿和决定。**基于推拉理**论，我们开发了一个概念框架，通过对中国安徽省 25 **所大学的** 513 **名学生的横断面**调查，使用结构方程模型（SEM）进行了测试。结果表明，推动因素（β=0.515, p<0.001）**和拉**动因素（β=0.232, p<0.001）**直接影响留学决策，留学意向在其中起部分中介作用。**值得**注意的是，意**图完全中介推动因素对决策的影响。本研究首次实证验证了在发展中的中国区**域背景下**亚洲学生流动的推拉机制。我们提出了可操作的战略，包括跨境大学伙伴关系、符**合区域**劳动力需求的课程调整、加强学生基础设施建设，以增强亚洲作为学习目的地的吸引**力，促**进教育合作。

关键词：拉动与推动因素，留学生流动，留学意向与决定，中国安徽省

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization and the increasing demand for higher education the annual number of Chinese students pursuing education overseas continues to rise, reflecting both the "push" factors from domestic education systems and the "pull" factors from destination countries. However, the decision-making process behind studying abroad involves complex influences, including economic conditions, educational policies, career prospects, and cultural preferences. Understanding these factors is crucial for policymakers, educational institutions, and students themselves to optimize international education strategies and enhance global talent mobility.

Based on the push-pull theory, this study constructs a model of influencing factors and applies structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the internal mechanisms behind Chinese university students' intentions and choices regarding studying abroad. Anhui Province was selected as the research context due to its: (1) representative socioeconomic profile as a mid-tier developing region; (2) rapidly growing outbound student mobility (22% CAGR 2018-2023); By analyzing the push factors and pull factors, this research aims to provide a scientific basis for improving international education policies and student decision-making.

Through micro-level empirical analysis, this study addresses the gaps in existing theoretical frameworks and offers targeted recommendations to support students in making informed choices, while also assisting universities and governments in developing strategies to retain talent or facilitate smoother transnational education flows. The findings will contribute to the sustainable development of global higher education and cross-cultural exchange.

2. Literature review

This research examines factors shaping Chinese students' study-abroad decisions, providing actionable insights for Asian governments, universities, and education stakeholders. The findings support evidence-based policymaking, facilitate academic research, and inform student choices. Through push-pull theory analysis, it bridges gaps in international student mobility literature. The study enables universities to enhance international student services and adapt programs to global education trends. Combining empirical analysis with practical applications, it contributes to policymaking and scholarly understanding of transnational education flows.

2.1 Theory of “Push-Pull”

The push-pull theory, originally conceptualized in migration studies (Lee, 1966), explains population movement through "push" factors (negative conditions in the origin) and "pull" factors (positive attractions in the destination) [1]. Applied to higher education, this framework elucidates motivations behind international

student mobility (ISM). Push factors include limited educational opportunities, political instability, or economic constraints in home countries, while pull factors encompass institutional reputation, scholarship availability, and post-graduation employment prospects in host nations [2].

Research highlights the dual role of economic and academic drivers. For instance, Chen identifies tuition costs and visa policies as critical pull factors, whereas political repression and unemployment act as push forces [3]. Bodycott emphasizes cultural proximity and language as influential pulls, particularly in Anglophone destinations [4]. However, critics argue that the theory oversimplifies decision-making by neglecting individual agency and structural barriers like immigration policies [5]. Recent studies advocate integrating additional frameworks, such as social network theory, to address complex interdependencies (Beech, 2018) [6]. Contemporary shifts, such as the rise of digital education and post-pandemic mobility patterns, further challenge traditional push-pull binaries [7]. Additionally, regional disparities in higher education quality and geopolitical alliances increasingly shape student choices, as seen in Asia-Africa educational corridors [8].

Overall, the push-pull model remains foundational in ISM research but requires nuanced adaptation to account for globalization's evolving dynamics, including digital education and geopolitical shifts.

2.2 Domestic Push Factors and Destination Pull Factors

The decision of Chinese students to study abroad is shaped by a dynamic interplay of domestic push factors and destination pull factors, each contributing to the complexity of international student mobility (ISM).

China's competitive education system and socio-economic pressures are central drivers of outbound student flows. Academic pressure, particularly from the high-stakes college entrance examination, pushes students to seek alternative educational pathways abroad. Studies by Zhao and Wang highlight that many students view studying overseas as an escape from the rigid Gaokao system, enabling access to more flexible and diverse learning environments [9]. Concurrently, employment challenges amplify this trend. Research by Liu and Chen reveals that students perceive international qualifications as critical for enhancing career competitiveness in China's saturated job market, where domestic degrees alone may no longer suffice [10].

Government policies also institutionalize this push. Wang and Li emphasize that state-sponsored scholarships, streamlined visa processes, and initiatives like the Study Abroad China Plan incentivize students to pursue global education [11]. Additionally, perceptions of superior educational quality abroad and aspirations for personal growth further reinforce these motivations [12]. However, the relationship between push factors and decision-making is not linear. For instance, despite strong policy support, financial constraints and familial obligations may temper students' willingness to study abroad [13], underscoring the need to consider intersecting socio-economic dynamics.

On the pull side, academic reputation, affordability, and socio-cultural compatibility dominate students' destination choices. High-ranking universities with robust research infrastructure and industry connections attract those prioritizing academic excellence and career outcomes [14]. Affordability remains pivotal, particularly for middle-income families. Studies by Martinez and Garcia note that tuition costs, living expenses, and scholarship availability significantly influence destination attractiveness [15], with students favoring countries offering financial aid and cost-effective education.

Cultural proximity and social stability further shape preferences. Destinations with shared languages, cultural practices, and low crime rates are perceived as less daunting and more inclusive [16]. For example, South Korea's cultural exports and geographic closeness make it a favored choice for Chinese students [17]. Post-study work policies and social integration strategies also enhance appeal. Smith and Johnson found that host countries with clear pathways to employment and inclusive policies [18], such as language support and anti-discrimination measures, are more likely to attract and retain international students.

The interplay of Chinese push factors and destination pull factors underscores the dual dynamics of escape from domestic pressures and pursuit of global opportunities. While academic and employment pressures dominate push narratives, institutional reputation and cultural alignment define pull mechanisms. Future research should explore how digital education (e.g., hybrid programs) and geopolitical shifts reshape these dynamics. Policymakers and institutions must adopt holistic strategies—addressing affordability, cultural integration, and post-graduate support—to optimize student mobility outcomes.

2.3 Students Study aboard Intention and Decision

The transition from study abroad intentions to actual decision-making among students is a multifaceted process influenced by personal, contextual, and systemic factors. While intentions often serve as precursors to action, empirical studies reveal significant gaps between aspiration and realization, shaped by mediating variables.

Existing research underscores that intentions are primarily driven by personal aspirations, such as career advancement, academic prestige, and cultural exposure. For instance, Li and Tierney note that Chinese students' intentions to study abroad are strongly linked to perceptions of Western universities as pathways to

global employability [19]. However, intentions alone rarely translate directly into decisions. Chen highlights that financial capacity and family support act as critical moderators; even highly motivated students may abandon plans due to economic constraints or familial obligations [20]. Similarly, institutional barriers, such as visa policies and language requirements, create friction. Kim and Lee observed that tightened post-9/11 U.S. visa regulations disproportionately reduced enrollment intentions among Asian students, despite strong initial interest [21]. The role of external shocks further complicates this relationship. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, disrupted decision-making patterns, with many students deferring or altering their plans due to health concerns and travel restrictions [22]. Conversely, destination countries' adaptive measures, such as hybrid learning and extended visa flexibility, mitigated attrition among committed applicants [23]. Psychological frameworks, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior [24], contextualize these dynamics by emphasizing perceived behavioral control. Gaps arise when students overestimate their ability to navigate logistical challenges or underestimate socio-cultural adaptation barriers. A study by Bodycott on Hong Kong students revealed that while 78% expressed strong intentions to study abroad, only 52% finalized their decisions, citing anxieties about discrimination and academic integration [25]. While intentions reflect students' idealized goals, decision-making is mediated by pragmatic, institutional, and situational factors.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Conceptual framework and research hypothesis

Based on the above literature review, this study constructs a theoretical model to identify the drivers of Chinese college students studying abroad (Figure 1). Based on the VBN model, this study explores the driving mechanism of Chinese college students studying abroad by combining the introduction factors of China and the attraction factors of destination countries.

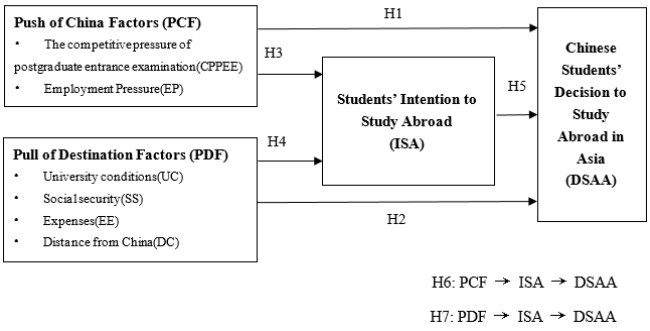

Figure 1. Theoretical model

Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the push of China factors and the student's decision to study abroad in Asia.

H2: There is a positive relationship between the pull of destination factors and the student's decision to study abroad in Asia.

H3: There is a positive relationship between the pull of destination factors and the student's intention to study abroad.

H4: There is a significant influence of the pull of destination factors on the student's intention to study abroad.

H5: There is a positive relationship between the student's intention and the decision to study abroad in Asia.

H6: There is positive relationship between the pull of destination factors and the Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Asia by the mediating effect of students' intention to study abroad.

H7: There is positive relationship between the push of China's factors and the Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Asia by the mediating effect of students' intention to study abroad.

3.2 Study Design and Scientific Methods

This study employed a quantitative approach to investigate the impact of China's push factors and destination countries' pull factors on Chinese university students' study abroad decisions, with study abroad intention serving as a mediating variable. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire adapted from established scales in migration and educational decision-making literature, utilizing a Likert 5-point scale.

Focusing on Anhui Province—a representative region with growing outbound student mobility the research targeted 25 universities stratified by institutional geographic distribution to ensure sample diversity. Participants were randomly selected, with 550 questionnaires distributed through a combination of online platforms and on-site administration. After eliminating incomplete or inconsistent responses, 513 valid questionnaires were retained, yielding a 93.3% validity rate. The dataset will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to elucidate the direct and indirect pathways through which push-pull factors shape decision-making, particularly examining how intention mediates these relationships.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was selected for its capacity to: (1) simultaneously analyze complex relationships between latent constructs; (2) account for measurement error; and (3) test mediation effects (Hair et al., 2018). By anchoring the study in Anhui, the findings aim to provide localized insights for policymakers and universities to optimize student

mobility strategies within Asia while addressing structural barriers in China's education system.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and validity tests

4.1.1. Reliability analysis

The reliability analysis results indicate that all dimensions employed in this study exhibited high internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for all variables exceeded 0.8, demonstrating good reliability of the measurement scales. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha values for CPPEE, EP, UC, SS, EE, DC, ISA, and DSAA were 0.886, 0.903, 0.889, 0.897, 0.887, 0.892, 0.873, and 0.878 respectively, all indicating high measurement consistency. Overall, the total reliability of all 40 items reached 0.944, further validating the reliability of the scales in this study for subsequent data analysis and hypothesis testing. The detailed results are presented in Table 2.

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4.1.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) via Overall Measurement Model

In the structural equation modeling in AMOS, the model fitting index was analyzed by CFA to determine the model fitting effect, and the fitting ability of the model obtained by exploratory factor analysis to the actual observed data was tested. CFA is a statistical method used to verify the factor structure of a measurement tool, ensuring that the measured tool designed accurately reflects the concept envisioned by the researcher. Perform common model fitting experiments, including χ^2 test and ratio χ^2/degrees of freedom (CFI), norm fit index (NFI), incremental fit index (IFI), and more. This helps to assess the degree of fit between the model you build and the actual data. In this paper, based on the recommendations of Kline (2005) and Hair et al. (1998), the fitting indicators and criteria shown in Table 1 were selected for judgment. It can be seen that the fitting results of the model are in line with the fitting standards, and the fitting effect of the model is good. The fitting results of the confirmatory factor model are shown in Table 1.

Fit indicators	CMIN /DF	RMSEA	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Fit standard	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Statistical results	1.073	0.012	0.940	0.996	0.995	0.996

Table 1 Fitting results of confirmatory factor model

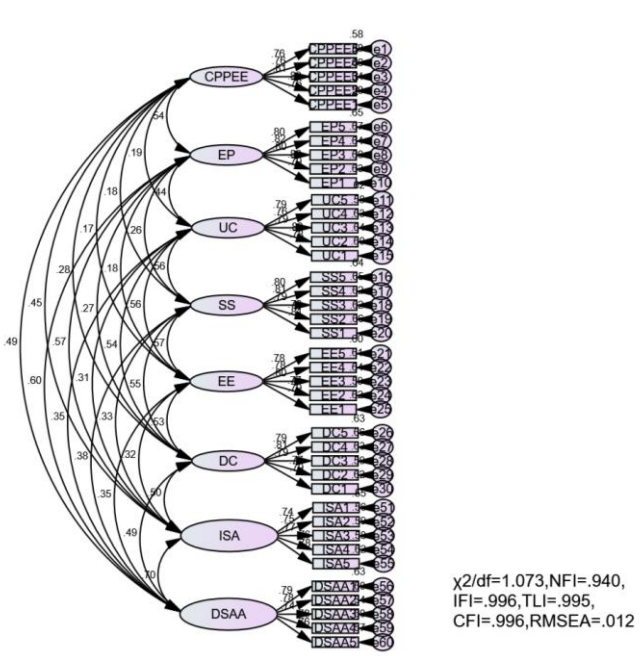

Figure 2. Measurement model

The results of confirmatory factor analysis demonstrate that the model fit indices are crucial for ensuring the reliability of research conclusions. Table 1 presents the model fit indices of the confirmatory factor analysis in this study. The CMIN/DF value of 1.073 is substantially lower than the recommended threshold of 3 for good model fit, indicating excellent structural alignment between the model and the observed data. The RMSEA value of 0.012 is significantly below the critical value of 0.08, reflecting minimal approximation error and exceptional data-model congruence.

Regarding relative fit indices, the NFI (0.940), IFI (0.996), TLI (0.995), and CFI (0.996) all substantially exceed the 0.9 benchmark for good model fit. These indices collectively demonstrate that the proposed model provides a significantly better fit to the data compared to the baseline model, confirming the strong theoretical rationality of the model construction.

Figure 2 illustrates the structural diagram of the measurement model, explicitly displaying the relationships between latent variables (e.g., CPPEE, EP) and their corresponding observed variables. The directional arrows from latent variables to observed indicators, accompanied by standardized factor loadings, visually demonstrate the explanatory power of observed variables for their respective latent constructs. Combined with the fit indices in Table 1, the measurement model not only exhibits outstanding global fit but also maintains theoretically consistent relationships between latent and observed variables. These results collectively validate the robust validity and stability of the measurement model, establishing a solid foundation for subsequent data analysis and hypothesis testing.

4.1.3 Validity analysis

This study conducted rigorous reliability and validity tests on relevant variables, with the following results:

Regarding Average Variance Extracted (AVE): All latent variables demonstrated favorable AVE values. The AVE value for the "The competitive pressure of postgraduate entrance examination" dimension was 0.601, indicating that this latent variable accounts for 60.1% of the variance in its observed variables, thereby confirming the effective reflection of the latent construct by its indicators. The "Employment Pressure" dimension achieved an AVE of 0.650, demonstrating strong explanatory power over its observed variables. The AVE values for "University conditions" (0.615), "Social security" (0.636), "Expenses" (0.612), and "Distance from China" (0.624) all exceeded the 0.5 threshold, confirming adequate convergent validity in their respective measurement models. Although the AVE values for "Students' Intention to Study Abroad" (0.580) and "Chinese Students' Decision to Study Abroad in Asia" (0.591) were relatively close to the critical value, they still indicate moderate explanatory capacity of the latent variables over their observed indicators.

Regarding Composite Reliability (CR): All dimensions exhibited satisfactory composite reliability. The CR value for "The competitive pressure of postgraduate entrance examination" reached 0.886, reflecting high internal consistency among its observed variables. The "Employment Pressure" dimension showed exceptional consistency with a CR of 0.903. The CR values for "University conditions" (0.889), "Social security" (0.897), "Expenses" (0.888), "Distance from China" (0.892), "Students' Intention to Study Abroad" (0.874), and "Chinese Students' Decision to Study Abroad in Asia" (0.878) all surpassed the acceptable threshold of 0.7, confirming stable and consistent measurement of latent constructs by their respective observed variables.

Synthesis of Findings: The combined AVE and CR results validate that the measurement models for all latent variables in this study possess robust convergent validity and excellent internal consistency. These findings confirm that the measurement instruments effectively and reliably assess the target constructs, establishing a solid foundation for subsequent data analysis and hypothesis testing.

Table 2 Reliability and validity data results

Factor	dimension	Item	Estimate	AEV	CR	Cronbach's α
Push of China Factors	The competitive pressure of postgraduate entrance examination	CPPEE1	0.764	0.601	0.886	0.886
		CPPEE2	0.761			
		CPPEE3	0.813			
		CPPEE4	0.8			
		CPPEE5	0.763			
	Employment Pressure	EP1	0.805	0.65	0.903	0.903
		EP2	0.821			
		EP3	0.798			
		EP4	0.815			
		EP5	0.792			
Pull of Destination Factors	University conditions	UC1	0.789	0.615	0.889	0.889
		UC2	0.761			
		UC3	0.792			
		UC4	0.8			
		UC5	0.777			
	Social security	SS1	0.798	0.636	0.897	0.897
		SS2	0.807			
		SS3	0.786			
		SS4	0.785			
		SS5	0.81			
	Expenses	EE1	0.776	0.612	0.888	0.887
		EE2	0.779			
		EE3	0.802			
		EE4	0.768			
		EE5	0.787			
	Distance from China	DC1	0.792	0.624	0.892	0.892
		DC2	0.811			
		DC3	0.791			
		DC4	0.766			
		DC5	0.787			
Students' Intention to Study Abroad		ISA1	0.74	0.58	0.874	0.873
		ISA2	0.75			
		ISA3	0.768			
		ISA4	0.763			
		ISA5	0.784			
Chinese Students' Decision to Study Abroad in Asia		DSAA1	0.793	0.591	0.878	0.878
		DSAA2	0.776			
		DSAA3	0.738			
		DSAA4	0.777			
		DSAA5	0.757			

Discriminant validity analysis was conducted by comparing the correlation coefficients between constructs with the square roots of their respective Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. As shown in the table, the diagonal values represent the square roots of AVE for each construct, indicating strong correlations between each latent variable and its corresponding measurement items. To establish discriminant validity, the correlation coefficients between any two constructs must be lower than the square roots of their AVE values. The results reveal that all inter-construct correlation coefficients were lower than the corresponding AVE square roots, with the majority of correlations being statistically significant at the 1% level (denoted by **). This confirms clear differentiation between latent variables.

For instance, the correlation coefficient between ISA and DSAA was 0.609** ($p < 0.01$), which is lower than the AVE square root of DSAA (0.769), satisfying the discriminant validity criterion. Similarly, the correlation

between CPPEE and EP was 0.489** ($p < 0.01$), below the AVE square root of EP (0.806), further validating robust discriminant validity.

Synthesis of Findings: The discriminant validity test demonstrates significant distinctiveness between latent variables, supporting the hypothesized model's discriminant validity. Each construct exhibits conceptual clarity and mutual independence, effectively distinguishing itself from others. These results ensure the accuracy and reliability of the measurements, reinforcing the validity of subsequent analytical procedures.

Table3 Differentiation validity

	ISA	DSAA	CPPEE	EP	UC	SS	EE	DC
ISA	0.762							
DSAA	0.609**	0.769						
CPPEE	0.395**	0.437**	0.775					
EP	0.505**	0.532**	0.489**	0.806				
UC	0.276**	0.304**	0.170**	0.392**	0.784			
SS	0.293**	0.330**	0.166**	0.231**	0.494**	0.797		
EE	0.280**	0.302**	0.152**	0.165**	0.498**	0.505**	0.782	
DC	0.442**	0.435**	0.245**	0.241**	0.479**	0.493**	0.469**	0.790

***、*Represents the significance levels of 1% and 5%, respectively. The oblique diagonal number is the root number value of the AVE of this factor*

4.2 Structural equation model analysis

In this paper, AMOS is used to analyze the statistics of model fit in SPSS to test the degree of model fit. Use software to establish push of Chinese factors, Pull of Destination Factors of Students' Intention to Study Abroad and Chinese Students' Decision to Study Abroad in Asia structure equation model, and to the fitting results, path coefficient and significance test, establish the structure equation model, model is shown in the following figure:

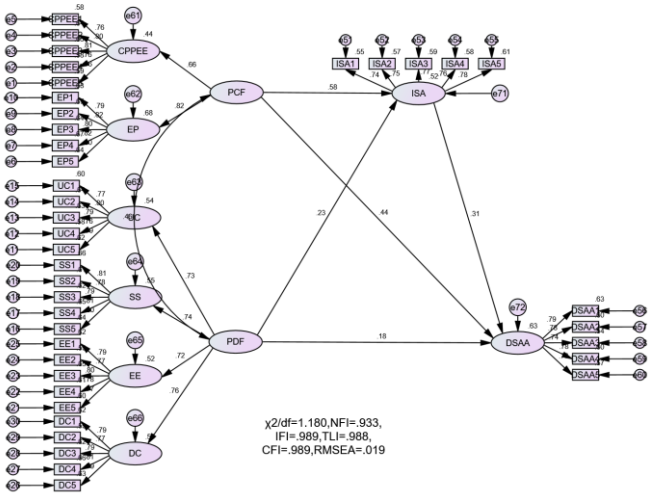

Figure 2 Structural equation model

After the model fitting calculation of the software, the fitting indexes corresponding to the structural equation model are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Model fit metrics

Index	CMIN/DF	RMSEA	NFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
Criterion for judgement	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Result	1.180	0.019	0.933	0.989	0.988	0.989

Figure 2 illustrates the structural equation model developed in this study. After computational fitting via specialized software, the model fit indices are presented in Table 4.

The CMIN/DF value of 1.180 is substantially lower than the recommended threshold of 3 for good model fit, indicating strong alignment between the model structure and empirical data. The RMSEA value of 0.019 is significantly below the critical threshold of 0.08, demonstrating minimal approximation error and excellent data-model congruence.

The NFI (0.933), IFI (0.989), TLI (0.988), and CFI (0.989) all substantially exceed the 0.9 benchmark, confirming that the proposed structural equation model outperforms the baseline model in explaining variable relationships.

Figure 2 explicitly displays the directional path coefficients between latent variables. For example: PCF shows significant path coefficients with ISA and DSAA, reflecting both the magnitude and direction of their influences. PDF exhibits defined associative pathways with related latent variables.

Synthesis of Findings: The combined evidence from robust fit indices and theoretically grounded path relationships validates the rationality and reliability of the structural equation model. This model not only achieves superior global data fit but also provides a rigorous framework for exploring intrinsic variable interactions, thereby supporting subsequent analytical refinements and theoretical derivations.

Table 5 Model path table

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (UE)	S.E.	C.R.	P
H1	PCF=>DSAA	0.438	0.515	0.099	5.2	***
H2	PDF=>DSAA	0.179	0.232	0.065	3.565	***
H3	PCF=>ISA	0.58	0.618	0.081	7.611	***
H4	PDF=>ISA	0.235	0.277	0.068	4.079	***
H5	ISA=>DSAA	0.307	0.339	0.077	4.396	***

Table 5 presents the key results of the model pathways, providing crucial information for investigating the relationships between variables.

Regarding hypothesis H1, the path PCF→DSAA demonstrates an Estimate(SE) of 0.438 and Estimate(UE) of 0.515, indicating a positive effect of

PCF on DSAA. With a standard error (S.E.) of 0.099, a critical ratio (C.R.) reaching 5.2, and a p-value marked as *** (typically indicating $p < 0.001$), these results show statistical significance at the highest level, strongly supporting hypothesis H1 and confirming PCF's significant positive influence on DSAA.

For hypothesis H2, the path PDF→DSAA reveals an Estimate(SE) of 0.179 and Estimate(UE) of 0.232, suggesting a positive association between PDF and DSAA. The S.E. of 0.065, C.R. of 3.565, and *** p-value demonstrate statistically significant pathway relationships, validating PDF's positive impact on DSAA.

In hypothesis H3, the PCF→ISA path shows an Estimate(SE) of 0.58 and Estimate(UE) of 0.618, reflecting PCF's positive effect on ISA. With an S.E. of 0.081, C.R. of 7.611, and *** p-value, these results conclusively prove the significant positive relationship between PCF and ISA, supporting H3.

Hypothesis H4 demonstrates through the PDF→ISA path (Estimate(SE)=0.235, Estimate(UE)=0.277) a positive influence tendency of PDF on ISA. The S.E. of 0.068, C.R. of 4.079, and *** p-value confirm the statistical significance of this pathway relationship, corroborating H4.

Finally, hypothesis H5 shows that the ISA→DSAA path (Estimate(SE)=0.307, Estimate(UE)=0.339) reveals ISA's positive impact on DSAA. With an S.E. of 0.077, C.R. of 4.396, and *** p-value, these results verify the statistically significant influence of ISA on DSAA, validating H5.

Collectively, these findings confirm the statistical significance of all pathway relationships in the model, strongly supporting the proposed hypotheses. The results provide robust empirical evidence for understanding the intrinsic mechanisms between variables, offering substantial data support for deeper insights into these relationships.

4.3 Mediation effect analysis

In SEM model, Bootstrap method was used to verify whether students study abroad intention plays an intermediary role in push of Chinese factors and pull of destination factors on Chinese students' decision to study abroad in Asia. The results are shown in Table 6.

This study employed the Bootstrap method in Amos 24 to examine the mediation effects of Organizational Commitment and Job Satisfaction. The analysis was configured with a sample size of 5000 iterations (generally requiring at least 1000) and a 95% confidence level (commonly set at 90%, 95%, or 99%), using bias-corrected confidence intervals to observe upper and lower bounds. A mediation effect is considered statistically significant if the bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect does not include zero. The final mediation effect test results are summarized in the table below.

Table 6 Mediating effect data result

M PATH	TE	ES	Lower	Upper	P
PCF=>ISA=>DSAA	Indirect1	0.048	0.005	0.14	0.027
	Direct1	0.247	0.004	0.479	0.046
	Total1	0.294	0.052	0.52	0.024
PDF=>ISA=>DSAA	Indirect2	0.022	0.000	0.069	0.049
	Direct2	0.117	-0.028	0.257	0.112
	Total2	0.14	-0.01	0.28	0.065

In the mediation pathway analysis of PCF → ISA → DSAA, the direct effect was 0.247 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that PCF did not exert a statistically significant direct influence on DSAA. However, the indirect effect through study abroad intention was 0.048 ($p < 0.05$), and the total effect reached 0.294 ($p < 0.05$), with all confidence intervals excluding zero. These results confirm a full mediation effect of study abroad intention in this pathway, meaning PCF indirectly impact DSAA by enhancing ISA. Consequently, the hypothesis is supported.

For the pathway PDF →ISA → DSAA, the direct effect was 0.117 ($p > 0.05$), suggesting no significant direct relationship between PDF and DSAA. Although the indirect effect was 0.022 ($p < 0.05$) with its confidence interval excluding zero, the total effect of 0.140 ($p > 0.05$) lacked statistical significance, and the confidence intervals for both direct and total effects included zero. Thus, ISA failed to mediate the relationship between PDF and DSAA, leading to rejection of the hypothesis.

5. Conclusions and suggestions

5.1 Conclusion

This study found that push factors from China have a significant positive impact on students' study abroad intentions and their choice to study in Asia. The SEM analysis results indicate that the stronger the push factors from China (including pressure from postgraduate entrance exams and employment challenges), the more likely students are to develop a strong intention to study abroad. However, it is noteworthy that while push factors from China significantly influence students' study abroad intentions, their direct impact on the final decision to study abroad is relatively weaker. This finding suggests that push factors from China may play a more indirect role rather than being a direct determinant of students' study abroad behavior. For instance, these factors may initially motivate students to consider studying abroad, but the final decision is often influenced by other considerations, such as personal preferences, family support, or the attractiveness of the destination.

At the same time, statistical analysis results show that pull factors from study destinations also have a significant positive impact on students' study abroad

intentions and their choice to study in Asia. The stronger the pull factors from study destinations (including university facilities, social safety, study costs, and proximity to China), the greater the likelihood of students choosing to study abroad. This indicates that favorable social and university conditions and environments are crucial in promoting students' decision to study abroad. For example, universities with strong academic reputations, affordable tuition fees, and safe living environments are more likely to attract Chinese students. Additionally, the cultural and geographical proximity of Asian countries to China makes them appealing destinations, as students perceive them as more accessible and familiar compared to Western countries.

These findings highlight the importance of both push and pull factors in shaping students' study abroad intentions and behaviors, with pull factors playing a particularly significant role in the final decision-making process. The study also underscores the need for policymakers and educational institutions to consider these factors when designing strategies to attract international students. By addressing the concerns related to push factors and enhancing the attractiveness of study destinations, stakeholders can better support students in achieving their educational and career aspirations.

5.2 Contribution

This study makes three key contributions: First, it establishes the first empirical evidence of intention's mediating role between push-pull factors and study decisions in intra-Asian mobility. Second, it identifies proximity and social security—previously underexplored in Western-centric models—as critical pull factors for Asian destinations. Third, it extends Push-Pull Theory by demonstrating how push factors operate primarily through intention formation rather than direct influence on decisions, revealing a nuanced decision pathway specific to developing Asian contexts. These insights advance theoretical understanding of Global South educational mobility.

5.3 Suggestions

Based on the above conclusions, the following suggestions are proposed:

(1)Enhance Awareness of Study Abroad Opportunities

Chinese universities should strategically position studying abroad in Asia as a pathway to alleviate pressures from postgraduate entrance exams and employment challenges. By highlighting the affordability, cultural proximity, and academic quality of Asian countries, institutions can offer students a viable alternative to the highly competitive domestic education system. Compared to Western destinations, Asian study abroad programs provide comparable educational standards at lower costs while fostering international exposure and career competitiveness, aligning with China's goals of promoting global educational exchanges. To enhance awareness, universities should proactively organize study abroad fairs, seminars, and workshops to demystify application processes and program benefits. Integrating global perspectives into curricula through courses on international relations, cross-cultural communication, and language training can further cultivate students' readiness for overseas education. Collaborations with foreign universities, embassies, and educational organizations will help establish platforms for sharing scholarship opportunities and policy updates. By addressing information gaps and offering structured guidance, institutions can transform Asian study abroad into a natural, accessible choice for students, diversifying their academic and career pathways while strengthening China's international educational influence and soft power.

(2) Improve Study Environment in Asian Countries

Asian governments, communities, and universities must collaborate to build supportive environments for international students by enhancing infrastructure, academic quality, affordability, and social safety. Governments should invest in public safety and streamline visa processes while universities improve facilities (e.g., modern labs, libraries), offer scholarships, and design robust academic programs with joint degrees and research collaborations with Chinese institutions. Cultural integration initiatives—language support, exchange programs, and anti-discrimination policies—help students adapt, alongside campus safety measures like 24/7 security. Countries should strategically promote unique strengths: Japan and South Korea can highlight cutting-edge technology programs, while Malaysia emphasizes multicultural management expertise and heritage. Targeted marketing campaigns showcasing Asia's cultural proximity, career opportunities, and post-study work options will attract Chinese students. By combining academic excellence, financial accessibility, cultural inclusivity, and strategic partnerships, Asian nations can position themselves as competitive global education hubs, fostering cross-border talent development and strengthening their appeal in the international education market. This holistic approach addresses both practical needs (cost, safety) and long-term aspirations (career growth, global exposure), creating a sustainable ecosystem to diversify educational pathways and enhance regional educational influence.

5.4 Limitations and Research Perspectives

This study has limitations: (1) Sample represents one Chinese province, limiting generalizability; (2) Cross-sectional design cannot capture decision evolution over time; and (3) COVID-19 impacts may skew perceived

importance of factors like social security. Future research should: (a) Conduct longitudinal multi-region comparisons across China; (b) Investigate digital education (e.g., hybrid programs) as emergent pull factors; (c) Examine geopolitical influences (e.g., ASEAN partnerships) on destination choice; and (d) Integrate qualitative methods to explore familial/cultural dynamics underrepresented in our model.

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