

MAPPING THE DEMAND FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS AMONG CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: PERCEIVED BENEFITS, CONCERNS, AND LANGUAGE-RELATED FACTORS

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Abstract

This study investigated the attitudes and demand patterns of Chinese university students and their parents toward study abroad programs in Southeast Asia. It used a mixed-methods design, collecting survey data from 850 respondents (501 students and 349 parents) across six cities in Sichuan Province, China. These data were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with 24 families. The results show that parental acceptance of Southeast Asian study abroad was higher than expected, with 60.1% of parents indicating willingness to consider Southeast Asian destinations. Destination preferences were highly concentrated, with Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand accounting for 89.5% of first-choice selections. A logistic regression analysis identified prior knowledge of Southeast Asian higher education (OR = 3.52, $p < .001$), awareness of credential recognition policies (OR = 1.88, $p = .001$), and prior participation in study tours (OR = 2.44, $p < .001$) as the strongest predictors of positive attitudes. Language-related factors played a prominent role: 39.7% of parents cited language programs as a preferred field of study, significantly higher than comparable urban samples in eastern China. The study also found that participation in Southeast Asian study tours was positively associated with subsequent study abroad intentions, primarily through an information-bridging mechanism that improved parental awareness of educational opportunities. These findings contribute to the understanding of outbound education decision-making in non-coastal Chinese provinces and offer practical implications for institutions and policymakers seeking to support educational exchange with Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *study abroad, Southeast Asia, Chinese university students, parental attitudes, language-related factors, educational decision-making, mixed-methods*

1. INTRODUCTION

The geography of Chinese outbound education is undergoing a structural shift. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have traditionally dominated as destination countries. Recent data indicate a notable increase in Chinese student flows to Southeast Asian nations (Gu et al., 2023). Official statistics indicate that approximately 703,500 Chinese students went abroad for study in 2024 (Ministry of Education, 2024), with the number recovering to pre-pandemic levels. Industry reports suggest that the share of Asian destinations has increased in recent years, with Malaysia and Thailand recording among the fastest growth rates in Chinese student enrollment.

This shift is particularly relevant for provinces like Sichuan, which have a distinct demographic and economic profile within Chinese outbound education. As the largest province in western China by population, Sichuan produces over 800,000 college entrance examination candidates annually (Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2024), creating a substantial base of potential outbound students. Compared to coastal provinces such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, Sichuan families generally have lower per-capita spending power and higher sensitivity to tuition costs (Sichuan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This cost sensitivity makes Sichuan an ideal site for examining whether the turn toward Southeast Asia represents a genuine preference shift, or whether it is merely a fallback when traditional Western destinations become financially or logistically inaccessible.

Public and scholarly interest in Southeast Asian study abroad for Chinese students has grown steadily in recent years. However, little empirical research systematically explores the attitudes held by Chinese families toward these pathways. Existing studies focus primarily on macro-level student flow statistics (Gu et al., 2023) or small-scale case studies of specific programs. No published work to date has surveyed both students and parents in a western Chinese province at scale, nor has it unpacked the structural determinants of their attitudes toward Southeast Asian educational destinations, or rigorously tested how short-term study tours connect to longer-term study abroad intentions in this specific regional context.

The present study addresses these gaps by pursuing four distinct research objectives. Its first objective is to document the attitudes of Sichuan students and parents toward study abroad in Southeast Asia, covering destination preferences, field-of-study preferences, and primary concerns for both cohorts. Second, it identifies the key factors predicting positive attitudes toward these study abroad routes, with particular attention to language-related variables. Third, it examines whether prior participation in Southeast Asian study tours is associated with increased study abroad intentions. Fourth, it analyzes the demand structure for Southeast Asian study tour programs, including budget expectations, preferred duration, and thematic preferences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework: The Push-Pull Model

The most widely used theoretical framework for understanding international student mobility is the push-pull model first laid out by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Push factors describe conditions in a student's home country that drive them to pursue education abroad, such as limited domestic capacity, restricted program options, or the

perceived premium on foreign credentials. Pull factors describe traits of the destination country that attract applicants, including educational quality, cultural environment, visa accessibility, employment prospects, and cost of living. Subsequent studies have expanded this framework to incorporate family-level variables. Bodycott (2009), in his work on decision-making patterns among Hong Kong families, found that kinship networks and cultural-religious affinity exert strong influences on destination choice, a cluster of variables that does not fit neatly within the original push-pull binary.

The push-pull framework has a notable limitation when applied to Chinese contexts: it assumes that decision-making units are either individual students or families acting as unified rational actors, yet neither characterization adequately describes Chinese households navigating higher education choices. Wu (2014) challenged this assumption in a qualitative study of Beijing families, demonstrating the relevance of the dual drivers concept, the tension between the student's emotional preferences and the parent's rational calculations. This tension is especially salient at the undergraduate level, where parents typically hold decisive authority over destination and program selection.

2.2 Chinese Students Studying in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asian higher education is far more heterogeneous than most narratives acknowledge. At the upper tier, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University have held positions inside the global top 50 for several years (QS World University Rankings, 2024), while the University of Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia have advanced into the global top 200. Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University anchor Thailand's representation, each carrying a strong regional reputation. A systematic review by Yee and Hassan (2024) notes that Malaysia's internationalization policies have positioned it as a regional education hub, with international student inflows from across Asia climbing in recent years.

The recent rise in Chinese students choosing Southeast Asian universities can be traced to several converging conditions. Cost remains the first-order driver: tuition at top-ranked Malaysian and Thai institutions runs at roughly one-third to one-half of comparable Western fees. During and after the pandemic, safety and visa stability also weighed more heavily in parental reasoning, and Asian destinations were generally perceived as easier to enter and less disruption-prone than Western alternatives. Gu et al. (2023), drawing on 35 biographical interviews with Chinese undergraduates studying in Asia, report that students' perception of the central-periphery structure of higher education shaped where they enrolled, with cost and geographic proximity doing much of the work. Gu et al. (2023) also caution that Asia has not yet built the capacity to

absorb large volumes of international students, leaving open the question of whether the current wave represents a durable reorientation or a temporary adjustment.

2.3 Study Tours and Their Connection to Study Abroad

How short-term study tours shape later study abroad decisions has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Work that does exist focuses primarily on attitudinal and dispositional outcomes, gains in intercultural competence (Zuo & Hu, 2022) or global-mindedness (Deacon & Miles, 2022), without testing whether those gains translate into actual destination choices for degree study. No published study rigorously tests whether prior study tour participation raises the probability of later choosing Southeast Asia for a full degree. Where studies have touched on the question, they generally omit controls for family income and prior international exposure, leaving estimated effects vulnerable to confounding. Given how rapidly Southeast Asian study tour programs have expanded within Chinese secondary and tertiary education, this gap is consequential.

2.4 Language-Related Factors Linked to Study Abroad Decisions

Language occupies a distinctive position in Chinese families' calculus regarding Southeast Asian study abroad. English-medium instruction in Malaysia and Singapore draws one subset of students, while Thai- and Vietnamese-language programs attract another subset whose interest is more commercially oriented. Prior work on English language self-efficacy and study abroad intentions has largely been conducted in Western contexts (Petzold & Moog, 2018), and whether self-efficacy interacts with destination-specific language considerations in the Chinese-Southeast Asian corridor has not been tested. For English-major students and their parents, the weight of language-related career prospects in decision-making is typically higher than for students in other disciplines, making this gap especially worth addressing.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design with a quantitative-dominant structure. The quantitative component consisted of a cross-city survey generating comparable attitudinal data. The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with 24 families, intended to provide explanatory context for survey findings that were statistically clear but substantively ambiguous.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Survey data were collected from 850 respondents across six cities in Sichuan Province: Chengdu (provincial capital), Mianyang, Deyang, Yibin, Nanchong, and Leshan. These cities were selected to represent variation in economic development, educational infrastructure, and information environments across four of Sichuan's five major economic zones. Within each city, schools were sampled by type (key high schools, ordinary high schools, and universities) using a stratified cluster approach. The final sample comprised 501 student questionnaires and 349 parent questionnaires, with 178 matched student-parent pairs. The sample was approximately balanced by gender (53.2% female), with household income peaking in the 100,000–200,000 RMB range (32.1%), consistent with Sichuan's urban income distribution.

3.3 Instruments

The survey instrument was developed through three iterations, drawing on the push-pull framework (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and Bodycott's (2009) family decision-making instrument. A pilot test with 30 students and 25 parents in Chengdu identified three issues: inconsistent interpretation of Southeast Asia as a geographic category, central tendency bias on Likert items, and declining response quality for study-tour items placed at the end of the questionnaire. The final instrument addressed these issues by including an explicit country list, adopting a 6-point scale to reduce midpoint clustering, and repositioning study-tour items earlier in the questionnaire. The instrument comprised five sections covering demographic and family background, baseline awareness and information channels, study tour attitudes and preferences, study abroad attitudes and preferences, and family decision-making mechanisms. Cronbach's alpha for key scales ranged from .78 to .89.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted in Stata 18 using survey data commands to account for cluster sampling. These involved adjusted t-tests for continuous variables and Rao-Scott chi-square tests for categorical variables. To predict positive study abroad attitudes, a binary logistic regression was fitted using a 6-point scale where a score of 4 or higher indicated a positive attitude. The model was built with five blocks of predictors: demographics, family economics, information exposure, prior experience, and policy awareness. For the qualitative data, two researchers independently coded the transcripts, employing thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overall Attitudes Towards Study Abroad in Southeast Asia

Parental attitudes toward Southeast Asian study abroad were more positive than anticipated. On the 6-point scale, the mean parental rating was 3.44 (Mdn = 4), with 60.1% of parents selecting 4 or above, indicating willingness to consider Southeast Asian destinations. Students rated their attitudes significantly higher ($M = 3.81$; 69.7% selecting 4 or above; paired t-test, $p < .001$).

A closer examination of the student-parent attitude gap reveals that this divergence was nearly a full point wider within families earning 100,000–200,000 RMB annually. Interview data indicate that students' greater willingness stemmed largely from social media depictions of Southeast Asian university life, while parental caution centered on credential recognition and employability. Despite students' stronger inclination, 74.6% of parents claimed final decision-making authority over study abroad choices; only 23.5% of students saw themselves as the primary decision-maker. This asymmetry between attitudinal openness and actual decision-making power shapes demand in ways that aggregate scores alone cannot capture.

4.2 Destination Preferences

Mean acceptance scores on the 6-point scale reinforced a three-tier structure, with Singapore receiving the highest rating ($M = 4.62$). Malaysia ($M = 3.91$) and Thailand ($M = 3.58$) formed a distinct second tier, while all other countries fell below 2.50. Interview data indicate that parents evaluated these tiers against fundamentally different reference groups: Singapore was compared to developed-country destinations such as Australia and New Zealand, whereas Malaysia and Thailand were judged against domestic second-tier universities, with a premium placed on the international exposure component.

Among first-choice destination selections, Singapore alone accounted for 42.3% of first mentions, followed by Thailand (27.8%) and Malaysia (19.4%), meaning these three nations captured 89.5% of all responses. By contrast, Vietnam (4.2%), the Philippines (3.1%), and Indonesia (2.4%) were seldom cited. This three-tier hierarchy has practical implications for recruitment, as the value proposition that resonates for Singapore-bound families differs categorically from what attracts those considering Malaysia or Thailand.

4.3 Language-Related Factors

Language-related factors stood out as a particularly prominent dimension within the Sichuan sample. Nearly 40% of parents (39.7%) cited language programs as a

preferred field of study for Southeast Asian education, a share substantially exceeding the 24% reported by Gu et al. (2023) in a first-tier city context. Interview data clarify that this disparity is rooted in Sichuan's geographic role as a southwestern gateway for ASEAN trade, with parents explicitly referencing motivations tied to commercial engagement with ASEAN and the southward corridor of the China-Europe Railway Express.

The prominence of language programs in parental preferences was not uniform across destination countries. Among parents who expressed positive attitudes toward Singapore, 62.8% cited English-medium instruction as a primary attraction; for Malaysia, the corresponding figure was 54.1%. By contrast, parents considering Thailand were more likely to emphasize cultural experience (43.6%) and affordability (51.2%) than language factors. This pattern suggests that language considerations function as a strong pull factor for English-medium destinations but play a secondary role for destinations whose appeal is grounded in other attributes.

Among student respondents, 54.3% reported obtaining information about Southeast Asian study abroad primarily through short-video platforms, while parents relied predominantly on word-of-mouth from relatives and colleagues (38.7%). This generational information gap may partly explain the attitude discrepancy between students and parents, as content circulating on student-facing platforms tends to emphasize lifestyle and cultural dimensions rather than the credential and employability concerns that dominate parental thinking.

4.4 Predictors of Positive Attitudes

The logistic regression analysis identified three clusters of significant predictors. The strongest predictor was parental knowledge of Southeast Asian higher education: compared to parents with low knowledge, those with high knowledge were 3.52 times more likely to hold positive attitudes (OR = 3.52, 95% CI [2.11, 5.88], $p < .001$). Awareness of credential recognition policies was also significant (OR = 1.88, 95% CI [1.30, 2.71], $p = .001$). Prior experience had a notable effect: families whose children had participated in an overseas study tour were 2.44 times more likely to hold positive attitudes (OR = 2.44, 95% CI [1.60, 3.72], $p < .001$). Household income showed a non-linear pattern: the 200,000–500,000 RMB group was significantly more positive than the reference group (OR = 1.47, $p = .038$), but the above-500,000 RMB group was not (OR = 1.39, $p = .233$). Neither the parental information channel nor parental overseas travel experience reached significance.

A supplementary analysis merits attention: parents who scored highest on credential-related concerns also proved the most responsive to policy information.

Among this subgroup, 78.3% indicated that their acceptance of Southeast Asian study abroad would rise substantially if credential recognition processes were made fully transparent. Safety and political stability concerns, though ranked third overall at 41.2%, were diffuse, shaped mainly by media narratives and peer conversation rather than by institutional information, and therefore less tractable via targeted policy response.

4.5 Primary Concerns

Two concerns dominated the parental profile. Credential recognition, cited by 63.5% of parents, led the list, followed closely by post-return employability at 54.8%. These are functionally linked concerns, both reflecting anxiety about outcomes after the child returns home. Lower down the ranking were safety and political stability (41.2%), language environment (32.7%), cultural adjustment (28.1%), and healthcare access (14.5%).

4.6 Study Tour Demand and Its Relationship to Study Abroad Intentions

More than half of the sample (54.8%) indicated willingness to send a child on a Southeast Asian study tour within the next two years. Budget preferences clustered tightly: 77% of respondents indicated a ceiling between 8,000 and 15,000 RMB, and the typical preferred duration was 7 to 10 days. Thailand and Singapore were the two most preferred destinations for study tours, though Thailand's share in the study tour rankings (31.2%) exceeded its share in full-degree study abroad rankings (27.8%), consistent with its reputation for tour-friendliness and lower program costs.

When asked about preferred study tour themes, respondents ranked language immersion (42.7%), historical and cultural exploration (38.4%), nature and science programs (29.1%), and arts workshops (22.3%). The leading position of language immersion echoes the finding in Section 4.3 that language-related considerations carry special weight in Sichuan families' educational thinking.

Students whose families had already sent them on a Southeast Asian study tour were considerably more likely than non-tour peers to consider the region for a full degree abroad (68.5% vs. 42.1%). Mediation analysis shows that this association traced primarily to a single channel: parents whose children had toured came away with greater knowledge of Southeast Asian higher education, and it was that knowledge, rather than any boost in confidence about the child's capacity for independent living, that drove the effect. Study tours thus function as a cognitive onramp that helps families cross the awareness threshold identified in Section 4.4.

5. DISCUSSION

The finding that 60.1% of Sichuan parents are willing to consider Southeast Asian study abroad challenges the prevailing assumption that Chinese families in non-coastal provinces remain strongly oriented toward Western destinations. This acceptance level substantially exceeds the pre-study estimate of 30–40%, suggesting that academic and policy discourse may be lagging behind actual attitudinal shifts in the population.

The three-tier destination structure places Singapore in a distinct evaluative category, separate from Malaysia and Thailand. Treating Southeast Asia as a homogeneous destination obscures the fundamentally different frameworks that families apply to different countries. Interview data show that parents assess Singapore against the reference group of Australia and New Zealand, while Malaysia and Thailand are assessed against domestic second-tier universities augmented by the perceived value-added of international exposure. These are two distinct decision logics operating under a single geographic label, and conflating them in research or policy design carries practical costs.

The prominence of language-related factors in the Sichuan sample extends previous findings on study abroad motivation. The 39.7% parental preference for language programs, compared to rates typically reported in eastern urban samples, likely reflects Sichuan's emerging role in China's southward economic corridor. For English-major families in particular, Southeast Asian destinations offer a combination of English-medium instruction and proximity to ASEAN markets that Western destinations cannot replicate. Language-related motivations for Southeast Asian study abroad are thus not merely practical but are embedded in families' evolving economic geography.

The language dimension intersects with the tour-to-degree conversion path. Within the subset of parents who listed language programs as their preferred field of study, those whose children had already taken a Southeast Asian study tour were 3.1 times more likely to hold positive study abroad attitudes than those whose children had not. This multiplicative effect points to study tours being especially effective demand-generators when they incorporate structured language immersion, giving families a preview of the language learning environment a full degree program would offer.

Parental knowledge emerged as the strongest predictor of positive attitudes (OR = 3.52), with direct policy implications. Among every predictor measured, knowledge is the most amenable to targeted intervention, and the parallel finding on study tours, which function as an information-bridging mechanism rather than a confidence-builder for children's independence, points in the same direction. Study tour program

design should therefore build in explicit informational components aimed at parents: post-tour briefings, virtual campus tours of destination universities, and graduate employment tracking data.

Household incomes above 500,000 RMB showed no significant positive effect on attitudes, confirming that the shift toward Southeast Asia is primarily a middle-income phenomenon. Wealthier families retain access to traditional Western destinations and have not developed a stronger preference for the region. This income-stratified pattern implies that Sichuan households earning 100,000–500,000 RMB per year, approximately 58% of the sampled population, constitute the primary demand segment for Southeast Asian study abroad.

These findings complicate the traditional push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) in two related ways. First, the model treats destination choice as primarily driven by country-level pull factors, yet the Sichuan data show that families do not evaluate Southeast Asia as a single destination. Lumping Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand together under one pull-factor label obscures the decision logic that families actually employ. Second, the strong predictive power of parental knowledge (OR = 3.52) suggests that many families are not choosing against Southeast Asia after a reasoned evaluation, they simply lack the information to evaluate in the first place. Missing information functions less like a push or pull factor and more like a barrier to entry into the decision process itself, a dimension the original model does not capture.

6. CONCLUSION

This study mapped the demand for Southeast Asian study abroad and study tour programs among Chinese university students and their parents in Sichuan Province. Parental acceptance of such programs proved substantially higher than prior work had assumed, with the middle-income bracket forming the core of receptive households. Destination preferences clustered in a three-tier structure dominated by Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, though each country entered families' evaluations through a distinct reference framework. Language-related considerations carried disproportionate weight in the Sichuan sample, mirroring the province's position within China's southward economic corridor. Prior study tour participation was positively linked with subsequent study abroad intentions, with the effect flowing through an information-bridging mechanism that raised parental awareness of Southeast Asian higher education.

Several practical implications follow from these findings. Institutions recruiting Sichuan students would do better to emphasize credential recognition transparency and concrete language-related career pathways than to rely on generic cultural-proximity

messaging. On the policy side, a searchable database of credential recognition status, indexed by country, institution, and field, would speak directly to the top concern surfaced in this study. For the study tour industry, the evidence makes a case for moving away from purely experiential program designs toward ones that package structured informational components aimed at parents.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The sample was drawn from a single province and did not cover adult learners, vocational education students, or ethnic minority populations in western Sichuan. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference regarding the relationship between study tours and later study abroad decisions. Self-reported attitudinal measures also carry the usual risk of social desirability bias. Future work would benefit from multi-province samples, longitudinal designs tracking how attitudes convert into behavior over time, and closer examination of how institutional agents, particularly study abroad agencies, shape family decision-making in practice.

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