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Factors Influencing International Students from Third-World Countries Studying in China: A Case Study of a Coastal Marine University

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Abstract: Cultivating maritime professionals is vital for the advancement of ocean engineering. With the continuous development of China's offshore engineering technology and higher education in recent years, an increasing number of international students are choosing to study at China's maritime institutions. This study examines a sample from marine colleges and universities in a specific region of China to identify the key factors influencing students from third-world countries to pursue education in China. It analyzes whether these institutions meet international students' needs and evaluates their overall study experiences. The subjects include international students from third-world countries enrolled in majors such as marine engineering, marine science, and shipping technology. Through questionnaires and data analysis, the study explores students' motivations, expectations, experiences, and challenges. Findings indicate that China's advanced technology and high-quality educational resources are primary attractions. Economic development also offers career opportunities for international students. However, language barriers and cultural adaptation remain significant challenges. Additionally, some students report financial pressures, with living costs being a crucial factor in their decision to study abroad. This research provides valuable insights for institutions and policymakers to enhance support services, improve study experiences, and bolster China's appeal as a study destination.

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1. Introduction

The ocean is abundant in resources [1,2], making the cultivation of marine-related professionals essential for advancing the research, development, and utilization of these resources. In recent years, with China's comprehensive national strength steadily increasing, the country has emerged as a global leader in ocean-related fields such as marine science, marine engineering, and aquaculture [3-5]. Concurrently, China's higher education system has been flourishing, with significant improvements in the quality of education [6,7]. Against the backdrop of globalization, cross-border educational exchanges and talent mobility have become focal points for many nations. China actively promotes international educational cooperation, attracting a substantial number of international students, particularly from developing countries, and making notable contributions to advancing global educational equity and connectivity. Likewise, locally distinctive marine-focused universities and colleges have also drawn international students from these regions.

Si and Zhang conducted a comprehensive review of marine engineering education in non-native English-speaking countries, identifying a strong correlation between language and cultural differences, economic development levels, accessibility to advancements in marine engineering, and the overall standard of marine engineering in those nations [8]. Zhang et al. proposed a four-dimensional cultivation model designed to enhance the training of applied and innovative talents in inland waterway ship and marine engineering. Their findings demonstrated that significant improvements in students' professional knowledge, practical skills, and overall competency ultimately lead to better employment outcomes and higher job satisfaction among graduates [9].

Singaravelu et al. examined the career development behaviours of Asian international students, non-Asian international students, and domestic students, focusing on career certainty and the environmental factors influencing their choices. Their study revealed no significant differences in career certainty between these groups but highlighted distinct influences from family, school counsellors, and friends. A positive correlation was noted specifically for Asian international students between career certainty and their willingness to persist in their studies [10].

Mansfield et al. explored student expectations and perceptions of foreign higher education programs in China, emphasizing the need to understand selection criteria and gender differences in decision-making to develop effective internationalization strategies for foreign universities [11]. Ahmad and Shah investigated the growing trend of international students choosing China as a study destination, emphasizing that a combination of academic quality, cultural immersion, and economic opportunities makes China highly attractive to international students [12].

Gao and De highlighted that China is the third most popular destination for international students globally, while also pointing out existing challenges in further increasing international student enrolment [13]. Yin and Zong examined the impact of International Student Mobility (ISM) on scientific research in China, revealing that the presence of international students significantly enhances the production of foreign-related publications [14].

The aforementioned studies have thoroughly analyzed the factors influencing the attraction of foreign students to China, including economic development, advancements in science and technology, supportive policies, and the quality of higher education institutions. However, there remains a gap in research on the specific factors influencing local institutions, particularly those offering specialized educational programs, in attracting international students.

To address this gap, this paper investigates the factors affecting the ability of regional local institutions to attract international students. Using a random sampling method, 500 international students from sea-related institutions in a coastal region of China were selected for the study. The research explores these students' motivations for choosing their institutions, the challenges they face, and the support systems available to them. The findings not only provide local marine institutions with valuable insights to better understand and address the needs of international students but also offer a reference point for national and other higher education institutions in formulating policies for international students. Moreover, the study contributes to advancing transnational educational cooperation and lays a foundation for the cultivation of talent in developing and third-world countries. It also provides inspiration for foreign student study abroad education programs at local maritime university institutions around the world.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

2.1 Research object

The term "Third World countries" was first introduced by French economist Alfred Sauvy in 1952 to describe nations that were aligned with neither the United States (representing the capitalist bloc) nor the Soviet Union (representing the socialist bloc) during the Cold War. Specifically, it referred to countries that were not part of either camp, often characterized by economic underdevelopment and limited influence in international politics. Over time, the term has evolved into a synonym for developing countries, particularly those with relatively low levels of economic and social development. These countries typically share common traits such as low income levels, limited industrialization, high poverty rates, and underdeveloped infrastructure [15,16].

For students from these countries, studying in China represents not only an educational choice but also a crucial pathway for personal growth and improving their quality of life. As a result, their motivations and the driving factors behind their decisions often exhibit unique characteristics. Local Chinese institutions, established and managed by local governments or

education departments, differ from national key universities and research-intensive institutions. While they may have comparatively fewer research resources, less prominent faculty, and lower academic reputations, they hold significant developmental potential driven by local economic growth and educational reforms.

In particular, local marine institutions, which specialize in maritime disciplines, possess distinct advantages in developing programs with strong maritime characteristics. Consequently, these institutions may attract international students based on a unique set of selection factors compared to other higher education institutions in China.

2.2 Research problem

What are the key factors influencing students' decision to study at regional marine local institutions in China? This is the primary question explored in this paper. The study also examines whether these regional institutions effectively meet the needs of students from third-world countries pursuing education in China. Additionally, it investigates the overall experiences of international students during their studies in China.

2.3 Research hypothesis

Based on the analysis of the research object and the formulation of the research problem, this paper presents several research hypotheses, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Research hypothesis.

Impact factors	Research hypothesis
Low cost	H1: The low tuition fees and cost of living at regional universities have a positive impact on international students from developing and underdeveloped countries coming to China.
Language adaptation	H2: The introduction of English-medium courses in marine programs at local marine institutions has a positive impact on international students from developing and underdeveloped countries.
Specialized Courses	H3: The establishment of specialized courses with an oceanic focus has had a positive impact on the development of international students from third world countries coming to China.
Location and environment	H4: The climate, culture, social environment and safety of the school's location have a positive impact on international students from developing and underdeveloped countries.
Economic support	H5: Scholarships and other financial assistance for international students in China have a positive impact on Chinese students from third world countries.
Career development	H6: The linkage of local marine institutions with the maritime industry and the abundance of internship and employment opportunities have a positive impact on international students from third world countries coming to China.

2.4 Research methodology

The scope of this paper includes 500 incoming international students from developing countries at a local marine-related institution in China. The sample size is calculated using the sample proportion formula as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p(1-p)}{E^2} \tag{1}$$

Where N is the total population size, Z is the Z-value corresponding to a 95% confidence level (approximately 1.96), p is the estimated proportion of the feature in the overall population (using a conservative value of 0.5), and E is the acceptable margin of error. Based on this formula, the required sample size n is calculated to be approximately 384. Therefore, 384 samples were randomly selected for analysis in this study.

3. Investigation and analysis

3.1 Distribution of international students coming to China

Figure 1 demonstrates the age distribution of international students coming to China in the sample. Based on the sample data, the confidence interval of the sample is calculated according to equation (2).

$$Confidence\ Interval = \bar{x} \pm Z \frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{n}} \tag{2}$$

Here, A represents the sample standard deviation, n is the sample size, and the confidence interval is (27, 29), rounded to the nearest integer. Based on the data analysis of the age distribution of international students at a local marine-related institution in China, the average age of international students is 28.39 years. Most students are concentrated within this range, and the age distribution approximates a normal distribution. However, there are relatively few students in the age groups of 15-19 years and over 45 years. Notably, there is a significant increase in the number of students aged 24-23, which may be related to their academic or career planning needs. Additionally, older students may find programs with practical applications more appealing. The fact that many local Chinese marine-related institutions are located in developed coastal areas provides more practical opportunities, which aligns with this trend.

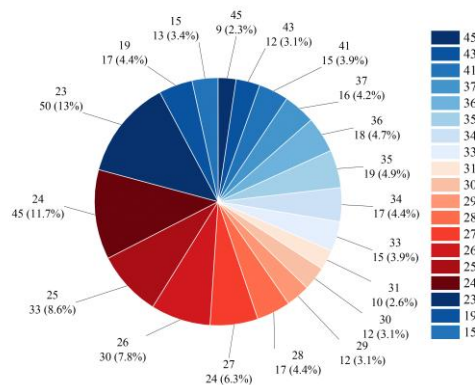


Figure 1. Age distribution of international students coming to China.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of source countries for incoming international students. According to the survey data, international students from third-world countries are influenced by a range of factors when selecting local marine-related institutions in China. The data shows that students come from diverse regions, including Africa, Asia, and Oceania, with a notable predominance of African countries (e.g., Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya), likely reflecting China's educational cooperation and growing influence in Africa. Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines exhibit a stronger tendency to send students to China due to geographical proximity and cultural similarities. While the numbers from Oceania (e.g., Fiji) are smaller, they still highlight China's appeal in the global education market.

The distribution of international students is relatively balanced, with the majority of countries sending between 12 and 20 students. However, some countries, such as Indonesia, South Africa, and Fiji, have a higher number of students, suggesting a stronger demand for education or greater educational cooperation with China. Key influencing factors include economic conditions, educational demand, geographic and cultural proximity, as well as China's government policies on educational assistance and scholarships. Additionally, the appeal of marine-related fields, such as marine engineering and aquaculture, may play a significant role in attracting international students to relevant institutions.

In conclusion, the motivations driving international students to pursue their studies in China are closely linked to economic development, educational collaboration, cultural ties, and the diverse educational opportunities offered by Chinese institutions.

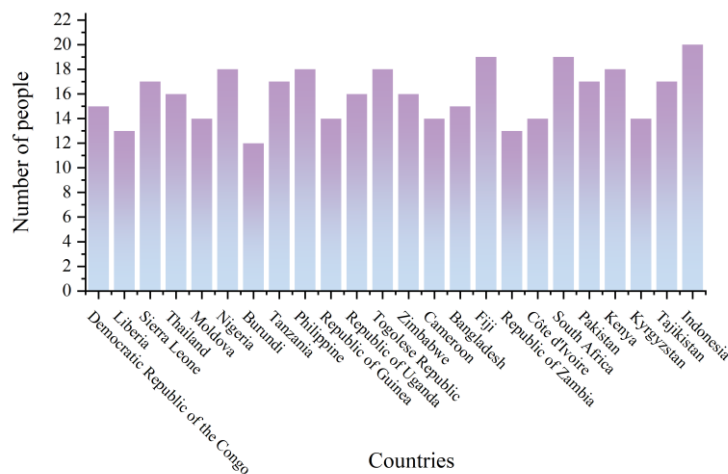


Figure 2. Distribution of Chinese students by country of origin.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of international students in China by subject area and degree level. The survey data highlights notable trends in the subject areas and degree levels pursued by international students from Third World countries at Chinese maritime-related institutions.

In terms of subject areas, Ocean Engineering, Aquaculture, and Marine Science are the most popular disciplines, attracting 59, 57, and 51 international students, respectively.

These fields are of global significance, especially in developing countries, due to the critical role of marine resource development and environmental protection in economic growth. Ocean Engineering, as a leading discipline, has broad international applications and is closely aligned with China's strong presence in this field. Aquaculture and Marine Science also reflect the growing demand for professionals in countries with abundant coastal and inland waters, covering essential areas like marine resource management, scientific research, and technological advancement.

In contrast, disciplines like Harbor and River Engineering and Navigation Technology, attracting 44 and 39 students respectively, are relatively less popular. This could be due to their more applied nature and regional focus, making them less attractive overall. Marine Electronics & Electrical and Marine Power Engineering show moderate appeal, with 44 and 45 students, indicating a demand for these fields in certain countries, though they are not as universally sought after as the leading disciplines.

Regarding degree levels, the largest group of international students is at the undergraduate level, comprising 134 students (45% of the total). Marine Engineering (20) and Ship Power Engineering (19) are particularly favored at this level, likely due to their practical applicability and the need for technical talent in countries with limited resources and environmental protection. At the master's level, 131 students (44% of the total) were enrolled, with Aquaculture (22) and Marine Engineering (21) being the most popular disciplines, reflecting a demand for deeper academic study and technical expertise. At the doctoral level, 119 students (40% of the total) were enrolled, with Marine Science (17) and Harbor and River Engineering (17) being the most attractive disciplines. These fields are linked to high-end research and global issues such as environmental protection and sustainable development, requiring senior scientific talent.

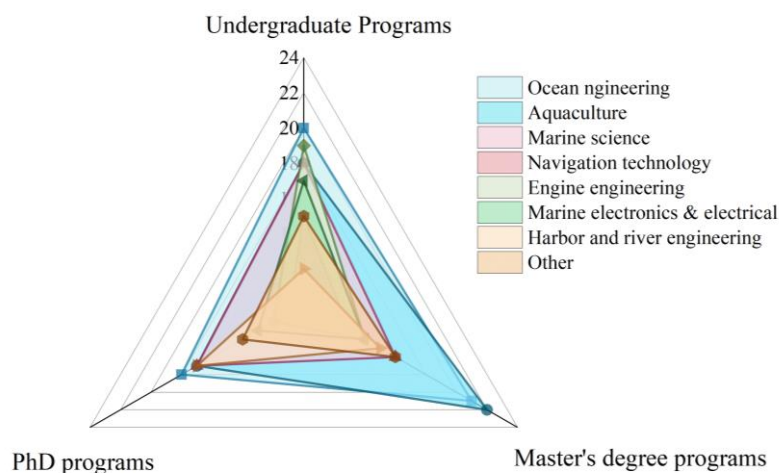


Figure 3. Distribution of Chinese students by country of origin.

Taken together, disciplines closely linked to the development of marine resources, such as Marine Engineering, Aquaculture, and Marine Science, attract significant interest from international students across all degree levels. Marine Engineering, in particular, stands out, reflecting the recognition and growing demand for China's distinctive expertise in maritime fields. In contrast, disciplines like Port and River Engineering and Navigation Technology are more popular at the undergraduate level. This may be due to their practical and region-

specific nature, making them suitable for targeted engineering applications and technical training.

At the doctoral level, the higher percentage of students choosing Port and River Engineering indicates a strong demand for advanced research and technology development in this field, drawing international students with an interest in academic inquiry. Potential influencing factors include the economic development level of each country, the demand for marine resource development, the intensity of educational cooperation, and China's strengths in scientific research within these fields. Together, these factors shape the trend of international students opting to study at China's marine-related institutions.

3.2 Analysis of the reasons for coming to China

Figure 4 illustrates the various factors driving international students from third-world countries to choose to study in China. These drivers include China's technological advantages in fields such as Marine Engineering and Aquaculture, the international competitiveness of Chinese degrees, the cultural appeal, and the growth potential of the Chinese economy. China's leadership in marine engineering technology, advanced aquaculture practices, and harbor construction has become a key factor in attracting large numbers of international students. These fields are not only highly technical but also closely tied to global sustainable development and resource management, making them particularly attractive to students from countries focused on resource development and marine industries.

In addition, the international competitiveness of Chinese degrees is a significant draw for students. Many international students believe that obtaining a Chinese degree will enhance their competitiveness in the global job market, particularly in science, technology, and engineering fields, which offer ample career development opportunities.

Additionally, many students choose China due to their interest in Chinese culture and the need to learn the Chinese language. China's long history, rich cultural heritage, and its increasingly internationalized economic environment make it an attractive destination for students seeking to broaden their knowledge. For students aspiring to build a future career in China or in industries related to China, learning Chinese and integrating into Chinese culture have become essential goals of their study abroad experience. During their time in China, international students not only aim to enhance their academic skills but also hope to strengthen their cross-cultural competitiveness in the globalized workforce by engaging deeply with Chinese culture.

Regarding the rewards of studying in China, the vast majority of international students expect to acquire both knowledge and practical skills, particularly in specialized fields such as marine engineering, aquaculture, and other technologies. These skills are seen as crucial for building a strong foundation for their future career development. Additionally, many students recognize that studying in China offers more than just academic benefits; it also provides valuable cultural and linguistic experiences. This aspect is especially important for those who plan to work in China or pursue careers related to China, as it helps them adapt to the local environment and strengthen their professional prospects in a China-oriented context.

Post-graduation plans among international students show a diverse range of intentions.

Many students plan to continue their studies and pursue higher degrees, particularly in high-tech fields such as marine engineering and aquaculture. Their goal is to further enhance their skills and make contributions to academia or scientific research through advanced studies and research work. At the same time, a significant number of students aspire to work in China after graduation, especially in the country’s rapidly growing high-tech and engineering sectors. China’s fast-paced development and vast market demand provide abundant job opportunities, and many students aim to secure skilled positions to gain practical experience and lay the groundwork for their future careers.

Some international students intend to return to their home countries after graduation, with the goal of applying their knowledge and skills to the development of marine resources and fisheries management. They hope to address practical challenges in their home countries and contribute to the growth of related industries. Finally, a portion of international students harbor entrepreneurial aspirations. They plan to leverage the knowledge and skills acquired in China to start their own businesses, particularly in fields such as marine engineering and aquaculture.

Taken together, the motivations and expectations of international students choosing to study in China are shaped by multiple, interconnected factors. These include recognition of China’s technological advantages in fields such as marine engineering, a strong interest in Chinese culture and language, and the appeal of China’s rapidly growing economy and employment opportunities. These factors collectively drive their decision to choose China as a study destination, influencing their diverse plans for future academic and career development. This trend reflects China’s increasing significance in the global education, research, and employment markets.

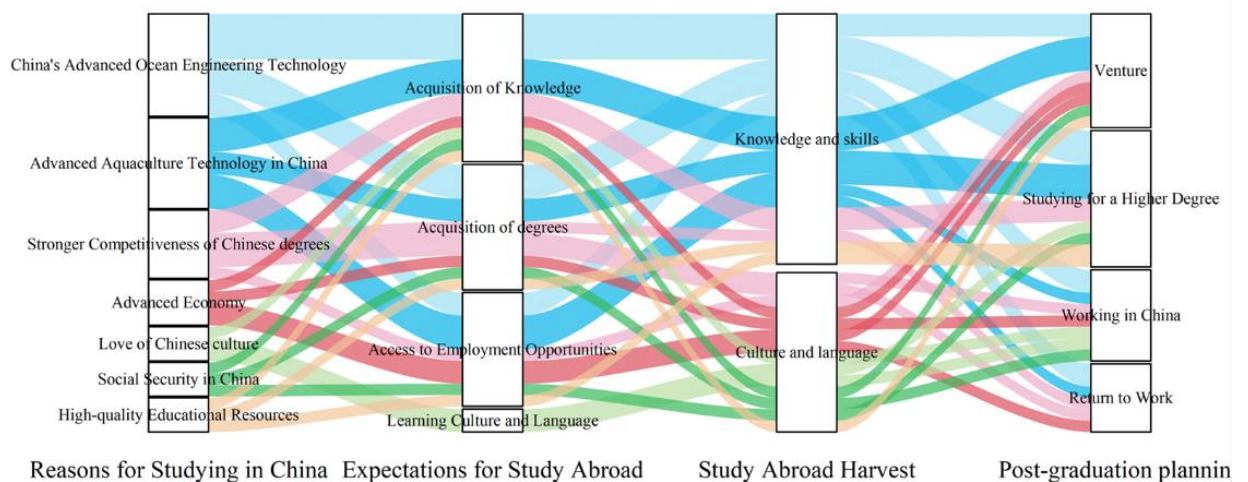


Figure 4. Factors related to the choice of study abroad for international students coming to China.

Figure 5, the word cloud diagram, illustrates the impressions of international students about the Chinese education system based on the sample. Overall, international students have positive perceptions of the Chinese education system in several key areas. First, many international students recognize China's significant advantages in "advanced technology,"

particularly in marine engineering and navigation technology, both in terms of academic knowledge and practical applications. This drives their decision to study in China, where they expect to acquire advanced skills in these fields. Second, China's "advanced economic" development is highly regarded. International students are optimistic about the career and employment opportunities offered by China's status as the world's second-largest economy, which boosts their confidence in their future prospects. Additionally, international students value China's "high-quality education" system. They look forward to gaining a solid academic foundation and practical experience, especially in science, technology, and engineering disciplines, which are viewed as key to their personal and professional growth.

In terms of daily life, international students also appreciate China's "social security" system, which ensures their basic needs are met during their studies. The abundance of opportunities available in China has led many international students to believe that they can not only gain academic knowledge but also expand their career prospects. Furthermore, China's unique "cultural heritage" and "interesting" historical background have piqued the curiosity of international students, making them eager to live here. They view studying in China as not only an academically enriching experience but also an opportunity to immerse themselves in a rich cultural environment.

Finally, international students praised the "diversified" and "favorable" educational environment in China, noting that the open and inclusive education system helps broaden their horizons and exposes them to diverse ideas and cultures, enriching their study abroad experience. Overall, international students believe that China offers not only advanced technology, economic, and educational resources but also a wide range of cultural and professional opportunities, making them excited and optimistic about their study abroad experience in China.



Figure 5. Impressions of international students on China's education system.

3.3 Analysis of the overall experience of incoming students at school

This study explores the overall experience of international students studying and living in China through a sample survey, with a particular focus on the challenges they face, their intentions to stay and work in China after graduation, and their opinions on how to improve the support services and educational programs offered by Chinese universities to

international students from developing and underdeveloped countries. The survey questions in the questionnaire focused on the difficulties international students encounter in both their academic and daily life, and encouraged them to provide feedback to help identify areas for improvement. Figure 6 illustrates the specific problems commonly faced by international students from third-world countries in their studies and life, along with their frequency of occurrence.

According to the survey results, there are some differences in the challenges international students face in their studies and daily life in China. In terms of academics, most international students adapted well, with 48 students reporting no issues and another 48 mentioning only a few minor problems. This indicates that the majority of international students were able to integrate successfully into the Chinese academic environment, grasp the course content, and complete their studies without significant difficulty. However, 24 students reported some problems with their studies, and 26 students experienced frequent learning difficulties, which may be related to factors such as language barriers or the complexity of the coursework. Fortunately, no students reported particularly serious academic challenges, suggesting that overall, international students' academic adjustment is relatively positive.

In contrast, the challenges encountered by international students in their daily lives are more varied. While 25 students reported having no issues and 36 students mentioned only a few problems, 24 students faced some difficulties, 17 students experienced more frequent life challenges, and 14 students reported other types of problems. Language barriers and cultural differences were the main difficulties students encountered in their daily lives. Specifically, 21 students cited language issues as a barrier to daily activities, while 16 students mentioned cultural differences as an obstacle to adapting. In addition to language and cultural challenges, financial concerns were also a significant source of stress for some international students, with 15 students reporting financial pressures, which may be linked to the cost of living and the burden of tuition fees in China.

Overall, international students have generally adapted well to their studies, but they face more challenges in their daily lives, particularly in terms of language communication and cultural adaptation. To help international students better integrate into both the academic and social environment in China, universities could offer additional language support, organize cultural adaptation activities, and provide financial assistance to alleviate these challenges and reduce the pressures of studying and living in China.

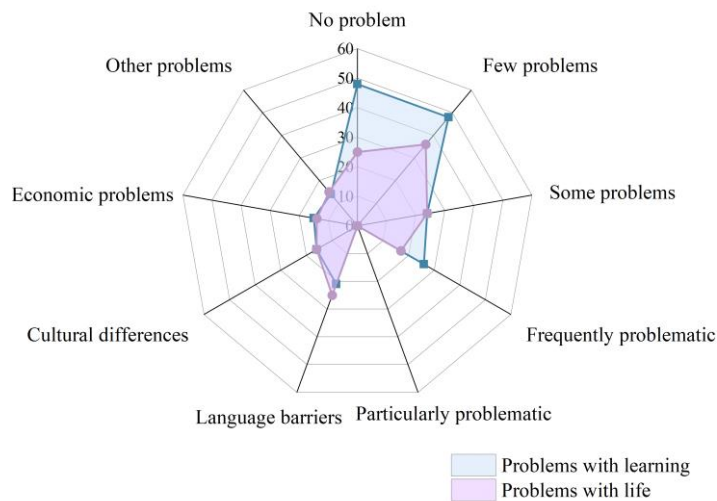


Figure 6. Factors related to the choice of study abroad for international students coming to China.

5. Conclusions

Based on a sample of marine universities in a specific region of China, this paper explores the central question: among the many factors influencing students from Third World countries in their decision to study in China, which ones play a key role in selecting a regional, marine institution? Additionally, two related questions are addressed: do these regional marine institutions meet the study abroad needs of students from Third World countries, and what is the overall experience of these students in China?

The study found that China's advantages in "advanced marine engineering technology" and "high-quality educational resources" are the most critical factors influencing students from Third World countries when choosing marine-related institutions. China's rapid development in marine science, engineering, and technology has sparked interest among international students in the academic depth and professional prospects these disciplines offer. China's innovations and scientific achievements in these fields motivate international students to seek advanced knowledge and skills through China's education system, which will enhance their career development in related industries. Additionally, many international students highlight the facilities and faculty of Chinese higher education institutions—especially in marine, shipping, fisheries, and environmental engineering—as major factors in their decision to pursue further studies in these institutions, thanks to the abundant practical opportunities and research resources available.

Secondly, economic development plays a crucial role in international students' decision to study in China. As the world's second-largest economy, China offers not only advanced technical education but also a wealth of employment opportunities. Many international students prioritize countries with rapid economic growth when selecting study destinations, as these nations offer broader career prospects. China's robust economic engine attracts multinational corporations and international organizations, creating a wide range of job opportunities, particularly in industries such as maritime, engineering, and construction.

Consequently, international students generally believe that studying in China will open doors to both academic advancement and career development.

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Regarding the overall study experience of international students in China, the survey indicates that the majority of students have a positive view of China's social security system, cultural heritage, and diverse educational environment. The provision of medical care, social welfare, and campus safety management has given international students better protection in their daily lives. Additionally, many students have expressed a strong interest in China's long history, rich cultural heritage, and increasingly diverse social environment, with a willingness to learn more about these aspects. Particularly in local marine institutions, students not only gain professional knowledge but also participate in cultural exchange activities, which help broaden their perspectives and foster international thinking.

However, international students continue to face certain challenges in their daily lives, particularly in terms of finances. Although the cost of living in China is relatively lower than in many Western countries, tuition fees and living expenses remain a significant burden for international students from economically disadvantaged countries. Some students have reported experiencing considerable financial pressure, particularly due to high tuition fees and the limited availability of scholarships at certain regional marine institutions. Therefore, institutions and the government could further enhance support for international students facing financial difficulties by offering additional scholarships and bursary opportunities.

In general, local Chinese marine institutions have attracted a significant number of international students from third-world countries due to their academic strengths in marine science, technology, and engineering, strong economic appeal, and high-quality educational resources. However, despite the favorable academic environment, challenges in life adaptation persist. To better meet the needs of international students, especially in areas such as language support, cultural adaptation, and financial assistance, maritime-related institutions should further optimize their services. This will help international students overcome cultural differences and financial pressures, ensuring they can successfully complete their studies and enjoy a positive study abroad experience. Furthermore, with the continued development of China's maritime sector, international students seek greater career opportunities, particularly in the maritime industry and international cooperation programs.

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