

A Path from English-speaking Countries to English Programs in Japan: Factors Influencing Chinese Students' Choices

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1. Introduction

The number of English courses has been increasing in Japan. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has explicitly stated that the measures taken to realize the goal of 300,000 international students will be 'to develop universities centres for internationalization (G30 project)' and to 'increase courses conducted only in English' (MEXT, 2012:17). There are two reasons for the increasing implementation of English courses in Japan. From a macro perspective, implementing English courses can empower universities, promote the globalization of universities, and make universities more attractive. From a micro perspective, English courses can help Japanese students to acquire English proficiency and help international students to feel at ease studying in Japan.

The philosophy behind English courses is English Medium Instruction (EMI) – the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English in countries or regions where English is not the dominant language (Macaro et al., 2018). Scholars have identified several driving forces behind the internationalization of Japanese higher education, such as improving university rankings, improving English proficiency, internationalizing education, nurturing global human resources by using English at universities to bolster domestic students' career prospects, improving the domestic labour market and the performance of Japanese companies, and reinforcing the mobility of international students and faculty members (Iino, 2018; Aizawa and McKinley, 2020; Macaro et al., 2018; Cameron and Galloway, 2019; Galloway and Curle, 2022; Yonezawa and Shimmi, 2017).

However, many problems remain unsolved, such as language-related issues. EMI students often do not receive sufficient education on content due to their lack of English proficiency (Hellekjær, 2010), regarded as a major obstacle (Chapple, 2015; Hu et al., 2014). One approach to increasing students' chances of success in EMI programs is to support the growth of English language proficiency (Rose et al., 2020).

Furthermore, due to the failure to include criteria for instructors' English proficiency in EMI guidelines (Aizawa and Rose, 2019), instructors' limited linguistic ability may also prevent them from using anecdotes or colloquial expressions in their courses (Bradford, 2012). This disadvantage may hinder the success of EMI (Aizawa and McKinley, 2020). Consequently, some students believe their teachers' limited English abilities prevent them from teaching effectively (Galloway et al., 2017).

Despite the disadvantages of EMI programs in Japan, the number of enrolled international students is increasing significantly. For example, MEXT initiated the Top Global University Project (TGUP) in 2014. Its leading performance indicators are 'to increase the number of classes, start foreign languages' and 'to increase the ratio of international students in the total student population' in Japan (MEXT, 2018:2). TGUP's midterm report states that the number of English courses increased by 2.5 times from 2013 to 2019. The number of international students enrolled in English courses also increased by 1.7 times over this period.

International students who have studied and graduated with a degree from English-speaking countries are notable in EMI programs. They have experienced immersive English-speaking environments and received lectures from mainly native English speakers, considered ideal EMI instructors (Galloway and Ruegg, 2022). Despite this, they still chose Japan as a study destination. Their motivations are vague and underresearched. Why are they willing to study in another country in English even though they face the risk of less proficient instructors and less effective teaching?

EMI involves more than adopting English-medium courses and considering international circumstances; it may have various attractions for international students. This article aims to understand how Chinese students decide to move from English-speaking countries to EMI programs in Japan and elucidate the factors influencing their choices. Understanding their choices will help to promote a better environment for international students and improve EMI in tertiary education.

However, 'international students' are a complicated group because they may have different backgrounds and life trajectories influenced by their own cultures. Their motivations for enrolling in EMI programs may also vary. Therefore, this research will focus on only one group, Chinese students, who constitute the largest group of international students in Japan. Considering the context of Chinese culture, this research will answer two research questions:

1. How do Chinese students decide to move from English-speaking countries to EMI programs in Japan?

2. What factors influence their choices?

2. Literature review

Although increasing the number of international students is central to the internationalization of Japanese higher education policy, limited research has been conducted on international students in the EMI settings in Japan (Galloway and Curle, 2022). Despite the advantages and objectives of implementing EMI from students' perspectives, it remains unclear whether the concept of internationalization attracts them and why they are choosing EMI programs. This article's literature review investigates these possible reasons from two perspectives: why Japanese students choose EMI courses in Japan and why international students choose EMI programs in Japan.

2.1 Why do Japanese students choose EMI courses in Japan?

Japanese students' motivation for taking EMI courses is English-oriented (Aizawa et al., 2020; Bradford, 2019; Galloway et al., 2020; Uchihara and Harada, 2018). For example, Chapel (2015) explored the attitudes of EMI students and discovered the limitations and problems involved with EMI courses. In his research, students (n=89) were asked to select up to three reasons for taking EMI courses. The most popular reason was to 'improve English ability' (n=74). The following were to 'make foreign friends' (n=49) and 'experience real English' (n=35).

Sugimoto (2020) compared the experiences of students enrolled in two EMI programs (n=71, n=93) and found that students enrolled in EMI classes primarily aimed to improve their English skills and increase their competitiveness in the global job market. The study results indicated that the most effective reasons were 'I was interested in the subjects' and 'I like courses taught by English native speakers.'

2.2 Why do international students choose EMI programs in Japan?

International students' desire to study in Japanese EMI programs is primarily motivated by the international prosperity associated with Japan's society. For example, Shimauchi (2014) studied EMI international students in Japan (n=12) and Korea (n=13) and found national and regional push and pull factors. National push factors included dissatisfaction with education in home countries and the intention to escape from the life routine. In contrast, national pull factors consisted of scholarship, connections with people in recipient countries, and interests in the recipient countries' culture and society. Furthermore, many students showed interest in the region.

Based on Shimauchi's (2014) work, Nemoto (2017) used Trajectory Equifinality Modelling (TEM), which is the main approach adopted in this article, to discover the push and pull factors of Asian students (n=4) choosing EMI programs in Japan. Asian students' reasons for choosing EMI programs included:

- Attraction of studying abroad;
- Desire for English education;
- Advice from Japanese friends;
- Lack of Japanese ability;
- University's reputation;
- Beliefs about life after entrance (Experience European atmosphere in Asia);

The use of English in EMI attracts many international students but is not as crucial for Japanese students. Instead, Japanese students consider English ability as a route toward learning rather than an objective. They consider social factors and trends as essential determinants.

Quantitative research has also been conducted on this topic. Galloway and Curle (2022) addressed students' (n=102) incentives and attitudes toward studying English in Japanese universities, examining why international students choose English teaching programs in Japan and international students' attitudes towards English teaching programs in Japan. They identified the primary motivation for enrolment in EMI programs as 'an interest in learning Japanese and visiting Japan.' Other motivations included a desire to improve their Japanese proficiency, a desire to study in Japan, an awareness of the role of English as the world's lingua franca, the quality of the program, and the opportunity to improve English proficiency.

Rakhshandehroo and Ivanova (2020) researched 137 international students from two Japanese universities to understand the contexts and conditions contributing to students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their on-campus experiences. The reasons for choosing EMI programs in Japan included scholarship opportunities (n=71), the high quality of the research fields (n=53), the attraction to Japanese culture (n=51) and having a connection in Japan (n=14). However, neither scholarship nor research fields were reported as essential reasons for participants.

Shimauchi (2014) also indicated that studying in English-speaking countries is the first choice of many students who want to be educated in English. However, many students may be unable to do so due to financial problems, high English requirements in English-speaking countries, students' desire to focus on academia (they assumed there would be parties and distractions in the US), and English-speaking countries'

accessibility to Asian countries. Some interviewees declared their expectations to study in English-speaking countries after graduating and considered EMI programs in Asia as a way to become accustomed to English-speaking environments.

However, some students study in English-speaking countries and then come to Japan. No research has been conducted on the factors influencing this choice. This study will fill this research gap by examining these students' motivations.

3. Research methods

3.1 Methodology

Following Nemoto's (2017) approach, this research applied TEM to capture and describe Chinese students' life trajectories toward EMI programs. TEM is a cultural psychology methodology that attempts to depict individual transformations in relation to historical, social, and cultural backgrounds within an irreversible time (Yasuda and Sato, 2012). The final state of the individual's life may be reached through different routes, referred to as equifinality.

In TEM, the researcher needs to define the Equifinality Point (EFP) of interests in the process, for example, beginning college or getting married. In this study, The EFP is entering EMI programs in Japan. However, this EFP is merely one aspect of an individual's life. Complementing this, polarized EFP refers to deciding not to begin an EMI program in Japan. While progressing toward an EFP, each individual experiences phases and undergoes trajectories that may or may not vary. Every individual experiences an Obligatory Passage Point (OPP) (Sato et al., 2009), such as leaving the country where they were previously residing. Alternative options are presented at the Bifurcation Point (BFP) (Sato et al., 2009). At this point, life courses are potentially transformed by diverging trajectories. However, the alternatives may not be actual routes; a rational BFP occurs when an individual looks back and realizes they could have had a different life course if they chose another option.

In the life course, social forces influence individuals' choices, acting as either Social Direction (SD) or Social Guidance (SG). SG is the driving force facilitating the process of EFP, while SD is the force obstructing progression toward an EFP (Yasuda et al., 2015a: 38). Either SG or SD is always stronger than the other, helping the individual to make a decision.

3.2 Participants

Researchers can use a 1/4/9 rule for participant capacity (Yasuda, 2015b). Researching one participant helps to understand the individual; researching three to five

participants helps to capture similarities and differences; researching seven to 11 participants makes a result generalizable. Based on this rule, this study examined four Chinese participants. Their details are provided in **Table 1**. This research recruited four participants aged between 20 and 30 from three popular destinations for studying abroad in China to identify similarities and difficulties. The students were taking different majors.

Table 1 Status of participants before and after coming to Japan

	Status	Before coming to Japan
Student 1 (Male)	Ph.D. student	MSc in the UK
Student 2 (Female)	MA student	MA in Canada
Student 3 (Female)	MA graduate	BA in Canada
Student 4 (Male)	MEng student	MEng in the US

3.3 Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant between June and September 2022 to examine why the students originally studied in English-speaking countries. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, after which the transcriptions were read through several times carefully.

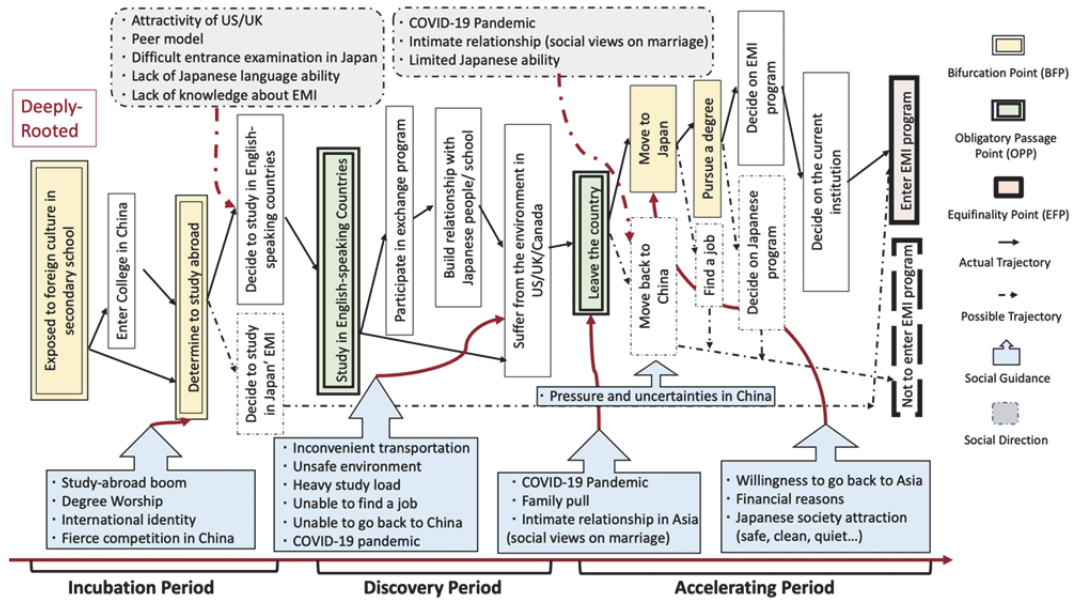
Following Arakawa et al.'s (2012) and Yasuda et al.'s (2015b) approaches to coding, the researcher first determined an irreversible timeline for each participant. All the narratives were segmented by meaning clusters. They were then labelled and positioned into the timeline. Then, similar actions, emotions, and perceptions were determined, and BFPs were clarified. After determining the possible points and actual points, the researcher determined the trajectory and checked the traceability of each interviewee.

In the next step, SDs and SGs were analyzed without being constrained by any existing framework. The researcher coded narratives sentence by sentence and found numerous factors influencing every step. The four participants had similar experiences, so the same codes were categorized and reorganized. Finally, time periods were determined.

4. Results and Analysis

Figure 1 shows the trajectory of the participants before they entered EMI programs. It shows the similarities and differences between each participant. This section will address the first research question: How do Chinese students decide to move from

Figure 1 TEM figure: Pathways before entering EMI programs



English-speaking countries to EMI programs in Japan?

‘Study in English-speaking countries’ and ‘leave the country’ were the two OPPs in this process. The irreversible time was divided into three periods: the incubation period, the discovery period, and the accelerating period. The participants’ physical and mental statuses radically changed before and after the OPP.

In the incubation period, each participant had a deep affection for Japan. Student 1 used to receive exchange students from Japan as a host family when he was in high school. He was impressed by their manner and became adapted to Japanese culture at that time. Student 2 participated in a visiting program held by her high school and had the opportunity to visit a famous factory in Japan, where she felt welcomed. The culture of Japanese companies also attracted her. Students 3 and 4 both explicitly stated that they were fascinated by Japanese culture, including its travel opportunities and animations.

Excerpt 1 (translated by the researcher):

(1) In addition, I received exchange students from Japanese high schools during my high school period. As they were living in my home, we could communicate for a long time. I learned a lot about Japanese culture, which made me very curious about it.

(2) (We had an exchange program to Japan) And then we visited a high school. We needed to change our shoes! There was a lawn and so many things. So fancy! Then we visited (a famous company) there, which made me feel very good.

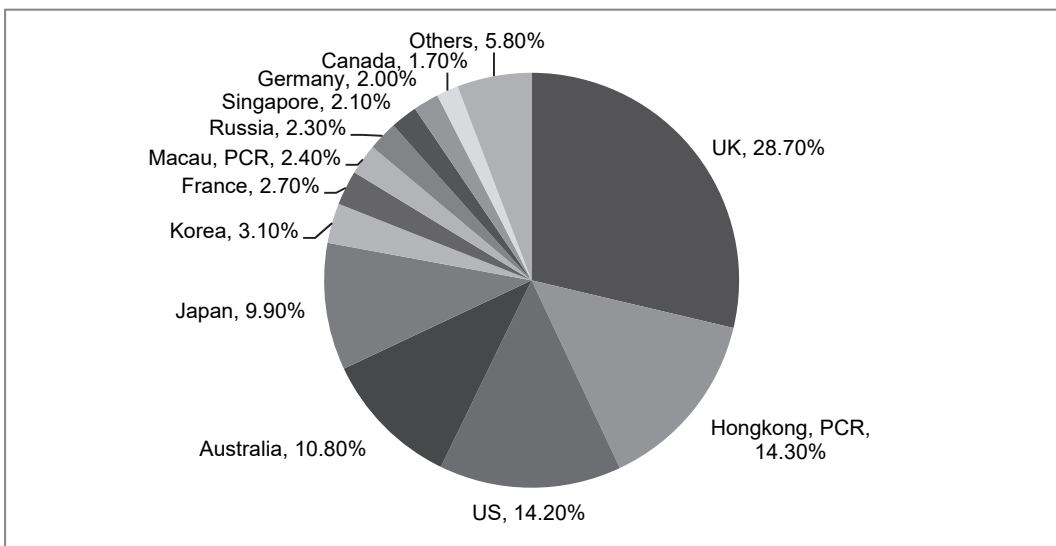
(3) In fact, I have always been interested in Japan. When I was in high school, I wanted to study abroad, but I didn't learn Japanese at that time (that's why I gave up).

(4) I have been watching Japanese animations and travelling to Japan many times and learnt Japanese by myself.

After around 12 years of preparation for the Gaokao (Chinese university entrance exam), entering college remains the primary goal in the Chinese educational system. Despite their interests in foreign cultures, only one student studied abroad; the other three attended college in mainland China. Only afterwards, while studying in college, they started considering studying abroad.

There were two SGs in this period: the 'study abroad boom' and 'degree-worship'. Domestically, 4,570,000² candidates applying for China's national graduate school entrance exam in 2022 indicated their goal of pursuing a higher degree. Furthermore, data from the Chinese Ministry of Education suggests that in 2019, there were 703,500¹ Chinese students studying abroad. This number continues to increase even after the COVID-19 pandemic. In world-class universities and first-class discipline universities, also known as the 'Double-First Class' universities, 4.8% of graduates

Figure 2 Distribution of destinations for undergraduates to study abroad in 2019 (Wang and Miao, 2021)



chose to study abroad in 2019. Additionally, 1.7% of students from other universities also chose to study abroad (Wang and Miao, 2021:64). The goals of obtaining a master's degree and studying abroad motivate Chinese students who did not go abroad during their undergraduate degree to apply for graduate school courses abroad.

After deciding to study abroad, two possible choices emerged: going to Japan or going to English-speaking countries like the US (14.2%) and the UK (28.7%), the two most popular foreign destinations for Chinese undergraduate students (Figure 2).

Many social factors acted as SDs, influencing Chinese students' decisions. For example:

Excerpt 2 (translated by the researcher):

I felt very envious of students who stayed abroad. I remember a friend of mine whose mother was a visiting scholar at Harvard University, and he spent a year in the community high school there. Although it was a normal school, it was very different. For example, they created a cell model in biology class. So, I started thinking that it was cool to study in Western countries.

Student 2 reported that she was affected by a peer model in her high school who returned from the US. She admired this student's lifestyle. The attraction of English-speaking countries outweighed her affection for Japan, and eventually, she decided to study in English-speaking countries at this stage.

The discovery period began with studying in English-speaking countries and was full of loss and self-doubt. Participants' routes differed during this period, but there were also similarities. Apart from Student 3, who graduated before the COVID-19 pandemic, the other participants faced challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic while studying abroad. Their courses were transferred online, many countries were out of control, and they were not allowed to return to China due to flight restrictions. Even though some of them had considered finding a job in an English-speaking country after graduation, the COVID-19 pandemic made this impossible. Job vacancies decreased, and domestic citizens were prioritized for the limited jobs available. Furthermore, traditional concerns surrounding inconvenient transportation and an unsafe environment, such as the prevalence of guns in the US, caused students to feel less satisfied with their experiences in the US, UK, and Canada. They were confused about the future and looked into alternative paths after graduation.

Interpersonal relationships were vital during this period. Student 3 moved to China, where she built a relationship with a Japanese student. Similarly, Student 4 undertook

a project at a Japanese university, where he was now enrolled. These connections influenced their future choices. Students 1, 2, and 4 indicated that they thought about returning at first because they wanted to see their partners and their family.

Excerpt 3 (Translated by the researcher):

- (1) I got married, and I want to stay closer to my wife.
- (2) My boyfriend was Japanese. I was thinking, why not go to Japan?
- (4) There were many objective reasons. My family and my girlfriend were in China, and I was kind of hoping to go back, but I couldn't. So, I need to go back to Asia at least.

Chinese students' path to EMI programs was accelerated after deciding to leave the country, referred to as the accelerating period. Although they had other possible choices, such as moving back to China, which some students tried, pressurized working environments and uncertainties regarding COVID-19 policies motivated them to move to Japan, an Asian country close to home with more possibilities. Notably, the students held a deep respect for Japan, which developed over many years – the so-called 'chase of an old dream.'

After deciding to go to Japan, the students looked into EMI programs. Entering university was much easier than finding a job because the students were often not required to submit an English proficiency certificate. Furthermore, they did not have to learn Japanese, even if they knew some, but not enough, for the entrance exams. Student 1 was an exception and decided to pursue a degree before moving to Japan.

The four participants shared similarities and differences in their experiences. Some factors highlighted by the students could be both SG and SD, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was the main reason most students left the US, UK, or Canada because Japan was more under control. However, the pandemic also made them doubt whether studying abroad was a good idea. They may have been unable to return to China due to the country's quarantine policy. Furthermore, some factors shifted between SG and SD, like international identity, which motivated the students to study in English-speaking countries but also in Japan.

In contrast to students who had never been to other countries, students who studied in English-speaking countries had lower expectations of instructors' English proficiency. They did not criticize their instructors' English. They appreciated it because they could concentrate on professional content and learn more from non-native speakers who spoke more slowly.

5. Discussion

This section answers the second question: What factors influence Chinese students' choices to move from English-speaking countries to EMI programs in Japan? The results significantly differ from those presented by previous research.

5.1 Pull factors

5.1.1 Asia's pull

An old Chinese by Confucius states, 'While parents are still living, it is better for the child not to go on a long sojourn.' In the era of urbanization and globalization, students and workers are moving across borders to pursue a better life. However, the traditional ideology of staying by the parents' side and prioritizing the family's well-being is rooted in Chinese culture (Peng, 2014). Chinese parents try to provide the best opportunities for their children to be educated, understand the world, and have broader horizons. However, due to the one-child policy and Chinese culture's family-oriented values, they always hope that their children will return home or at least be near them after they finish their education. Chinese students often claim that 'my parents want me back.'

Chinese students also have strong connections with their families. Due to the geographical and time difference between English-speaking countries and China, many students feel obligated to stay closer to their families in case of an emergency or when their parents need them. Therefore, several factors pull students back from English-speaking countries, including their strong willingness to 'go back to Asia', not specifically China or Japan or any other Asian countries, but at least Asia, where their family is within an accessible distance.

Intimate relationships are also an attraction but not a determinant factor. In this research, all four participants' decisions to return to Asia were affected by their partners. Similarly to the attachment to family, the pursuit of a stable relationship is also respected in China (Xiao, 2016). Therefore, Chinese students often plan for the future under family collectivist values (Quan and Si, 2010).

Socially, the value of marriage also restricts students. Younger generations are expected to get married and build a family before a certain age; otherwise, they may stigmatize their family (Luo, 2022). The push for marriage becomes stronger after around 25, the age at which most graduate students finish their education. In this research, all four participants had partners in China or Japan. They were trying to maintain a healthy relationship, but the awareness of 'self' cultivated in Western countries resulted in them refusing to give up on their own goals. After many struggles,

dilemmas, and compromises, they finally decided on a path satisfying their parents, partners, and themselves, which was returning to Asia.

5.1.2 Japan's pull

After deciding to return to Asia, Japan's national pull was a significant factor.

Japan pulled students through its soft power, including social values and cultural outputs. The participants had been connected to Japan since secondary high school, including its culture, society, and people. Their affection for Japan was rooted in their connections, which significantly influenced their choices. After graduating, they could have chosen a different path, but their past experiences with Japan played a crucial role.

Second, Japan is the most developed country in Asia, giving it an instrumental advantage. Studying in Japan was regarded as suitable for career advancement. Furthermore, families capable of funding their children to study abroad are generally well-educated and in the Chinese upper class (Wang and Miao, 2021). When considering studying abroad, the students said they preferred developed countries and indicated their intentions to immigrate to a safer, cleaner, and more prosperous environment. Japan was their first choice.

Contrasting previous research on ordinary routes, none of the four participants considered universities' rankings, reputation, and academia. Instead, they considered the experience of studying in Japan to be attractive. This focus suggests that they valued experience rather than academic achievement. Japanese universities have good reputations in academia but rank relatively low. For example, the best university in Japan, the University of Tokyo, ranked only 77 according to US news³ and 39 according to Times Higher Education⁴. For ranking-oriented students, Japan may not be a good destination. However, after obtaining a degree in the US, UK, or Canada, many students met their education expectations and were now focusing on the country that appealed to them. Therefore, Japanese EMI programs hold more social rather than academic meanings.

5.2 Push factors

5.2.1 English-speaking countries' push

Dissatisfaction with the US, UK, and Canada was the main factor pushing Chinese students to Japan's EMI programs. Due to the cultural differences between Eastern and Western countries, the participants experienced cultural shock when studying abroad. In Canada and the US, some universities are located in small villages, where it

is hard to get around if you do not drive, especially when it is snowing. The participants were not used to this environment and disliked the inconvenient transportation and weather conditions, making them more likely to leave these countries.

Frequently reported gunshots also caused safety concerns for Chinese students and their families. After COVID-19, the anti-Asia or anti-Chinese (Ho, 2021; Chiang, 2020) movements made Chinese students' life even harder. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused disorder in society. Many Asian countries required citizens to wear masks and be extremely cautious, while Western countries held different opinions on the severity of COVID-19, making Chinese students anxious about the situation.

Finally, the English ability that the participants developed in English-speaking countries contributed to their final decision to pursue EMI programs instead of other Japanese programs. Some students were not required to provide English proficiency test reports, such as TOEFL, when they applied to courses, making them more confident about studying in Japan, where their English ability is regarded as linguistic capital. Conversely, it is only seen as a basic life skill in English-speaking countries. These factors pushed the participants to leave the country and eventually pushed them to EMI programs in Japan.

5.2.2 China's push

After Chinese students were pulled back to Asia, several situations in China pushed them to Japan's EMI programs. A recent social phenomenon called *neijuan* (involution), in which meaningless competition occurs, has received significant attention in the Chinese media since 2020. The word *neijuan* deviated from its original use regarding agricultural involution after its use by Geertz (1963) and now describes the situation in China where "individuals are compelled to overwork because of the standard raised by their peers who appear to be even more hardworking" (Koetse, 2021). Students are getting better degrees but doing less compatible jobs in this environment.

This phenomenon was generated by China's social condition. The COVID-19 pandemic and socioeconomic stagnation have primarily affected the generation who graduated and was supposed to enter the job market between 2020 and 2022. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of university graduates entering the job market in 2021 reached a record high of 9.09 million and 10.76 million in 2022⁵. However, graduates' chances of finding a job that matches their education and personal expectations are slim because of the limited job vacancies compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. More graduates are reluctant to enter the labour market; instead,

they choose to pursue a further or double degree to delay their employment. Consequently, students who have studied abroad cannot adapt to the fierce competition in China, motivating them to move away to Japan.

6. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

This research has investigated why Chinese students choose EMI programs in Japan after graduating from English-speaking countries. Adopting the TEM, qualitative research on 4 participants was conducted to identify similarities and differences between their choices. The results indicated that students take EMI programs in Japan due to the Japanese context rather than the quality of EMI. Chinese students mainly come to Japan for the social meanings of Japan's EMI programs.

This study has several implications for practitioners. Universities should provide more opportunities for EMI students to be exposed to Japanese culture and provide more access to the Japanese community. The Japanese language remains dominant in Japanese society, and even though EMI international students' status in Japan is reified through admission to graduate school, it is hard for them to be entirely accepted as a member of the Japanese-speaking community due to their limited Japanese proficiency. Rakhshandehroo (2017) showed that international students in EMI programs need more administrative support in English due to their lack of Japanese proficiency. Providing students with opportunities to be immersed in Japanese society would satisfy their expectations of life in Japan and make them feel included as non-Japanese speakers.

Students' lack of Japanese ability and the difficulty of the Japanese entrance examination prevent international students from studying in Japan. EMI can provide a solution for these students. However, not many students know about EMI programs when they are deciding whether to study abroad. If EMI programs were more popular and better advertised, more international students would be attracted. However, this creates a further problem. As EMI lowers the requirements for entering Japanese universities for international students from English-speaking countries, many students who enter EMI are not doing so for academic reasons. Therefore, universities cannot expect their students to achieve academically. Stakeholders need to find a balance between academic and non-academic life; otherwise, the long-term development of universities could be damaged.

Endnote

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