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"I Wanted a PhD, Not a Label": Capital Constraints, Symbolic Stigma, and Chinese International Doctoral Mobility to Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Chinese international doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia as a process shaped by unequal distributions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Moving beyond push–pull and rational-choice explanations, it explores how doctoral pathways form, are sustained, and are evaluated under conditions of structural constraint. Based on semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese doctoral students enrolled in public universities in Malaysia and Thailand, the findings identify three interconnected stages of mobility: pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion. Economic, cultural, and social capital shaped the range of destinations participants perceived as feasible, while cultural and social capital continued to influence academic participation and pathway sustainability after enrollment. As participants considered their post-PhD futures, symbolic capital became increasingly important in shaping expectations of credential recognition and future career opportunities. The study introduces path convergence to explain how different configurations of constraint can lead students toward overlapping sets of feasible mobility pathways, and stage-specific capital effects to capture changes in the relative salience and function of capital across the doctoral trajectory. The study contributes a process-oriented perspective to scholarship on South–South doctoral mobility and unequal systems of recognition in global higher education.

Keywords: Doctoral mobility; Path convergence; Capital constraints; International student mobility; Southeast Asia; Symbolic violence

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, doctoral degrees have become increasingly institutionalized as a prerequisite for academic employment in China, particularly within vocational and applied higher education sectors. As competition for domestic doctoral opportunities intensifies, a growing number of Chinese students are pursuing doctoral education overseas, with Southeast Asia—especially Malaysia and Thailand—emerging as increasingly significant destinations. Compared with traditional study destinations in Europe and North America, Malaysia and Thailand have become increasingly attractive alternatives for Chinese doctoral students because of comparatively affordable costs, more accessible entry conditions, and their perceived compatibility with students' educational and personal circumstances (Zheng et al., 2026). For many Chinese students, these institutions represent not only alternative pathways to doctoral education, but also more accessible opportunities for international academic participation and career advancement under constrained conditions. This trend reflects the growing significance of South–South mobility within global higher education and the diversification of international doctoral mobility beyond traditional Western-centered destinations (Bao et al., 2023). At the same time, the concentration of Chinese doctoral students within a relatively limited number of Southeast Asian destinations raises important questions about how international mobility opportunities are structured, negotiated, and experienced under conditions of unequal access and recognition. In this study, Chinese doctoral students enrolled in Southeast Asian universities are conceptualized as international students navigating long-term degree mobility within emerging South–South higher education pathways.

Existing studies of international student mobility have frequently relied on the push–pull framework, which explains cross-border educational movement through the interaction of home-country pressures and destination attractiveness, often emphasizing factors such as educational quality, financial cost, career prospects, and institutional conditions (Ren et al., 2024). Although useful for identifying observable motivations, this perspective tends to assume that students choose among a relatively open set of alternatives. Such an assumption is less adequate for doctoral mobility, where access to international opportunities is unevenly shaped by prior educational trajectories, financial resources, language proficiency, academic competitiveness, and institutional barriers. For many prospective doctoral students, the central question is therefore not simply which destination is most desirable, but which pathways are realistically accessible and sustainable within their existing circumstances. Perspectives emphasizing constrained choice and bounded agency have helped address this limitation by recognizing that mobility decisions are made within unequal opportunity structures (Biolchi & Mueller, 2026). However, they offer less explanation of how heterogeneous constraints accumulate and interact over time, progressively narrowing initially diverse possibilities and producing patterned concentrations of doctoral mobility toward particular destinations.

To address this gap, the study draws on Bourdieu's theory of capital to examine international doctoral mobility as a process shaped by unequal distributions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Rather than treating mobility as the outcome of preference or rational choice alone, this perspective foregrounds how students navigate opportunities that are unevenly distributed and differently valued within global higher education systems (Collin, 2021). Building on this framework, the study introduces path convergence to explain how different configurations of capital constraint can progressively narrow initially diverse mobility possibilities and lead otherwise heterogeneous students toward overlapping sets of feasible doctoral pathways. It also proposes stage-specific capital effects to capture how the relative salience and function of capital change across pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion. Economic, cultural, and social capital shape access to and participation within doctoral pathways in different ways, while symbolic capital becomes increasingly salient as students anticipate how their qualifications will be recognized and converted into future academic or professional value (X. Li et al., 2026). Empirically, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 18 Chinese doctoral students enrolled in public universities

in Malaysia and Thailand to examine how these processes are experienced and negotiated across the doctoral trajectory. In doing so, the study contributes a process-oriented account of South–South doctoral mobility that links constrained access, unequal participation, and differentiated credential recognition within contemporary global higher education.

RQ1: How do Chinese doctoral students navigate capital constraints in pursuing doctoral education in Southeast Asia?

RQ2: How are doctoral pathways sustained, evaluated, and negotiated across different stages of mobility?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of research on international student mobility has been grounded in the push–pull framework, which explains cross-border educational movement as the outcome of rational decision-making based on cost–benefit considerations. Within this perspective, "push" factors such as limited educational opportunities and intense competition in the home country interact with "pull" factors such as educational quality, career prospects, institutional reputation, and favorable immigration or education policies in destination countries to shape mobility decisions (Y. Liu et al., 2025). In the context of Chinese doctoral mobility, this framework has frequently been used to explain the diversification of overseas study destinations and the increasing movement of students toward emerging higher education hubs outside traditional Western destinations. The growing popularity of Southeast Asia is therefore often interpreted as a rational response to lower financial costs, more flexible admission requirements, and expanding opportunities for international doctoral education.

Despite its influence, the push–pull framework has been criticized for assuming that international students make decisions within a relatively open and comparable set of alternatives. By emphasizing observable motivations and destination attractiveness, it tends to understate the structural conditions that shape unequal access to international educational opportunities (L. Li & Shen, 2024). This limitation is particularly evident in doctoral mobility, where pathways are highly selective and are shaped by prior educational trajectories, language proficiency, financial resources, institutional prestige, and broader systems of academic recognition (Koo et al., 2021; Sun & Wu, 2025). Perspectives emphasizing constrained choice, bounded decision-making, and structural inequality have therefore provided an important corrective by recognizing that students exercise agency within unequal opportunity structures rather than choosing freely among equivalent alternatives. However, these perspectives primarily explain why individual choices are restricted; they offer less insight into how multiple constraints accumulate and interact over time, progressively narrowing initially diverse possibilities and producing patterned concentrations of mobility toward a limited range of destinations. This process-oriented limitation is particularly important in doctoral mobility, where access, participation, and anticipated recognition may be shaped by different constraints at different stages of the trajectory.

To examine how such unequal opportunity structures are produced, experienced, and negotiated, this study draws on Bourdieu's theory of capital. Recent research on international Chinese doctoral students likewise indicates that academic trajectories and career decision-making remain embedded in broader familial, social, and cultural contexts throughout doctoral study (Xu, 2025). Bourdieu distinguishes among economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, which shape individuals' positions within social fields and influence their capacity to access opportunities, participate effectively, and gain legitimacy and recognition. Applied to international doctoral mobility, this perspective shifts attention from individual preference alone to the unequal resources through which students perceive, access, and sustain particular educational pathways. It also highlights that the value of a doctoral trajectory is not determined solely by obtaining the qualification itself, but is mediated by broader hierarchies of institutional prestige and academic recognition. Bourdieu's framework is therefore particularly useful for examining how Chinese doctoral

students navigate constrained mobility opportunities, academic participation, and the anticipated recognition of their qualifications within emerging South–South higher education contexts.

Within international doctoral mobility, different forms of capital shape both access to and participation in educational pathways. Economic capital influences the affordability and sustainability of overseas study, while cultural capital shapes academic preparedness, language proficiency, familiarity with scholarly norms, and confidence in navigating doctoral environments. Recent research on Chinese international students in Malaysia similarly highlights the continuing importance of language, academic adaptation, and social integration within the host educational context (Xue & Kaur Mehar Singh, 2025). Social capital operates through access to information, educational intermediaries, peer and doctoral student networks, supervisory relationships, and other academic connections that may facilitate application, adaptation, and participation across the mobility trajectory. Symbolic capital, in turn, concerns the legitimacy and recognition attached to institutions, destinations, and doctoral credentials within broader academic and professional fields. Although existing studies have demonstrated the importance of these forms of capital in international mobility (Zhao et al., 2025), they are often examined as relatively stable resources or constraints. Less attention has been given to how the function and relative salience of different forms of capital may shift across successive stages of doctoral mobility, or to how their interaction shapes access, persistence, academic participation, and the eventual conversion of doctoral credentials into recognized professional value.

Building on this perspective, this study introduces path convergence to explain how structurally unequal conditions can produce patterned concentrations of international doctoral mobility. Path convergence refers to the process through which initially diverse mobility possibilities are progressively narrowed into a more limited set of feasible and sustainable pathways as multiple capital constraints accumulate and interact. Although related to constrained choice and bounded agency, path convergence differs in analytical emphasis (Zhang et al., 2021). Constrained-choice and bounded-agency perspectives primarily illuminate how individuals make decisions within restricted opportunity structures; path convergence instead focuses on the process through which such restrictions operate cumulatively across individuals and over time, resulting in the concentration of otherwise heterogeneous trajectories toward similar destinations or institutional pathways. It is also distinct from educational stratification, which identifies unequal distributions of educational opportunities and outcomes at a broader structural level. Path convergence specifies one process through which such inequalities are translated into patterned mobility trajectories by progressively excluding, weakening, or rendering certain alternatives unsustainable. The concept therefore shifts attention from whether mobility choices are constrained to how constraints progressively reorganize the field of feasible possibilities and produce recurring mobility patterns.

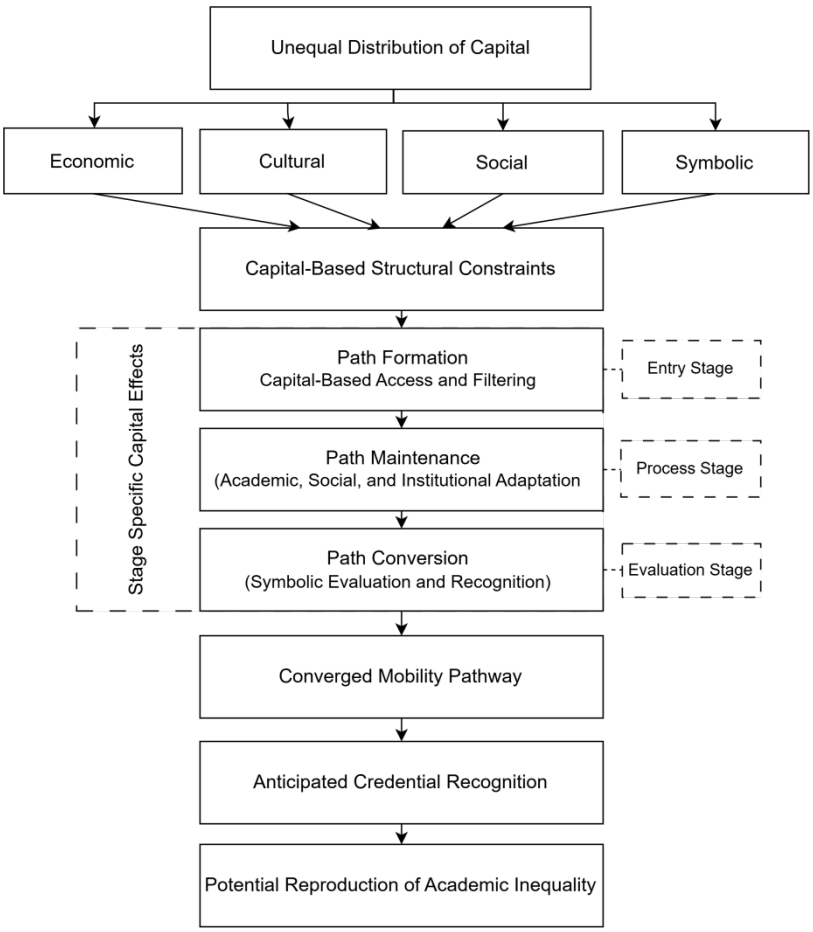
Complementing path convergence, this study proposes the concept of stage-specific capital effects to capture the changing role of capital across the doctoral mobility trajectory. The concept does not imply that particular forms of capital operate exclusively at one stage; rather, it emphasizes that their relative salience, function, and consequences may shift as students move from accessing a doctoral pathway to sustaining participation and eventually converting the credential into future academic or professional value. During pathway formation, economic, cultural, and social resources may primarily regulate which destinations and institutions are realistically accessible. During pathway maintenance, cultural and social capital become particularly important for academic communication, adaptation, participation, supervision, and network formation. During pathway conversion, symbolic capital becomes increasingly salient as doctoral qualifications are evaluated through hierarchies of institutional prestige, destination reputation, and professional recognition (Yang et al., 2021). Stage-specific capital effects therefore extend relatively static applications of capital theory by introducing a temporal and processual dimension, showing not only what resources students possess, but how the functions and convertibility of those resources change across successive stages of international doctoral mobility.

To synthesize these theoretical arguments, Figure 1 presents a process-oriented framework of capital-constrained international doctoral mobility. The framework integrates unequal distributions of

economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital with the three stages of pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion, illustrating how stage-specific capital effects may progressively shape path convergence and differentiated outcomes of participation and recognition. Rather than functioning as a fixed coding template, the framework provides an analytical map for examining how capital-based constraints are experienced and negotiated across participants' mobility trajectories. It therefore guides attention to both recurring patterns and cross-case variation in the empirical findings, particularly in relation to access, academic adaptation, social and institutional participation, and the anticipated recognition of doctoral credentials.

Figure 1

Process Framework of Capital-Constrained International Doctoral Mobility



As illustrated in Figure 1, international doctoral mobility is conceptualized as a dynamic process in which unequal distributions of capital shape three interconnected stages of pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion. During pathway formation, economic resources influence affordability, cultural resources shape perceived academic preparedness and eligibility, and social capital may provide access to information, intermediaries, peer guidance, and application networks. During pathway maintenance, cultural and social capital become particularly salient as students negotiate academic communication, supervisory relationships, scholarly participation, and integration into doctoral and research networks. During pathway conversion, symbolic capital becomes increasingly important as doctoral credentials are evaluated through institutional prestige, destination reputation, and broader systems

of academic and professional recognition, while social networks may also affect access to future opportunities. These forms of capital operate across rather than exclusively within particular stages, but their relative significance and function may change over the course of the mobility trajectory. Through their cumulative and stage-dependent effects, initially broader mobility possibilities may become progressively narrowed and stabilized, while the eventual value of the resulting doctoral pathway remains subject to unequal systems of credential recognition and academic hierarchy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how Chinese doctoral students experience and navigate mobility pathways to Southeast Asia under conditions of unequal access to resources and recognition. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research questions focus on how participants interpret their mobility decisions, academic experiences, and anticipated credential recognition across different stages of doctoral study. Rather than treating international doctoral mobility as a single act of destination choice, the study examined it as a process involving pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection because they enabled participants to describe their educational trajectories, constraints, adaptations, and future expectations in their own terms while allowing the researcher to explore recurring patterns across cases. The analysis was informed by Bourdieu's theory of capital while remaining attentive to themes emerging from participants' accounts. This approach supported an examination of how economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources operated within participants' mobility experiences and how their significance varied across different stages of the doctoral trajectory.

Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit Chinese doctoral students who could provide detailed, experience-based accounts of doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia. Participants were required to be enrolled in public universities in Malaysia or Thailand, two increasingly important destinations for Chinese doctoral students within emerging South–South mobility pathways. Including participants from both national contexts enabled the study to examine shared patterns as well as potential variations in how mobility constraints, academic adaptation, and future recognition were experienced across different institutional settings.

A total of 18 participants were included in the study, comprising 12 doctoral students enrolled in Malaysian public research universities and six enrolled in Thai public institutions. Participants represented a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including education, management, economics, computer science, architecture, geography, music, and other fields, and were at different stages of doctoral study from early candidature to near completion. Variation was also sought in gender, prior educational experience, language confidence, and application pathway, including both self-application and intermediary-assisted entry. This purposive variation was intended to capture different configurations of capital resources and mobility experience rather than to produce statistical representation. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Discipline	Year of Study	Country
P1	M	Educational Management	3	MYS
P2	F	Economics	3	MYS
P3	M	Computer Science	4	MYS
P4	F	TESOL	3	MYS
P5	M	Music Studies	4	MYS
P6	F	Educational Technology	3	MYS
P7	M	Vocational Education	2	MYS
P8	F	TESOL	2	MYS
P9	M	Visual Communication	3	MYS
P10	M	English Education	4	MYS
P11	M	Architecture	1	MYS
P12	F	Physical Education	4	MYS
P13	M	Geography	3	THA
P14	F	TESOL	3	THA
P15	F	TESOL	3	THA
P16	F	Musicology	2	THA
P17	F	Musicology	2	THA
P18	F	Educational Management	2	THA

Note. M = male; F = female; MYS = Malaysia; THA = Thailand.

Participant selection was guided by four inclusion criteria: (1) having completed prior education within the Chinese educational system; (2) being enrolled in a doctoral program at a public university in Malaysia or Thailand; (3) having direct experience of the application, adaptation, and doctoral study process; and (4) being willing and able to provide detailed reflections on their mobility experiences. These criteria ensured that participants had direct experience relevant to the research questions while allowing sufficient variation for cross-case comparison.

We assessed sample adequacy through the recurrence and development of themes across interviews rather than a predetermined numerical target alone. As data collection progressed, participants' accounts were compared for emerging similarities, differences, and new explanatory insights related to mobility decision-making, academic adaptation, capital constraints, and anticipated credential recognition. Recruitment ceased when later interviews no longer generated substantively new themes or altered the developing analytical structure, but instead primarily elaborated or provided variation within patterns already identified. The final 18 interviews therefore provided sufficient thematic depth to examine both recurring processes and meaningful differences across participants and the two national contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected between March and April 2026 through semi-structured online interviews. Participants were initially recruited through Chinese doctoral student networks and personal academic contacts, with subsequent participants identified through snowball referrals. Interviews were conducted via Tencent Meeting or Zoom according to participants' location and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 120 minutes, providing sufficient time for participants to reflect in detail on their doctoral trajectories, mobility decisions, academic experiences, and expectations regarding future career and credential recognition.

The interview protocol was organized around key stages of the doctoral mobility process, including motivations for pursuing doctoral study, destination and institutional choice, application experiences, academic adaptation, supervisory and institutional experiences, social and academic networks, and expectations regarding graduation and future employment. Example questions included: "Under what circumstances did you begin considering a doctoral degree?", "How did you decide on your destination country and institution?", and "How do you understand the relationship between your doctoral experience and your future career prospects?" The semi-structured format allowed a common set of topics to be explored across interviews while also enabling follow-up questions when participants raised experiences or concerns that were particularly relevant to their individual mobility trajectories.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded in full with participants' consent. Each interview recording was retained as a separate audio file and organized individually according to the corresponding participant code. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim in Chinese, and the transcripts were checked against the original audio recordings to correct transcription errors and preserve contextual and linguistic meaning. The Chinese-language transcripts constituted the primary material used for coding and thematic analysis.

Selected quotations used in the manuscript were subsequently translated from Chinese into English using AI-assisted translation. To enhance linguistic accuracy and preserve the intended meaning of participants' accounts, the translated excerpts were reviewed by a doctoral student specializing in English studies, who checked them against the original Chinese text and assisted in refining wording where necessary. The final English quotations therefore reflected both the semantic content and contextual meaning of the original Chinese accounts.

Interview recordings and transcripts were organized separately by participant and used solely for research purposes. Personally identifying information was removed during transcription and replaced with pseudonymous participant codes (P1–P18) in the analytical materials and manuscript. Further procedures concerning confidentiality, informed consent, data protection, and ethical safeguards are described in Section 3.5.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). An iterative inductive–deductive approach was adopted to allow themes to develop from participants' accounts while also using Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital as interpretive resources. Analysis was conducted on the original Chinese-language transcripts so that participants' meanings and contextual expressions could be retained as closely as possible. Coding and thematic organization were conducted by the researcher, with Microsoft Excel used to record, organize, compare, and refine codes across participants. The analytical process involved three interconnected stages: initial coding, thematic development and refinement, and mechanism abstraction.

In the first stage, the transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with each participant's mobility trajectory and to identify recurring experiences, concerns, and points of variation across cases. Initial codes were generated close to participants' own accounts rather than being assigned immediately to

predetermined theoretical categories. For example, descriptions of difficulty participating in academic discussions, dependence on translation tools, or lack of confidence in English-language writing were initially coded in terms such as language insecurity, academic communication difficulty, and limited academic confidence. Similarly, references to reliance on education intermediaries, peer recommendations, doctoral student networks, or informal application guidance were coded in relation to access to information and network-based support. This initial coding preserved the empirical specificity of participants' experiences before broader theoretical interpretation was introduced.

In the second stage, related codes were compared across interviews and organized in Excel to facilitate cross-case comparison and thematic refinement. Codes concerning affordability and financial pressure were associated with economic capital; language proficiency, academic preparation, and scholarly confidence with cultural capital; information channels, peer networks, and intermediary support with social capital; and concerns about institutional prestige, credential value, and future recognition with symbolic capital. Theme development involved repeated review of the relationship between individual codes, candidate themes, and the full dataset. Particular attention was paid not only to recurring patterns but also to differences and contrasting experiences across participants, including variation by national context, academic background, language confidence, and stage of doctoral study. Themes were refined when codes overlapped, lacked sufficient explanatory coherence, or were better understood as dimensions of a broader pattern.

The third stage moved from thematic description toward process-oriented interpretation. The analysis examined how the identified forms of capital operated differently across the stages of entering, sustaining, and converting an international doctoral pathway. Comparison across participants indicated that economic and cultural constraints were especially salient during pathway formation, cultural and social resources became increasingly important in maintaining academic participation and adaptation, and symbolic evaluation became particularly prominent when participants considered the future recognition and conversion of their doctoral credentials. Through this iterative movement between empirical accounts, cross-case comparison, and theoretical interpretation, the broader concepts of path convergence and stage-specific capital effects were developed. These concepts were therefore treated as analytical constructs emerging from the interaction between participants' experiences and the Bourdieusian framework rather than as categories imposed on the data in advance.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout data collection and analysis because familiarity with the context of Chinese doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia offered both interpretive advantages and potential sources of bias. Familiarity with the educational and social context helped support contextual understanding of participants' accounts, particularly when they discussed mobility decisions, academic adaptation, institutional expectations, and concerns about credential recognition. At the same time, such familiarity could create a risk of treating certain experiences or assumptions as self-evident. During the interviews, participants were therefore encouraged to explain their experiences in their own terms, and follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings rather than assuming shared understandings.

During analysis, reflexivity involved repeatedly returning to the original Chinese transcripts, comparing interpretations across participants, and examining accounts that differed from or complicated emerging patterns. Particular attention was paid to separating participants' descriptions from subsequent theoretical interpretation through Bourdieu's framework. Contradictory or divergent experiences were retained during theme development rather than being excluded solely because they did not conform to dominant patterns. These practices helped balance theoretically informed interpretation with close engagement with participants' accounts.

Research Trustworthiness and Ethics

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, the research procedures were reviewed and approved at the supervisory/research level. Formal approval from an institutional ethics committee was not obtained for this study, and no institutional ethics approval number was issued. All participants were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study before the interviews and provided informed consent to participate and to have the interviews audio-recorded. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. Personally identifying information was removed from the analytical materials, and participants were represented using pseudonymous codes (P1–P18). Interview recordings and transcripts were organized according to these participant codes and used solely for research purposes. Only selected anonymized excerpts were used when preparing English-language quotations for publication.

Several procedures were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the Chinese-language transcripts were checked against the original audio recordings and repeatedly reviewed during coding and theme development to maintain close engagement with participants' accounts. Second, codes and emerging themes were systematically organized in Microsoft Excel and compared across participants, allowing recurring patterns as well as contrasting and divergent experiences to be identified. Third, cross-case comparison was conducted across participants with different disciplinary backgrounds, stages of doctoral study, language confidence, application pathways, and national contexts in Malaysia and Thailand. Accounts that differed from dominant patterns were retained and considered during theme refinement rather than being excluded for inconsistency. Finally, theoretical interpretations were repeatedly compared with the original Chinese-language data, and the English translations of selected quotations were independently checked against the Chinese originals by a doctoral student specializing in English studies. Together, these procedures helped maintain coherence between participants' accounts, the developing themes, and the broader theoretical interpretation.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, organized around the interconnected processes of pathway formation, maintenance, and conversion. Rather than emerging as a single moment of educational decision-making, participants' doctoral mobility trajectories developed through ongoing negotiations with financial constraints, academic expectations, institutional environments, language-related challenges, and concerns surrounding future recognition and employability. Across different stages of mobility, participants described how unequal access to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital shaped not only where they could study, but also how they experienced academic adaptation, legitimacy, and long-term career uncertainty within international doctoral education. The findings further suggest that Chinese doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia is characterized less by broadly diversified destination choices than by a patterned concentration toward a relatively limited set of destinations perceived as accessible and sustainable under unequal structural conditions. This process of path convergence emerged through three interrelated stages: (1) pathway formation under initial capital constraints, (2) pathway maintenance shaped by academic and institutional adaptation, and (3) pathway conversion mediated by symbolic evaluation and unequal systems of recognition.

Pathway Formation under Capital Constraints

For many participants, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree in Southeast Asia emerged not from an open comparison among equally accessible international destinations, but through a progressive

narrowing of what they considered realistically attainable. Financial limitations, language-related insecurity, perceptions of academic competitiveness, and concerns about the risks associated with longer or more demanding doctoral pathways shaped which options remained feasible. Participants commonly described excluding certain destinations before formal applications were made and gradually concentrating their attention on institutions and countries perceived as financially manageable and academically accessible. In this sense, pathway formation reflected an early process of convergence in which unequal capital resources structured the range of possibilities participants believed they could realistically pursue.

Economic capital constituted one of the most immediate filtering mechanisms during pathway formation (He, 2025). For several participants, the anticipated costs of doctoral study in Europe, North America, or Australia placed these destinations beyond what they considered financially sustainable even before formal applications were pursued. P7 explained:

"Studying in Europe or North America was never really realistic for me. My family could not support that kind of cost, and I did not want to spend years repaying debt just for a PhD. Southeast Asia felt like the only option that I could actually afford." (P7)

P3 described a similar process of financial exclusion:

"I thought about applying to the UK before, but after calculating the tuition fees and living expenses, I gave up very quickly. The pressure was simply too much for my family." (P3)

These accounts indicate that affordability operated not simply as one consideration among several destination attributes, but as a boundary defining which doctoral pathways could realistically remain under consideration. Economic constraints therefore narrowed participants' mobility fields before institutional comparison or formal application took place, making Southeast Asian destinations more feasible not necessarily because they were initially preferred, but because they could be pursued without imposing what participants regarded as unsustainable financial costs.

Cultural capital further shaped which doctoral pathways participants perceived as realistically attainable (Ji, 2021). Concerns about language proficiency, academic preparation, prior educational background, and perceived competitiveness influenced not only whether participants believed they could gain admission, but also how they positioned themselves in relation to different academic environments. P14, studying in Thailand, described language proficiency as an important constraint:

"My English is not strong enough for academic discussion, and I still rely heavily on translation tools when writing papers. I knew it would be very difficult for me to survive in a highly competitive English-speaking environment." (P14)

By contrast, P10, studying in Malaysia, had previously completed a master's degree in the United Kingdom and considered his English proficiency relatively strong. Nevertheless, he remained concerned about the competitiveness of his academic background:

"Although I consider my English to be OK, since I completed my master's degree in the UK, I felt that my academic background was not competitive enough for top universities. Even if I applied, I probably would not succeed, so I focused on universities where the requirements seemed more achievable." (P10)

These contrasting accounts illustrate that cultural capital operated through more than language proficiency alone. For some participants, linguistic insecurity constrained the range of academic environments they believed they could manage, whereas for others, prior international educational experience and stronger English proficiency did not eliminate concerns about academic competitiveness and institutional eligibility. Across the Malaysian and Thai cases represented here, participants assessed their mobility possibilities through different configurations of cultural capital, contributing to the narrowing of destinations perceived as realistically attainable.

Social networks also influenced how participants accessed and evaluated information about potential doctoral pathways. P1 explained:

"I believe personal connections play a nearly decisive role. A colleague had already gone to that university to pursue a PhD and had been studying there for some time; this allowed me to confirm that the program wasn't a scam, which is what led me to seriously consider the opportunity." (P1)

For P1, information about his eventual university came from a colleague already studying there, which helped make the pathway appear credible and realistically accessible. His experience illustrates how social capital could reduce informational uncertainty and direct attention toward particular feasible pathways.

Economic and cultural capital did not operate independently during pathway formation, but interacted with social resources in shaping which destinations remained feasible. Financial limitations reduced the range of countries participants could realistically consider, while differences in language confidence, academic preparation, and perceived competitiveness further narrowed the institutions they believed they could access and successfully navigate (Z. Liu & Wang, 2025). Social capital further shaped which institutions became visible and credible within participants' networks. Participants' reliance on education intermediaries, peer recommendations, and informal doctoral networks provided practical information and guidance, but also tended to channel attention toward institutions and destinations already familiar within their social networks. Pathway formation therefore reflected the cumulative effects of multiple forms of capital rather than the influence of any single constraint.

Taken together, these findings show that doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia often emerged through the progressive elimination and stabilization of possibilities rather than through unrestricted comparison among equivalent destinations. Participants differed in the specific constraints they encountered: for some, financial affordability established the initial boundary of mobility, while for others language confidence, academic competitiveness, or access to information became more decisive. Nevertheless, these different configurations of constraint frequently produced a similar outcome—the concentration of attention on a narrower range of destinations perceived as accessible, manageable, and sustainable. The formation stage therefore provides empirical evidence of path convergence: heterogeneous individual circumstances did not produce unlimited diversification of mobility trajectories, but could instead lead different participants toward overlapping sets of feasible doctoral pathways.

Pathway Maintenance under Cultural and Institutional Conditions

After entering doctoral programs in Southeast Asia, participants' concerns shifted from gaining access to sustaining participation within unfamiliar academic and institutional environments. Maintaining the doctoral pathway required continuous adjustment to academic communication, research and writing expectations, supervisory relationships, and scholarly participation. Participants differed in the resources available to manage these demands, particularly in terms of language confidence, prior academic preparation, social and supervisory support, and familiarity with institutional expectations. Pathway maintenance therefore depended not simply on remaining enrolled, but on participants' capacity to adapt to and participate within the academic environments they had entered.

Cultural capital remained important after participants entered doctoral study, particularly in shaping academic communication, confidence, and participation. Several participants described difficulties expressing ideas in English, contributing to academic discussions, and meeting expectations for scholarly writing. P6 explained:

"I can understand most lectures, but when I need to discuss my ideas in English, I still feel very nervous. Sometimes I know what I want to say in Chinese, but I cannot express it clearly during academic discussions." (P6)

Such experiences suggest that language proficiency operated not only as a technical skill, but also as a resource influencing participants' confidence and willingness to participate in academic interaction. Even after gaining access to doctoral education, uneven cultural capital continued to shape how comfortably and actively participants engaged within the academic environment.

P13, studying in Thailand, described a more consequential form of language constraint:

"I thought I only needed to get through the language requirement during the application. But after starting the PhD, I realized that communicating with my supervisor, attending academic meetings, writing papers, and reading all had to be done in English. For me, that became very difficult." (P13)

These experiences show that language-related cultural capital functioned not only as a technical academic resource, but also as a condition shaping confidence, participation, and the capacity to sustain doctoral work. Its effects varied across participants. For some, limited English proficiency primarily produced hesitation and reduced confidence in academic interaction; for others, it created more substantial difficulties in communicating with supervisors, engaging in scholarly activities, and progressing with research. Cultural capital therefore continued to differentiate participants' experiences after entry, demonstrating that gaining access to a doctoral pathway did not necessarily ensure an equal capacity to participate in or maintain it.

Institutional conditions also shaped participants' capacity to maintain their doctoral pathways. Several participants perceived the academic expectations, supervisory arrangements, and progression requirements within their programs as demanding but comparatively manageable in relation to the more competitive doctoral environments they had previously imagined or considered. P12 explained:

"If I were studying in a more competitive system, I honestly do not think I could continue. Here, the expectations are still demanding, but they feel manageable for someone like me." (P12)

For participants such as P12, institutional conditions did not remove academic difficulties, but provided an environment in which those difficulties remained manageable enough for continued participation. Pathway maintenance therefore depended not only on participants' individual capital resources, but also on how institutional expectations interacted with those resources after entry.

Participants' experiences within these pathways were not uniform. Those with stronger language proficiency, research preparation, and access to academic networks were generally better positioned to engage in publication, research collaboration, and scholarly interaction, while others adopted more cautious strategies focused primarily on completing required milestones. P15 explained:

"Some students are already publishing internationally and building connections with professors, while I am mainly trying to finish my dissertation step by step without falling behind." (P15)

This contrast indicates that entry into similar doctoral pathways did not produce equivalent forms of participation. Differences in cultural and social capital continued to shape participants' academic visibility, engagement, and access to future opportunities during the maintenance stage. Path convergence therefore did not eliminate inequality, but shifted part of that inequality from access to the conditions under which participants were able to participate and progress after entry.

Pathway Conversion under Symbolic Evaluation

As participants considered their post-PhD futures, concerns increasingly shifted from completing the doctoral pathway to whether the resulting qualification could be converted into recognized academic and professional value. Several participants expressed uncertainty about how doctoral degrees obtained in Southeast Asia would be evaluated within the Chinese academic and employment context, particularly in comparison with credentials from more prestigious international destinations. At this stage, the central issue was no longer simply access to or participation in doctoral education, but the symbolic value attached to the credential and the extent to which it could support future career mobility and professional recognition.

Participants described symbolic evaluation as operating through anticipated judgments about the country and institution from which their doctoral degrees were obtained. P17, studying in Thailand, expressed concern that the credential might already carry a negative classification before graduation:

"Sometimes I feel that even if I successfully complete the PhD, people will still question it because of where I studied. It feels like the degree already carries a label before I even graduate." (P17)

P4, studying in Malaysia, similarly worried that institutional and national reputation might outweigh individual academic capability:

"There is a stereotype that degrees from certain countries are less credible. I worry that employers may judge the country first before they look at my actual abilities or research." (P4)

For P8, also studying in Malaysia, this symbolic evaluation was experienced more personally:

"I wanted a PhD, not a label. But sometimes I feel that studying in Southeast Asia automatically places you into a lower category in other people's eyes." (P8)

Across the Malaysian and Thai cases represented here, concerns about credential recognition were strikingly similar despite the different national settings. Participants perceived that the symbolic value attached to destination and institutional reputation could shape how their academic ability, professional identity, and future legitimacy were interpreted by others.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these accounts illustrate how symbolic capital is unevenly attached to doctoral credentials according to institution, destination, and perceived academic prestige. Participants' concerns suggest that credential evaluation was experienced not simply as an assessment of individual academic achievement, but as a classificatory process in which some educational pathways were perceived as carrying greater legitimacy than others. For several participants, these anticipated judgments also became internalized, shaping confidence, professional self-perception, and expectations about future career opportunities. In this sense, successful completion of the doctorate did not necessarily guarantee that the educational capital acquired through the degree would be converted into equivalent symbolic or professional recognition.

These findings indicate that pathway conversion depended not only on completing the doctorate, but also on how the resulting credential was symbolically evaluated within academic and professional fields. Although participants had successfully entered and sustained doctoral pathways in Southeast Asia, they did not assume that these achievements would translate into equivalent recognition after graduation. Concerns about destination reputation, institutional prestige, and perceived credential legitimacy continued to shape expectations about future employment and academic mobility. The converged mobility pathways enabled participants to access doctoral education under constrained conditions, but it did not eliminate inequalities in how the resulting qualifications were valued or converted into future opportunities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings challenge interpretations of international doctoral mobility that treat destination choice primarily as the outcome of preference comparison or cost–benefit calculation. Participants did consider affordability, institutional conditions, and career prospects, but their accounts show that such considerations operated within opportunity structures already differentiated by economic resources, academic background, language capability, social networks, and anticipated recognition. In many cases, potential destinations were excluded before formal application because they were perceived as financially unsustainable, academically inaccessible, or too risky relative to participants' existing resources (Zhu & Yang, 2023). This supports recent critiques of purely rational-choice and push–pull explanations by showing that international doctoral mobility is better understood as decision-making within a structurally bounded field of possibilities. (Zheng et al., 2026). At the same time, the findings extend constrained-choice perspectives by indicating that constraint does not operate only at the moment of destination selection. Its effects continue across access, academic participation, and anticipated credential recognition, making doctoral mobility an unfolding process rather than a discrete educational choice.

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in the concept of path convergence, which explains how differently situated students may nevertheless become concentrated within a relatively limited set of doctoral mobility pathways. The findings show that convergence did not result from a single shared constraint. Participants reached similar destination patterns through different configurations of economic, cultural, and social capital: some excluded Western destinations primarily because of cost, others adjusted their aspirations because of language or perceived academic competitiveness, while social networks and previously established mobility routes made particular institutions appear more credible and attainable.

(Tian et al., 2026). Path convergence therefore refers not simply to restricted choice, but to the cumulative process through which heterogeneous constraints progressively reorganize the field of feasible possibilities and produce patterned concentrations of mobility. In this respect, the concept differs from constrained-choice and bounded-agency perspectives, which primarily explain how individuals make decisions within restricted opportunity structures. It also differs from educational stratification, which identifies unequal distributions of opportunities and outcomes at a broader structural level (Xu & Shen, 2026). Path convergence specifies a process through which such inequalities are translated into mobility trajectories, showing how different forms of constraint can lead otherwise diverse students toward overlapping sets of feasible destinations without implying that their motivations, experiences, or eventual outcomes are identical.

The second theoretical contribution concerns stage-specific capital effects, which highlight how the relative salience and function of capital change across the doctoral mobility trajectory. The findings do not suggest that particular forms of capital belong exclusively to one stage. Rather, the same resource or constraint may assume different significance as students move from pathway formation to maintenance and conversion. During formation, economic capital largely determined the affordability of potential destinations, while cultural and social capital shaped perceived eligibility, access to information, and the credibility of particular pathways. (Yu, 2022). After enrollment, economic access alone was insufficient to sustain participation: cultural capital became increasingly consequential for academic communication, writing, research engagement, and confidence, while social capital operated through supervisory relationships, peer networks, and opportunities for scholarly participation. During conversion, symbolic capital became especially salient as participants anticipated how destination, institutional prestige, and credential reputation would affect the recognition of their doctoral qualifications. Stage-specific capital effects therefore extend static applications of capital theory by showing that inequality lies not only in how much capital students possess, but also in whether particular forms of capital can be mobilized and converted effectively at different points in the mobility trajectory.

A further contribution of this study concerns the symbolic evaluation of doctoral credentials within unequal academic hierarchies. Participants' accounts suggest that the value of a doctorate was perceived as depending not only on the qualification itself, but also on the symbolic status attached to the country and institution from which it was obtained (Ge & Ho, 2019). Concerns that Southeast Asian doctorates might be regarded as less prestigious or less credible indicate a form of symbolic inequality in which educational credentials are differentially valued according to their location within broader hierarchies of academic prestige. In several cases, these external classifications were also experienced at a more personal level, as participants anticipated being judged through the reputation of their destination before their individual research ability or academic achievements were considered (Raymond, 2021). When such classifications become internalized as self-doubt, defensive identity work, or lowered expectations about future recognition, they may be understood as approaching a form of symbolic violence in Bourdieusian terms. The findings therefore suggest that inequalities in international doctoral mobility extend beyond unequal access to education: they also concern the unequal conversion of doctoral credentials into legitimacy, professional recognition, and future opportunity (Dai, 2023).

Cross-context comparison did not reveal a sharp Malaysia–Thailand divide in the mechanisms shaping participants' mobility trajectories. Participants in both settings described similar concerns surrounding affordability, academic adaptation, language, and anticipated credential recognition, while variation was more evident in individual configurations of capital and institutional experience than in national context alone. The two contexts should therefore not be treated as identical, but the findings suggest that the processes of path convergence and stage-specific capital effects operated across both settings.

This study examined Chinese international doctoral mobility to Southeast Asia as a process shaped by unequal distributions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Based on interviews with Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia and Thailand, the findings show that mobility extends beyond the initial choice of destination and unfolds through interconnected stages of pathway formation, maintenance,

and conversion. Chinese doctoral students navigated capital constraints by progressively adjusting their mobility possibilities according to the economic, cultural, and social resources available to them, while the sustainability and eventual value of these pathways were continually negotiated through changing forms of cultural, social, and symbolic capital across different stages of mobility. The concepts of path convergence and stage-specific capital effects help explain how different configurations of constraint can progressively narrow mobility possibilities, shape unequal capacities for academic participation, and influence the subsequent recognition of doctoral credentials. In doing so, the study contributes a process-oriented perspective to research on South–South doctoral mobility and international student mobility under unequal conditions of access and recognition.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a relatively small qualitative sample drawn from Malaysia and Thailand and reflects primarily the perspectives of doctoral students themselves. It does not include the views of supervisors, universities, employers, or policymakers involved in doctoral training and credential evaluation. Future research could therefore extend the analysis through larger comparative studies across Southeast Asian destinations, longitudinal research following graduates after completion, and multi-actor studies examining how international doctoral credentials are interpreted and evaluated across institutional and employment contexts.

More broadly, the findings suggest that expanding access to international doctoral education does not necessarily produce equivalent experiences or outcomes. Mobility pathways may become more accessible while remaining differentiated in terms of academic participation, institutional positioning, and the symbolic recognition attached to the resulting qualifications. Understanding international doctoral mobility therefore requires attention not only to where students move, but also to how opportunities are sustained and how educational credentials are ultimately converted into legitimacy and future opportunity.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have several implications for institutions involved in international doctoral education. At the pathway formation stage, universities should provide clearer and more accessible information concerning admission requirements, program expectations, costs, supervision arrangements, and doctoral progression. Greater transparency may reduce prospective students' dependence on informal networks or intermediaries and enable them to evaluate doctoral pathways on the basis of realistic academic and financial expectations rather than incomplete or socially filtered information.

During pathway maintenance, host universities should pay particular attention to academic language development, research writing, supervisory communication, and opportunities for participation in scholarly networks. Language support should extend beyond meeting admission requirements and address the communicative and writing demands that emerge during doctoral study. Structured supervisory guidance, peer mentoring, research communities, and opportunities for academic collaboration may also help students with more limited cultural or social capital participate more fully and sustain progress within their programs.

At the pathway conversion stage, universities and policymakers should strengthen career preparation and provide clearer guidance on how international doctoral qualifications are evaluated in different employment contexts. Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes the value of targeted career support, skill development, and institutionally embedded employability strategies for international students (Xu et al., 2025). Employers and higher education institutions should avoid relying on destination country or institutional reputation alone as proxies for doctoral quality and should also consider research training, academic outputs, professional competencies, and demonstrated achievement. More transparent approaches to credential recognition may help reduce the symbolic disadvantages experienced by graduates from less traditionally prestigious international study destinations.

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