Article

Job Satisfaction Among Expatriate Academics at China's Offshore Campuses: Post-COVID-19 Challenges and Cross-Cultural Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines job satisfaction among 33 expatriate faculty members teaching Chinese international students at China's offshore campuses. Through thematic analysis of semistructured interviews and institutional documents framed by Herzberg's two-factor theory, this research explores the effects of cultural adaptation, faculty–student interactions, and post-COVID-19 institutional dynamics on faculty well-being. The findings revealed that long-term emotional bonds with students were the strongest motivators. In contrast, language barriers, perceived student passivity, and subtle grade-related pressures from influential families acted as powerful hygiene stressors. An "autonomy-support paradox" was evident: institutional support (e.g., language courses, mentorship) coexisted with centralized governance that restricted academic freedom, thereby intensifying dissatisfaction. Post-COVID-19 virtual/hybrid teaching further amplified intercultural miscommunication and disengagement. Unlike prior work focused on general faculty satisfaction, this study addresses underexplored gaps in non-Western transnational education, offering practical strategies to increase expatriate retention and enrich the learning environment for Chinese international students on offshore campuses.

INTRODUCTION

China's offshore campuses, where foreign universities deliver international curricula to primarily Chinese nationals, constitute a distinctive model of transnational education (TNE) that integrates global and local learning environments (Lane et al., 2025). As China aims to become a significant international education hub for nearly half a million international students (Liu & Coates, 2024; Yang, 2022), it relies heavily on expatriate academics to deliver high-quality instruction. However, these faculty members face significant challenges that shape their job satisfaction, including navigating cultural differences, engaging with Chinese students, and adapting to post-COVID-19 teaching environments. These issues not only threaten faculty retention but also directly impact the learning experience and well-being of the international students they serve; however, research on expatriate faculty experiences in this context remains limited.

The rapid growth of transnational education globally underscores the need to understand faculty well-being in such settings, particularly as post-COVID-19 virtual and hybrid modalities have become permanent features of the landscape. Cultural challenges, such as differing classroom expectations and Confucian-influenced student reticence (Heng, 2020), as well as governance constraints, create unique stressors for expatriate academics teaching predominantly Chinese international students. This study explores how these dynamics influence faculty job satisfaction and retention on China's offshore campuses. Grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory, the research employs thematic analysis of 33 semistructured interviews and institutional documents to examine these experiences.

The study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: How do cultural differences shape expatriate academics' experiences with China's offshore campuses?

RQ2: How do interactions with Chinese students influence faculty job satisfaction in transnational education settings?

RQ3: How do post-COVID-19 teaching challenges impact faculty well-being and teaching practices?

By analyzing interviews with faculty across various disciplines, this study provides in-depth insights into their perspectives on job satisfaction and support. The findings can inform practical strategies to enhance faculty retention and well-being and to improve the educational experience of Chinese international students enrolled in foreign university programs in China (Mok, 2021a, 2021b; Qu & Dai, 2024). This work contributes directly to the Journal of International Students' focus on cross-cultural wellness, intercultural communication, and virtual learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transnational Education and Offshore Campuses in China

China's offshore campuses, where foreign universities deliver international curricula to primarily Chinese nationals, represent a unique model of transnational education (TNE) that combines global and local learning environments (Kleibert et al., 2023; Lane et al., 2025). These campuses are integral to China's emergence as an international education hub, currently enrolling tens of thousands of Chinese students in foreign degree programs while contributing to the broader system that hosts hundreds of thousands (Liu & Coates, 2024; Yang, 2022). Expatriating faculty are essential to the success of these campuses in China, yet their experiences in non-English-speaking contexts remain underexplored (Chen & Zhu, 2022). Prior studies have focused predominantly on Western-hosted TNE, largely neglecting China's distinctive cultural and institutional dynamics (Chen, 2017; Yang & Welch, 2010). Comparative work in Qatar and Japan highlights parallel faculty challenges, such as contract instability and cultural isolation (Bhuian, 2016; F. Huang et al., 2019). This study addresses this gap by examining the job satisfaction of expatriate faculty members who teach Chinese international students at China's offshore campuses.

China's offshore campuses, formally known as Sino-foreign cooperative universities, emerged in the early 2000s as part of the country's strategy for internationalizing its higher education. The first, the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China, opened in 2004 following the 2003 Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (State Council Decree No. 372), which legalized full-fledged partnerships between Chinese and foreign institutions (Wilkins, 2016). By 2022--2023, there were nine fully approved Sino-foreign cooperative universities (e.g., NYU Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, Wenzhou-Kean University) and over 80 cooperative institutes (International Campuses, 2025). Enrollment in these offshore campuses totals approximately 50,000--60,000 students, primarily Chinese nationals pursuing foreign degrees, with expatriate faculty numbering approximately 3,000 (Liu & Coates, 2024; P. Yang, 2022). These institutions have made key contributions to China's postsecondary sector, including importing global curricula to modernize domestic teaching, fostering bilingual talent for economic innovation, and promoting "internationalization at home" to reduce outbound student mobility (Mok, 2021).

However, they also highlight equity gaps, as offshore programs often serve urban middle-class students, limiting broader access.

Cultural Adaptation and Cross-Cultural Wellness

Cultural factors significantly influence faculty job satisfaction and cross-cultural wellness in transnational education settings. Language barriers and culture shock frequently hinder integration and well-being (Kim et al., 2024). Confucian-based norms, which emphasize hierarchy and collectivism, can challenge faculty engagement and sense of belonging, aligning with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Chen, 2022). Faculty members with greater cultural proximity tend to adapt more readily, whereas those with lower cultural proximity experience reduced satisfaction without targeted support (Cen, 2018). For instance, Braun Střelcová et al. (2023) reported that European faculty members struggled with societal integration in China, which increased the risk of turnover unless it was mitigated by a sense of place attachment (Alemu & Pykhtina, 2020). Cultural intelligence enhances performance, but it requires institutional support, such as cross-cultural training (Ramalu & Subramaniam, 2019). Mentorship and cultural programs foster resilience and support Herzberg's motivators, such as achievement and recognition (Li & Huang, 2024).

Faculty–Student Interactions and Intercultural Communication

Teaching Chinese international students at offshore campuses has a profound effect on the job satisfaction of expatriate faculty, driven by challenges in intercultural communication. Students, as central actors in the educational system, directly influence faculty outcomes (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). Cultural barriers, such as exam-driven passivity rooted in Confucian heritage culture, limit classroom engagement and frustrate faculty when institutional support is lacking (Heng, 2020; Wang & Chiu, 2024; Wilkins & Annabi, 2023). Heng (2020) noted that Chinese students' deference to teacher authority is often misinterpreted as a lack of critical thinking, which can lead to misunderstandings in interactive environments. Language barriers further reduce interaction quality in non-English-dominant contexts (Greenier & Connor, 2025; F. Huang & Chen, 2024). Similar patterns appear in Qatar's branch campuses, underscoring the need for culturally responsive pedagogies (Bhuian, 2016). Conversely, positive student relationships enhance satisfaction and support cross-cultural wellness (Nuralieva et al., 2024). Inadequate cultural preparation, however, risks underperformance for both students and faculty (Heng, 2020; Kang, 2019).

Post-COVID Dynamics, Classrooms, and Virtual Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced persistent virtual and hybrid teaching challenges that intensified faculty difficulties, a gap that has been underexplored in prior research focused on general job satisfaction (Gao & Liu, 2021). China's rapid expansion of TNE through market-driven reforms exacerbated these difficulties, as faculty adapted to online platforms with limited institutional support (Mok, 2021). Student disengagement in virtual settings increases faculty stress, particularly when support for online pedagogies is inadequate (Wang &

Zhang, 2024). This study examines how post-COVID-19 classrooms and virtual learning dynamics continue to affect expatriate faculty job satisfaction at China's offshore campuses.

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Support

Job satisfaction has a significant effect on faculty effectiveness and retention, influencing the quality of teaching and institutional vitality (Arokiasamy, 2021; Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023; Nasser Al-Tamimi & Abdullateef, 2023). Organizational support, including resources, transparent communication, and growth opportunities, enhances faculty loyalty and well-being (Arokiasamy, 2021; Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023). In China's offshore campuses, centralized governance limits autonomy, which increases dissatisfaction and the risk of turnover, as observed in other TNE contexts, such as Qatar (Bhuian, 2016; Xia et al., 2023). Poor support and unclear expectations further fuel turnover (Ababneh, 2020; S. Wang & Zhang, 2024). Strategies such as mentorship, cultural training, and streamlined administration can increase satisfaction in transnational settings (Stoermer et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2023). This study examines tailored support strategies to enhance the experiences of expatriate faculty.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Herzberg's two-factor theory (1966) to frame faculty job satisfaction and retention. Herzberg's theory distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., supportive policies) and motivators (e.g., student engagement). These frameworks highlight how cultural and post-COVID-19 challenges affect faculty, building upon prior applications in transnational contexts (Gao & Liu, 2021).

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs complements Herzberg's framework by illuminating how unmet needs for belongingness and esteem intensify dissatisfaction among expatriates. In this study, language barriers and perceived grade coercion threatened psychological safety and a sense of belonging. At the same time, long-term student bonds and paternalistic mentoring roles fulfilled esteem and self-actualization needs, explaining the stark emotional contrast between motivators and hygiene stressors that emerged in the data. Table 1 illustrates how the study's key findings map onto Herzberg's hygiene factors and motivators, as well as the relevant levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This dual-lens framework clarifies why specific stressors (e.g., autonomy restrictions, grade coercion) consistently erode satisfaction, whereas others (e.g., long-term student bonds, paternalistic mentoring) emerge as powerful sources of fulfillment.

The categorization of findings into Herzberg's hygiene factors and motivators followed the original theory's distinction between extrinsic conditions that prevent dissatisfaction (hygiene) and intrinsic elements that produce satisfaction (motivators) (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1966). Institutional policies, governance constraints, language barriers, and grade-related pressures were classified as hygiene factors because their presence or absence primarily produced dissatisfaction rather than positive motivation, consistent with Herzberg's emphasis on "dissatisfiers" associated with the work environment.

Conversely, long-term student bonds, paternalistic mentoring relationships, and perceived teaching impact were coded as motivators because participants repeatedly described them as sources of deep fulfillment and energy, aligning with Herzberg's intrinsic "satisfiers" linked to the work itself. This mapping was refined inductively during data analysis and cross-checked against the original Herzberg publications.

Table 1. Application of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy to Key Findings

Theme/Finding	Herzberg Category	Maslow Level(s) Affected	Example from Data
Language Barriers & Culture Shock	Hygiene factor (absent)	Safety, Belongingness	"ridiculously difficult" to learn Mandarin
Grade coercion/blackmail	Hygiene factor (present stressor)	Safety, Esteem	Marley's perceived contract threats
Long-term student gratitude	Motivator	Esteem, Self-actualization	Armand's years-later messages
Paternalistic mentoring role	Motivator	Belongingness, Esteem	Joseph guides homesick students

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the rapid expansion of China's offshore campuses, research on the lived experiences of expatriate faculty, who teach predominantly Chinese international students, remains limited. Existing studies have focused primarily on Western-hosted transnational education (TNE) or on the perspectives of returning Chinese scholars, leaving non-English-speaking host contexts undertheorized (K.-D. Chen, 2017; R. Yang & Welch, 2010). While recent work has begun to explore faculty challenges at Sino-foreign universities (J. Chen & Zhu, 2022; Przytula, 2023), these studies rarely focus on the faculty–student relationship as the primary lens or examine how post-COVID-19 institutional dynamics continue to shape daily practice.

The present study addresses three specific gaps. First, although faculty–student interactions are recognized as influential, no prior research has documented the depth of long-term, emotionally sustaining bonds that expatriate faculty form with Chinese international students or the simultaneous distress caused by subtle grade-related coercion from influential families. Second, the literature has not yet articulated an "autonomy-support paradox" in state-guided

TNE: institutional resources (such as language courses and mentorship) designed to aid expatriates coexist with governance structures that constrain professional autonomy, thereby undermining their effectiveness. Third, the lingering effects of post-COVID-19 virtual/hybrid teaching on intercultural communication and faculty well-being in non-Western offshore campuses remain underexplored.

By revealing these previously undocumented dynamics and explicitly linking them to Herzberg's two-factor theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this study extends existing knowledge on the adjustment of expatriate faculty. It offers actionable insights for enhancing both faculty retention and the educational experience of Chinese international students on offshore campuses.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the job satisfaction of 33 expatriate faculty members teaching Chinese international students at China's offshore campuses, with a particular focus on cultural adaptation, faculty–student interactions, and post-COVID-19 teaching dynamics.

Although participants were recruited from multiple Sino-foreign universities across the country, the study did not statistically control for interinstitutional variation because all approved offshore campuses operate under the same national regulatory framework (L. Huang et al., 2023; Mok, 2021a; Si & Rayner, 2025; C. Wang & Chiu, 2024). Thematic saturation was reached across institutions, and institutional documents confirmed that core policies on curriculum approval, faculty autonomy, and post-COVID hybrid teaching mandates are applied uniformly nationwide, supporting the transferability of findings to the broader population of China's offshore campuses.

Thematic analysis, within the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), was employed to uncover nuanced perspectives that quantitative approaches might overlook. Data were collected through semistructured remote interviews and analysis of institutional documents (faculty handbooks, teaching policies, and employment guidelines). This approach was well suited for generating in-depth insights into cross-cultural wellness, intercultural communication, and virtual learning challenges in China's state-guided transnational education landscape (Mok, 2021a, 2021b).

The challenges identified in this study reflect national policy frameworks that uniformly govern all approved Sino-foreign universities under the Ministry of Education's Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (L. Huang et al., 2023; Mok, 2021a; Si & Rayner, 2025; C. Wang & Chiu, 2024). While participants were drawn from campuses in multiple provinces, institutional documents and faculty accounts confirmed that key policies on curriculum approval, faculty autonomy, and international student recruitment are applied consistently nationwide. Local implementation may vary slightly in emphasis, but the structural tensions reported, particularly centralized governance and post-COVID hybrid teaching mandates, are also present at the national level.

Participants

Thirty-three expatriate faculty members were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling initiated via the researcher's professional network. The participants were drawn from six Ministry of Education (MOE)-approved Sino-foreign cooperative universities operating under the national Regulations on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools. This framework imposes uniform requirements on curriculum approval, faculty autonomy, and post-COVID hybrid teaching, ensuring that the challenges identified (e.g., centralized governance limits) are systemic rather than institution-specific. These offshore campuses fully comply with MOE regulations, thereby supporting the generalizability of the findings to transnational higher education in China.

The participants represented diverse nationalities (e.g., North American, European, Australian, and one South African) and disciplines (e.g., humanities, STEM, and business), with service lengths ranging from one--ten years. This diversity captured a broad range of perspectives on cultural adaptation and teaching experiences with Chinese students enrolled in foreign university programs. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through two primary methods. First, semistructured remote interviews (averaging 60 minutes in length) were conducted following a protocol adapted from Morris (2020). Open-ended questions explore perceptions of job satisfaction, cultural adaptation, interactions with Chinese students, and post-COVID-19 teaching challenges (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Second, institutional documents, including faculty handbooks, teaching policies, employment guidelines, and new-employee guides (e.g., *XJTLU-General-Guide-Fo-New-Employees,* n.d.), were analyzed to contextualize faculty narratives and verify the reported support structures (Xia et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board (Reference No. IRB-2022-52) before data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Anonymity was protected by using pseudonyms and removing identifiable details. The procedures complied with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The process involved (a) repeated reading of transcripts and documents for immersion,

(b) open coding of recurring patterns (e.g., culture shock, student disengagement, support gaps), (c) consolidation into categories, and (d) refinement through cross-checking between interviews and documents. Themes were linked to the research questions and Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory. Distinct coding passes highlighted post-COVID-19 dynamics and interactions with Chinese students, differentiating this study from prior general satisfaction research.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Credibility, dependability, and transferability are enhanced through multiple strategies (Nowell & Albrecht, 2019). Data triangulation integrated interviews and documents; methodological triangulation combined thematic and content analysis. Member checking verified preliminary findings with select participants. Prolonged engagement and a reflexive journal addressed researcher bias. Thick descriptions support transferability to similar offshore campus contexts.

Researcher Positionality

As the sole researcher of this project, I have over 8 years of direct experience in transnational higher education, including five years as a faculty member and one year as a program coordinator at a U.S.-partnered offshore campus in China before beginning my doctoral studies. This insider role gave me firsthand familiarity with the cultural adaptation struggles, faculty–student dynamics, and institutional constraints that expatriate academics encounter in China's Sino-foreign universities. My doctoral training at a U.S.-based university further shaped my interest in cross-cultural wellness and ethical teaching practices in international contexts.

I entered the study with two primary assumptions that I documented in a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis: (1) that expatriate faculty dissatisfaction would primarily stem from cultural differences rather than institutional governance and (2) that Chinese students' classroom reticence would universally be experienced as disengagement. These assumptions were repeatedly challenged by the data, particularly by participants who highlighted centralized policy constraints as the dominant stressor and by those who reframed student silence as respectful deference rather than a lack of interest. Sharing these initial biases and their evolution is intended to increase transparency and trust, allowing readers to evaluate better how my background may have been influenced and corrected by the research process.

Limitations

The qualitative design involves subjectivity, mitigated through triangulation and member checking. The findings are context-specific to China's offshore campuses and may not fully transfer to less centralized systems (e.g., Qatar; Bhuian, 2016). Reliance on faculty perspectives excludes nonparticipating stakeholders, such as students. Although RQ2 and the study's focus on faculty–student interactions

highlight the centrality of the student experience, this research deliberately adopted a faculty-only perspective to capture expatriate academics' unfiltered perceptions of classroom dynamics, job satisfaction, and institutional support on China's offshore campuses. Including students would have shifted the focus to student satisfaction or learning outcomes, which are valuable but distinct research questions beyond the scope of this faculty-centered study. The decision to prioritize depth over dyadic breadth allowed for a richer exploration of how expatriate faculty interpret and emotionally respond to intercultural encounters, grade pressures, and post-COVID-19 teaching conditions. Future research could complement these findings by incorporating student voices through paired interviews, focus groups, or mixed-methods designs to examine mutual perceptions and coconstruction of the learning environment. Future research could incorporate student interviews or focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of the topic.

Supplementary Data

A demographic survey based on Spector's (1997) nine facets of job satisfaction (adapted from Morris, 2020) provided background data on participants' roles and experiences, complementing the thematic analysis and ensuring alignment with the study's focus on job satisfaction.

RESULSTS
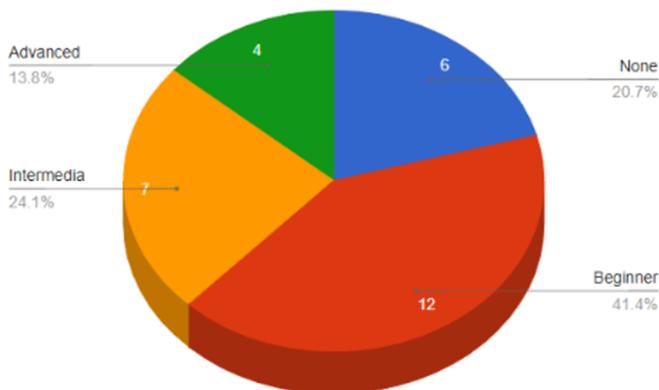
Expatriate Faculty in Offshore Education

Figure 1: Chinese Proficiency Levels of Expatriate Faculty

Note. Data adapted from "Exploring expatriate academics' perceptions of job satisfaction relating to organizational support at international branch campuses in China" [Doctoral dissertation, Abilene Christian University]. https://digitalcommons. acu.edu/etd/668.

This study explored the job satisfaction of 33 expatriate faculty members teaching primarily Chinese international students at China's offshore campuses. Thematic analysis of the semistructured interviews and institutional documents revealed three primary themes: challenges to cultural adaptation, faculty–student dynamics, and the impact of institutional support. These findings illuminate previously underexplored tensions in transnational education settings, particularly the interplay between rewarding student relationships and systemic barriers that undermine faculty well-being.

Participant Overview

The participants represented diverse backgrounds from North America, Europe, Australia, and one South African faculty member across disciplines, including humanities, STEM, and business, with service lengths ranging from one--ten years. Their Chinese-language proficiency varied widely (see Figure 1): six reported no proficiency, 12 were beginners, seven reported intermediate proficiency, and four reported advanced proficiency. As shown in Figure 1, participants' Chinese-language proficiency varied widely, which shaped their ability to engage with local communities outside the English-dominant campus environment and influenced their intercultural teaching experiences. This diversity shaped their experiences of cultural adjustment and interactions with Chinese students in the classroom.

Motivations for teaching in China varied and appeared to moderate the interpretation of cultural challenges. Approximately one-third of the participants described a deliberate, adventure- or mission-driven choice, such as "I always wanted to live in Asia" or "I felt called to teach abroad." These faculty members tended to frame difficulties (such as language barriers and culture shock) as expected and temporary "growing pains." Another third cited career opportunism ("better title/pay than I could get in the U.S." or "tenure track was impossible back home"), and these individuals more often linked ongoing frustrations to systemic issues rather than personal adaptation failures. The remaining participants mentioned family ties or spousal relocation. Notably, Christian, who described learning Mandarin as "ridiculously difficult" in his forties, fell into the career opportunism group, explicitly stating that limited domestic options had led him to China. This finding indicates that when faculty members feel a sense of choice, they are more likely to view cultural challenges as personal hurdles they can overcome rather than as permanent flaws in the system itself.

Jackie was the only participant with Chinese American heritage and U.S. citizenship only; no participants held both Chinese citizenship and permanent residence in China. The remaining 32 participants were nonethnic Chinese expatriates from North America, Europe, Australia, and South Africa. This near-uniform lack of cultural proximity among the majority amplified the salience of language barriers and culture shock, as most lacked the familial or ancestral ties that eased Jackie's transition. Jackie's outlier status, describing himself as "already halfway there" culturally and linguistically, underscores how ethnic and heritage proximity can dramatically mitigate adaptation stress, reinforcing the

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finding that cultural distance, rather than mere time in the country, is a primary driver of ongoing dissatisfaction for the broader expatriate faculty cohort.

Cultural Adaptation Challenges

Three-quarters of the participants experienced recurring culture shock, despite prior exposure to China or cultural proximity, indicating that adaptation is an ongoing rather than an initial process.

Navigating cultural differences presented both enriching and significant challenges that affected faculty well-being. Institutional documents emphasized respect for local customs and described Mandarin as notoriously difficult (*Faculty Handbook*, 2020); however, these references were omitted in later versions (*Faculty Handbook,* 2022; *Faculty Handbook,* 2025). Another document mandated compliance with Chinese laws and traditional culture, explicitly prohibiting missionary activities (Guidelines for Managing Foreign Experts, 2023). A 20-hour Mandarin course was offered at one campus (as noted in a university email on September 3, 2025), but centralized governance often limited the flexibility of such support.

Language barriers consistently hinder integration for individuals with limited proficiency in the Chinese language. Christian described learning Mandarin in his forties as "ridiculously difficult," which severely restricted his off-campus interactions. Bradley felt safe within the English-speaking campus bubble but apprehensive outside it, relying on basic phrases after several years in China.

A modest relationship was found between the length of stay and the intensity of ongoing intercultural communication challenges. Faculty with 1–3 years of experience in China most frequently described acute, daily frustrations with language barriers and culture shock (e.g., Christian's "ridiculously difficult" Mandarin learning at the middle-career stage). In contrast, those with 6–10 years of experience reported that overt shock had largely subsided; however, persistent operational and behavioral mismatches, such as "saving face" denials (Jeff) or subtle grade pressures from influential families (Marley), continued to generate low-level but chronic dissatisfaction. Mid-range participants (4–5 years) often occupied a transitional space, expressing reduced initial shock but growing awareness of systemic constraints. This pattern suggests that while acute culture shock diminishes over time, specific institutionally embedded stressors remain durable across career stages.

Culture shock extended beyond initial arrival. Gordon encountered unexpected operational hurdles with Chinese-only apps, whereas Maura experienced sensory disorientation from unfamiliar local cuisine (e.g., a whole chicken served with head and feet). Conversely, Jackie (Chinese-American) embraced these differences, enjoying culinary and cultural nuances. Positive revelations also emerged: widespread perceptions of societal safety allowed Cooper to leave belongings unattended in public, a stark contrast to home-country experiences. The participants described being treated as "superstar celebrities" in public, which provided an unexpected morale boost.

Cultural differences were not limited to East–West divides. Terry (South African) felt distinct from American and British colleagues, whereas Tori (American) perceived subtle discrimination from British peers, who stereotyped Americans as "loud" or "aggressive." Jeff highlighted the persistent tension caused by "saving face" behaviors outside the classroom. These ongoing adaptation struggles directly impacted participants' sense of belonging and esteem, relating to core levels of Maslow's hierarchy.

Faculty–Student Dynamics

Student relationships emerged as the single strongest source of job satisfaction but simultaneously the primary source of frustration when intercultural and institutional barriers limited engagement.

Most faculty expressed deep appreciation for relationships formed with Chinese international students. Armand treasured letters received years after graduation, affirming his lasting career impact and expressing surprise in his "positive influence" on students' lives. Terry enjoyed ongoing holiday communications and updates on exam performance. Over half of the participants reported forming long-term bonds that provided profound emotional fulfillment and reinforced their sense of achievement.

However, significant challenges arise from intercultural communication barriers. Low English proficiency has hindered interactive teaching, with Joseph noting a perceived decline in comprehension over recent years. Cultural norms of deference, rooted in Confucian respect for teacher authority, often manifested as passivity. Jackie felt that he was "speaking to an empty room" when students failed to seek clarification, whereas Christian found students' lack of resourcefulness "infuriating," especially with large class sizes.

Technology added complexity: Terry struggled to assess authentic learning amid the widespread use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT), and Joseph criticized overreliance on translation software, reflecting the transformative impact of technology on transnational education and highlighting the need for clear institutional policies on digital equity (Lane et al., 2025). Grade obsession created additional pressure. Randy described constant negotiation with students fixated on marks for prestigious graduate admissions. At the same time, Marley faced subtle threats from influential families, implying contract risks if high grades were not awarded, describing these tactics as "blackmail."

Despite these frustrations, many faculty members derive deep satisfaction from paternalistic roles. Joseph found fulfillment in guiding homesick first-year students as they navigated life away from home, describing an almost fatherly connection.

Institutional Support Impacts

The perceived inadequacy of organizational support amplified both cultural and pedagogical frustrations, with governance constraints repeatedly identified as the root cause.

A 20-hour Mandarin course represented a positive but insufficient step (university email, September 3, 2025). Broader administrative support, particularly for virtual teaching, AI policy, and protection from grade-related pressure, was widely described as lacking. Christian's overload from large classes, Jackie's overlooked students, and Marley's vulnerability to influential families all pointed to systemic gaps that threatened contract security and teaching efficacy.

These findings collectively reveal how institutional structures designed to support expatriate faculty often simultaneously constrain the professional autonomy and safety needed for sustained satisfaction and retention.

DISCUSSION

This study investigates how cultural adaptation, interactions with Chinese international students, post-COVID-19 teaching dynamics, and organizational support shape the job satisfaction and well-being of expatriate faculty at China's offshore campuses. The findings reveal that cultural differences, student–teacher relationships, and institutional constraints significantly affect faculty morale and retention. Unlike prior work that examined general job satisfaction, this study addresses novel gaps in non-Western transnational education contexts, particularly the interplay between rewarding student relationships and systemic barriers that undermine faculty well-being.

Cultural Adaptation and Cross-Cultural Wellness

Faculty experiences with cultural adaptation underscore its profound impact on cross-cultural wellness. Language barriers and culture shock hinder communication and integration, which is consistent with research on expatriate challenges in non-Anglophone settings (Cen, 2018; Kim et al., 2024). For example, Christian's struggle to learn Mandarin and Gordon's difficulties navigating Chinese-language apps reflect barriers to Maslow's needs for safety and belonging (Maslow, 1954). These challenges reduce job satisfaction, aligning with studies linking culture shock to turnover intentions (Alemu & Pykhtina, 2020; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018). Centralized governance in China's offshore campuses, which limits faculty autonomy, further complicates adaptation (Xia et al., 2023).

However, positive cultural experiences have been shown to enhance well-being. Jackie's appreciation for Chinese cuisine and Cooper's sense of safety fulfilled Maslow's need for belonging and Herzberg's motivators, such as recognition (F. L. Herzberg, 1966). Institutional documents suggest some support (*Faculty Handbook,* 2020, 2022, 2025), but participants reported that they had insufficient resources. Cross-cultural training can mitigate these challenges by fostering cultural intelligence and resilience (Doherty et al., 2013; Ramalu & Subramaniam, 2019). Maura's difficulty in navigating students' cultural knowledge gaps highlights the need for training to enhance intercultural communication and support faculty retention (Qu & Dai, 2024).

Critically, the data reveal novel layers of adaptation, such as intra-Western frictions (e.g., Tori's perceived discrimination from British colleagues), which complicate belonging beyond East–West binaries. Unexpected positives, such as "celebrity" treatment or safety perceptions, indicate hidden motivators in non-Western transnational education, suggesting additional resilience factors for international faculty (Buckner et al., 2021).

Faculty–Student Interactions and Intercultural Communication

Interactions with Chinese international students significantly shaped faculty morale. Positive relationships fulfill Herzberg's (1966) motivators, such as achievement, enhancing satisfaction (Hagedorn, 2000). Over half of the participants reported long-term bonds, with Armand receiving messages years later expressing gratitude and Terry enjoying holiday updates. These connections provided profound emotional fulfillment. These connections fulfilled belongingness and esteem needs (Maslow) and served as key motivators (Herzberg).

However, challenges such as low English proficiency and cultural passivity hinder engagement. Jackie felt that he was "speaking to an empty room" when students failed to clarify their misunderstandings, reflecting a deference rooted in Confucian norms (Heng, 2020; C. Wang & Chiu, 2024; Wilkins & Annabi, 2023). Students' reliance on AI tools and translation software undermined authentic learning (Terry, Joseph). Grade obsession created additional pressure, with Marley facing subtle threats from influential families, described as "blackmail." These stressors reflect Herzberg's hygiene factors, such as poor working conditions. While these challenges are significant, it is crucial to recognize students' concurrent agency and resourcefulness, such as forming study groups or leveraging technology, which faculty can learn to identify and leverage for more effective engagement (Heng, 2020).

The prevalence of paternalistic bonds (e.g., Joseph guiding homesick students) reveals an emotional fulfillment dimension that is often absent in transnational education research. Randy's "constant negotiation" with GPA-obsessed students and Marley's experiences with coercion indicate novel power imbalances stemming from students' socioeconomic influence. These findings extend the literature on Confucian deference by revealing coercive elements. Such dynamics suggest implications for global transnational education, where understanding student agency and culturally responsive practices could inform equity strategies (Bi, 2025; King & Bailey, 2021; Oladipo et al., 2024).

Post-COVID Dynamics and Virtual Learning

Post-COVID-19 institutional disruptions intensified student disengagement and language barriers. Virtual platforms exacerbate these issues, increasing faculty stress when support for online pedagogies is lacking (Gao & Liu, 2021). These findings extend research on transnational education disruptions by focusing on faculty experiences on China's offshore campuses (Breaden et al., 2025).

Inadequate support reflects Herzberg's hygiene factors, contributing to dissatisfaction. Institutional efforts, such as a 20-hour Mandarin course (as mentioned in a university email on September 3, 2025), were insufficient, underscoring the need for tailored strategies to increase faculty well-being in hybrid settings.

Organizational Support Strategies

To increase faculty job satisfaction and retention, institutions must implement targeted support strategies that address specific needs. Cross-cultural training can address adaptation challenges, whereas robust language resources mitigate off-campus barriers (Li & Huang, 2024). Mentorship fosters a sense of belonging, countering isolation (Nasser Al-Tamimi & Abdullateef, 2023). Clear policies on AI and grade negotiations protect faculty from emerging power imbalances (Wang & Chiu, 2024). These strategies, aligned with Herzberg's two-factor theory and Maslow's hierarchy, reveal a pathway toward collaborative environments that support both faculty well-being and the educational experience of Chinese international students in offshore campuses (Deuchar, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study offers an in-depth analysis of the factors influencing expatriate faculty job satisfaction at China's offshore campuses, with a focus on cultural adaptation, interactions with Chinese international students, and post-COVID-19 teaching dynamics. The findings reveal a central tension: positive, long-term student relationships emerged as the strongest source of emotional fulfillment and professional reward. Conversely, culture shock, language barriers, and perceived student passivity function as significant stressors, often compounded by subtle grade-related pressures from influential families. Critically, an "autonomy-support paradox" was evident, wherein institutional support (e.g., language courses) frequently coexists with centralized governance that limits academic freedom, undermining their effectiveness.

These findings address underexplored gaps in transnational education research, directly linking faculty well-being to the learning environment of Chinese international students. To navigate this paradox, practical strategies, including cross-cultural training, culturally responsive pedagogy, and transparent policies on AI and grading, are essential. Their implementation, which focuses on granting greater professional autonomy, can enhance faculty retention and, in turn, improve the educational experience and equity for the students they serve. Future research should investigate student perspectives on these dynamics and evaluate the proposed strategies across diverse transnational contexts to enhance global education initiatives.

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