



Chinese athletes' and parents' motivations for U.S. collegiate sports participation

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ABSTRACT: *To gain an understanding of international student recruitment and retention in collegiate athletics, this study examines the motivations and decision-making processes of Chinese high school athletes and their parents in pursuing U.S. collegiate sport opportunities. Using the push-pull framework and an ecological perspective, it explores how individual aspirations, family priorities, institutional resources, and national policies shape transnational mobility. Semistructured focus group discussions with 10 athletes and eight parents revealed six key motivational themes and highlighted the influence of recent collegiate sport-related policy changes in China. The findings suggest that while both groups value U.S. sport pathways, athletes and parents may hold different motivations and expectations. The study emphasizes the need for culturally responsive, context-specific communication strategies in recruitment and retention efforts.*

Keywords: college choice, international college athletes, international student, motivation

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INTRODUCTION

As international student enrollment continues to rise globally, research has increasingly focused on recruitment strategies, social integration, and institutional support systems (Grizzard et al., 2023; McFadden et al., 2012). A growing body of work suggests that campus involvement, particularly through collegiate sports, can enhance international students' sense of belonging and social capital. For example, Kim et al. (2023) reported that identifying with college sports teams strengthens international students' sense of community and social support, highlighting sports' potential role in adjustment and retention. Despite this growing interest, international college athletes (ICAs) remain an understudied population (Sethi et al., 2022). These students navigate dual transitions as international students and competitive athletes, often within unfamiliar academic and sporting systems. Understanding their motivations is critical for both recruitment and long-term adaptation (Grizzard et al., 2023; Sethi, 2024).

While recruitment is often framed around institutional offerings, strategic marketing emphasizes the need to understand athletes' personal goals and cultural contexts to improve outreach (Dwyer, 2020). ICAs are active decision-makers shaped by individual aspirations, family dynamics, and national systems. Although studies have explored ICA motivations from Europe and Latin America (Stokowski et al., 2013; Grizzard et al., 2023), little attention has been given to athletes from underrepresented countries, such as China (Sethi, 2024). Cultural differences can also hinder communication during recruitment (McFadden et al., 2012). Motivation, broadly defined as the perceived value and expected outcomes that guide and sustain behavior (Braver et al., 2014), plays a key role in these decisions. Exploring how Chinese athletes and their parents interpret and act on these motivations can inform more culturally responsive and effective recruitment practices.

The push-pull theory of motivation, widely applied in migration studies and ICA research (Grizzard et al., 2023), offers a structured lens to identify external conditions that push individuals away from their home country, such as limited sports development or rigid academic pathways, and pull them toward specific countries or institutions through factors such as athletic scholarships, academic prestige, or cultural exposure. While valuable in highlighting external motivators, this framework benefits from being situated within a broader developmental context. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) extends this perspective by highlighting how motivations are shaped through interactions within nested social environments. Although the full system layers are not discussed in this study, Bronfenbrenner's framework is used conceptually to highlight how adolescent motivation is embedded in relational and cultural contexts. Combined with push-pull theory, this approach offers a holistic view of motivation by capturing individual, familial, and broader systemic influences. This study aims to understand the perspectives of Chinese athletes and their parents to explore the complex motivations driving transnational athletic and study abroad decisions. The research addresses the following questions:

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- RQ1: What are the motivations driving Chinese athletes and their parents to pursue college athletics in the U.S.?
- RQ2: What push and pull factors from home and host countries influence the decision-making process of Chinese athletes and their parents?

METHOD

The study used a qualitative thematic analysis method to understand Chinese athletes' and parents' motivations for U.S. collegiate sport participation. Ten Chinese high school athletes (eight females, two males; $M_{age} = 17.1$ years) and eight parents (six mothers, two fathers; $M_{age} = 48.5$ years) who were planning or preparing for the athletes' pursuit of college athletics in the U.S. participated in the study. Sports experience ranged from two to thirteen years. Participants were recruited in Beijing, China, during the summer of 2024 through consultancy services supporting transnational sport academies. The Institutional Review Board approved the study, and the respondents provided written consent before they participated in the focus group interviews. Four semistructured focus groups (two with athletes and two with parents), each with four to five participants and lasting approximately 60 minutes, were conducted in Mandarin. Sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed by two bilingual researchers, including the first author, a former ICA.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data via an inductive thematic approach to capture emergent meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The first author, a native Mandarin speaker, coded transcripts and categorized motivation-related units into exclusive themes. To ensure coding consistency, a native Mandarin-speaking graduate student independently coded the same units. They refined category definitions through two discussions, achieving high interrater reliability (Cohen's kappa = 0.83) and indicating strong theme agreement (McHugh, 2012).

RESULTS

Thematic analysis yielded 48 distinct motivational units, which were categorized into six exclusive themes: education and sport system, individual fit and future development, resources, additional pathways, competitive level, and past player achievement. These themes capture the primary push and pull factors influencing Chinese athletes' and parents' decisions to pursue U.S. collegiate athletics (Table 1).

Table 1: Motivations for Studying Abroad (*n* of motivation units = 48, Cohen’s kappa = 0.83)

Theme	Definition	n (athlete, parent)	Example Quote
Education and Sport System	To pursue opportunities shaped by differences in educational and athletic systems between home and host countries.	17 (10, 7)	“In China, it’s hard to balance both school and training. If you focus on sports, you fall behind in class. However, in the U.S., they support both, so my daughter can keep developing as an athlete and still get a good education.”
Individual Fit and Future Development	To seek personal growth, self-exploration, and a better fit for one’s personality and long-term goals.	14 (7, 7)	“I’m not the type who can just follow one path all the time. I want to explore more, learn another culture, and grow beyond just being an athlete. Studying abroad feels more ‘me.’”
Resources	To access better support systems abroad or to overcome limited resources in the home country.	11 (7, 4)	“When we saw the U.S. campus and gym, it felt like a completely different level of support. My daughter just kept saying she hopes to play in that gym one day.”
Additional Path	To expand future options by applying to both domestic and international pathways.	3 (0, 3)	“We considered studying abroad as a backup option for our child in case they didn’t get into a top university here.”
Competitive Level	To compete at a higher level due to greater professional or athletic development opportunities abroad.	2 (2, 0)	“The opportunities to compete in a top-level league here are limited unless you’re trained professionally from a young age. I believe playing college sports in the U.S. could open up more doors for my future as an athlete.”
Past Player Achievement	To be inspired by the success of former athletes who studied or competed at U.S. universities or colleges.	1 (1, 0)	“A player from my high school went to a U.S. college and is now competing in NCAA DI. That got me interested in exploring this option.”

Education and Sport Systems

The participants, including both athletes and parents, described clear contrasts between the Chinese and U.S. collegiate sport systems. They noted the imbalance in China's education and sports structure, with one athlete noting that, "In China, it feels like you have to pick just one path...you are either focusing on school or on sports, but not truly both." University athletic pathways in China were described as "heavily focused on sports performance", offering limited academic support to collegiate athletes. This makes it challenging for students to pursue broader educational goals alongside their athletic commitments. In contrast, U.S. institutions were consistently portrayed as more flexible and supportive, allowing students to "develop comprehensively" in academics and sports. A key concern was China's 2023 policy restricting college athletes to sport-related majors, which several parents described as "a drastic change and difficult to adjust to." In contrast, they viewed U.S. colleges as offering more diverse academic options and providing opportunities for their children to "develop independence and teamwork."

Individual Fit and Future Development

We also found that participants tend to focus on environments that match the athlete's personality, needs, and aspirations. Both athletes and parents described the U.S. college experience as an opportunity for personal growth, independence, and exploration, with several referring to it as "a chance to broaden one's horizons." The decision to study abroad was viewed not only as a practical opportunity but also as a pathway for identity development and thriving in the future. As one athlete explained, "I felt that [with the U.S. collegiate sport system], our values were more aligned, which encouraged me to move in this direction", highlighting how individual perspectives shaped the decision-making process.

Resources

Some athletes and parents have visited campuses and training facilities at both Chinese and U.S. institutions. These firsthand experiences shaped their views of distinct environments. U.S. collegiate programs were described as offering strong pull factors, including advanced training facilities, professional coaching, and scholarships, signaling institutional support for both athletic and academic development. In contrast, their visits to Chinese institutions revealed push factors such as limited resources and underdeveloped support systems, particularly in less-developed sports such as football. One athlete remarked, "In China, football just started to develop, and the resources just aren't there," which ultimately pushed them to explore other opportunities that could better support their athletic and personal growth.

Parents: Additional Pathways

Three parents described the U.S. college sports route as an alternative or backup option to China's highly competitive Gaokao system. This theme reflected strategic family planning, as some families pursued both domestic and international university applications to provide more opportunities for the child. One parent explained, "We just wanted to find him another path, to create more options." Another explained, "He [the child] wanted to apply to a top university

in China, but if that did not go well, going abroad would be the alternative.” These comments illustrate how the U.S. system was viewed as offering more holistic opportunities, greater flexibility, and potential for personal growth.

Athletes: Competitive Level

Two athletes emphasized the appeal of competing at a higher athletic standard through NCAA programs. One athlete shared, “I looked into it and watched some NCAA Division I games, and I realized the atmosphere was incredible and everyone just wanted to win and play.” The opportunity to participate in a highly competitive and structured environment, such as the NCAA championship, was a major draw. In contrast, as one participant noted, “There isn’t even a real college league” for certain sports in China (e.g., football). This lack of structured collegiate competition highlights the appeal of U.S. programs for athletes seeking both high-level performance and greater visibility.

Athletes: Past Player Achievement

One athlete described being motivated by the achievements of earlier Chinese players who had successfully navigated the U.S. college sport system. She shared that at the beginning of the season, “I already knew that one of the older girls had gone abroad, so I looked into it,” indicating how the path taken by peers sparked her interest. These individuals served as inspirational figures, demonstrating the potential benefits of this route, including athletic development and expanded career opportunities.

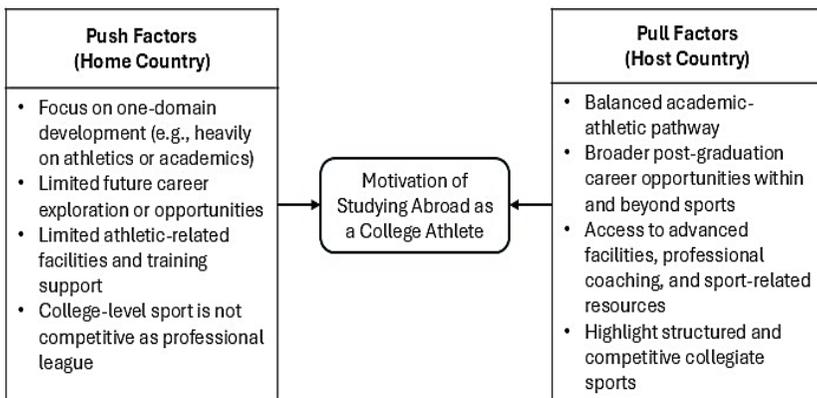


Figure 1: Major push and pull factors that motivate Chinese athletes and parents to study abroad as College athletes in the U.S.

DISCUSSION

The current study underscores the importance of viewing ICA recruitment not simply as an institutional strategy but also as a comprehensive process grounded in cultural, familial, and structural motivations. By examining how Chinese high school athletes and their parents navigate decisions about pursuing U.S. collegiate sport opportunities, we highlight how push and pull factors work together to shape mobility decisions.

Push factors stemmed primarily from dissatisfaction and lack of support with the domestic system. The participants described a rigid Chinese sport-education model that lacks support for both academics and athletics, making it difficult for students to fully develop in both areas. The 2023 policy change, which restricted collegiate athletes to sport-related majors, further constrained academic options and intensified concerns about long-term career trajectories. These institutional limitations, along with an underdeveloped training infrastructure and insufficient academic-athletic integration, contributed to a strong sense of exclusion and a growing urgency to look elsewhere.

In contrast, pull factors associated with the U.S. collegiate sport system, such as academic flexibility, scholarships, holistic support services, and successful role models, offered an appealing alternative. Consistent with prior research (Dwyer, 2020), participants described the U.S. as a place that supports students' comprehensive development, balancing elite athletic development with broader academic exploration. Although Chinese athletes represent a relatively small proportion of NCAA international college athletes, their growing visibility and success reinforce the perceived accessibility and legitimacy of this pathway.

Importantly, the decision to study abroad was not made in isolation. It was embedded within family dynamics and broader cultural shifts. Parents often initiate the process, driven by aspirations for their children's academic and personal development. They invest substantial time and resources in navigating these pathways. Their motivations, however, did not always fully align with those of their children. While some athletes emphasize sport performance and personal growth, parents often prioritize long-term academic and life opportunities. These differing priorities highlight the need to recognize athletes and parents as distinct but interrelated decision-makers.

Overall, the current study offers important insight into an understudied group of athletes from China, highlighting how push and pull factors shape both athletes' and parents' motivations in the pretransition phase. While it captures a detailed view of this specific context, future research could explore other regions and countries with different resources, institutional priorities, and intended collegiate competition levels to better understand how exposure, competition, and scholarships influence motivation among athletes from around the globe. Longitudinal work could also trace how these motivations evolve through recruitment and adjustment. Such an understanding can help institutions craft culturally responsive, targeted messages that address both practical concerns and aspirational goals; enable athletic departments and recruiters to build stronger trust; enhance engagement; and ultimately improve the recruitment, retention, and success of international collegiate athletes.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a deeper understanding of the factors that motivate Chinese high school athletes and their families to pursue collegiate sport opportunities in the U.S. By integrating ecological systems theory with the push–pull framework, the findings present a comprehensive view of how individual goals, family support, institutional structures, and sociocultural values intersect transnational athletic and educational decisions. These choices are not only strategic but also shaped by developmental and relational considerations. Grounded in an understanding of international athletes' and families' motivations, U.S. athletic programs and coaches can enhance recruitment strategies, foster culturally sensitive communication, and promote sustained engagement with athletes from underrepresented countries. The findings suggest that tailored policies and practices, including culturally informed recruitment approaches and supportive institutional structures, may improve the experiences and outcomes of ICAs. Future research should explore how these dynamics evolve over time and in diverse cultural contexts to inform further effective policy and practice in global sport and education systems.

Note. *In the preparation of this manuscript, we did not use artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation*

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