Navigating a double school-to-work transition: how do Chinese graduate students decide where to start their careers after studying abroad?

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Abstract

Purpose – This exploratory research aims to unravel how Chinese international students form their decisions regarding the school-to-work transition (sometimes also referred to as the university-to-work transition) when studying abroad.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors use the concepts of school-to-work transition and cultural approaches to investigate how Chinese graduate students make career decisions to navigate the school-to-work transition in the context of international mobility. The authors' empirical study is based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with Chinese graduate students studying in the Netherlands.

Findings – The authors discovered four patterns with two major subgroups among Chinese students studying in the universities in the Netherlands based on their initial intentions: return-return, open-return, open-stay and stay-stay. These patterns made sense when navigating the school-to-work transition: participants experienced varied international experiences, cultural perceptions and acknowledgment influences when enhancing employability and shaping their career decisions. Participants in the return-return and stay-stay groups indicated strong resilience and consistency in achieving their goals and strongly focused on long-term objectives. However, participants' open-return decision demonstrated a thoughtful alignment of personal goals and knowledge of the possible beneficial influence they may have in their home country. Open-stay participants utilized the overseas study opportunity to finalize their decisions and increase their employability in the local labor market, thereby creating a transition from university to work in the host country.

Originality/value – The authors highlight the way Chinese graduate students manage their international experience and provide novel insights into the role played by the cultural characteristics of their home country and host country.

Keywords School-to-work transition, Career decision-making, Graduate employability, International student mobility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The school-to-work transition (STWT) is a challenging phase when emerging adults finish full-time education and enter initial employment (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). This period is critical as they balance pressures to complete higher education, improve graduate

Disclosure statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

employability, and navigate other social role transitions, such as moving away from the parental home and taking on societal roles (Schoon and Bynner, 2019). This period not only shapes their career aspirations but also influences their graduate employability in an ever-changing job market. Continuous learning and resource acquisition are crucial for emerging adults to become and remain employable (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a, b; De Vos *et al.*, 2019; Donald *et al.*, 2018). However, little is known about the initial career trajectories of international graduate students (Pham *et al.*, 2023). Research specifically addressing how graduates enter and prepare for navigating the STWT in a global context and how they develop competitive advantages to be ready for work remains limited (Herbert *et al.*, 2020).

Simultaneously, internationalization and technological advancements have significantly increased the number of young adults studying abroad (OECD, 2020). A notable example is the surge in Chinese students studying abroad, rising from 284,700 in 2010 to 703,500 in 2019 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2020). More than half of the Chinese students pursuing master's degrees abroad plan to enter the labor market after graduation. Foreign educational systems offer significant opportunities for employability development during the STWT, and many international graduate students have demonstrated resilience in navigating obstacles to secure immediate employment (Pham *et al.*, 2019). However, international graduates also face significant risks and challenges. The impact of COVID-19 has underscored these challenges, with businesses being affected and thousands of jobs lost. Consequently, approximately 70% of Chinese students chose to return to China (New Oriental Group, 2023). This disruptive event prompt deliberate career reflection and is defined as a career shock (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018) that directly influences graduates' decision-making processes. Therefore, Chinese graduate students need to develop career competencies to navigate uncertainties and challenges and equip them with essential skills in the workplace (Pham *et al.*, 2024; Talluri *et al.*, 2024).

This is especially evident for Chinese graduate students studying abroad, where they encounter diverse cultural environments and face varied study- and work-related experiences. These dynamics add an extra layer of complexity to the already challenging transition, requiring students to adjust their behavior and understanding to succeed in cross-cultural settings (Arthur, 2016). To illustrate, Alves and Tomlinson (2020), Saito and Pham (2020), and Tholen (2013) explore how differences in cultural values, institutional resources, and interactions between education, labor markets, and employers shape diverse employability strategies. For instance, understanding hidden rules and conventions in diverse labor markets can pose significant challenges, and might slow down career progress (Pham *et al.*, 2024). However, how international students tackle these challenges has not been extensively researched. Our study connects with the previous argument about navigating cross-cultural challenges by illustrating how these challenges influence the ways graduates develop and apply cross-cultural competencies to enhance their employability.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Chinese graduate students abroad, focusing on their pre-STWT trajectories across diverse cultural backgrounds. Understanding these diverse experiences is crucial, as they significantly influence students' readiness for the job market (Herbert *et al.*, 2020), including their career choices regarding geographical and professional transitions after higher education. These experiences also shape the development of graduate employability, aiding in their adaptation to evolving labor market conditions and enhancing their prospects of securing suitable employment (Blokker *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to answer the following question: *How and why do Chinese graduate students form their initial career decisions regarding the school-to-work transition in the context of internationalization?*

This study makes significant contributions to the STWT and graduate employability literature. First, by examining the initial stage of the STWT experienced by Chinese graduate students studying abroad, we shed light on the challenges and opportunities for this group, deepening our understanding of international students' mobility complexities. It emphasizes individual agency (e.g. competencies and behaviors) and contextual (cultural) factors for international students navigating these transitions (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a; Blokker *et al.*, 2023). Second, our study contributes to employability literature by exploring the role of international lived experiences in shaping graduates' employability development. Adopting a career-focused approach, our study bridges the gap between graduate and work employability literature (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024). By examining how international experiences influence initial career trajectories, we highlight the importance of integrating these insights into the career development of graduate students. Our findings also contribute to graduate students, career coaches and practitioners, and universities, by providing insights that can enhance the effective preparation and navigation of the STWT, and management of graduate employability, and facilitate the transition into initial careers globally.

In the following sections, we explain the theoretical framework and research methodology before presenting and discussing our findings.

Theoretical background
School-to-work transition
The school-to-work transition (STWT) can be defined as "a process during which individuals navigate a physical and psychological movement when leaving education and starting to integrate into the labor market" (Blokker *et al.*, 2023, p. 245). Although different terms exist to denote this transition – such as university-to-work and college-to-work transition – we frame our research within the STWT terminology, as it has been the most frequently used and inclusive term (Blokker *et al.*, 2023; Steiner *et al.*, 2022). Traditionally, the STWT has been viewed as a one-time decision-making moment for young people to choose their occupations (De Vos *et al.*, 2019). However, recent research suggests that within multi-level and differentiated societies (Schoon and Silbereisen, 2009), the transition is an unpredictable and volatile process characterized by a series of choices and ongoing learning and adapting cycles. These complexities necessitate individuals to invest resources in coping with changes (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a, b). As the first major transition, it can be challenging and stressful because individuals navigate various uncertainties and adjustments. The STWT sets the stage for other transitions over the course of a person's life, making it an essential foundation for the entire lifespan (Blokker *et al.*, 2023; Zacher, 2015). Moreover, experiences during this early career phase significantly influence subsequent career transitions and long-term careers (Sullivan and Al Ariss, 2021; Zacher and Froidevaux, 2021).

The STWT has been investigated from diverse perspectives (for a review, see Blokker *et al.*, 2023). For example, psychologists consider the transition a key developmental task that emerging adults must undertake concurrently with other life transitions that characterize their passage toward adulthood regarding decision-making processes and adaptation skills (Masdonati and Fournier, 2015; Murphy *et al.*, 2010). Research in the field of education focuses on how school systems facilitate or impede entry into the labor market (Behle, 2020; Schoon and Heckhausen, 2019). Although psychological research and educational research on the STWT are inherently connected (see, e.g. the valuable insights offered by scholars like Clarke (2018) and Healy (2023) in the higher education literature), there are still many unexplored opportunities to connect graduate employability and career development

research when exploring how students move from education to work (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024).

International experience and STWT

International experience involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through exposure to different cultural and social contexts (Byram, 1997). It has been studied from various perspectives, including cultural, social, economic, and educational (Marginson, 2013). For many international students, the pursuit of international education is motivated by a desire to enhance personal and professional development, intercultural proficiency, and employability (Crossman and Clarke, 2010). Additionally, it is driven by a deeply subjective and intrinsic motivation to realize one's self-worth and fulfill one's life purpose (Yue and Lu, 2022). These qualities are highly valued in the globalized job market, enabling graduates to access more opportunities during the STWT.

Current research has extensively focused on international graduates in popular destinations like Australia and North America, which attract a significant number of foreign students (Jackson and Li, 2022; Norris and Gillespie, 2009; Pham, 2021; Saito and Pham, 2020). These studies highlight several benefits of international education, such as improved language skills, cross-cultural competence, and expanded professional networks, which are crucial for successful integration into the labor market. However, despite the growing number of international Chinese graduate students, there is limited research on their specific experiences and challenges during the STWT. This is problematic because Chinese graduate students often face unique cultural and contextual differences that influence their transitions to the workforce. These include differing educational systems, language barriers, and varying job market dynamics (Tran, 2016). Such factors can significantly impact their decisions on where and how to work, how to navigate their careers after graduation, and how to effectively unlock their international experience. Moreover, international experiences can shape individuals' career aspirations and decision-making processes, thereby influencing their long-term professional trajectories in contemporary careers (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). This dynamic, in turn, affects the global labor market, as international graduates bring diverse skills and perspectives to their roles. Therefore, integrating insights from studies of international graduates with a focus on the unique experiences of Chinese students can provide a novel understanding of how international experience influences the STWT process.

Graduate employability of international graduate students

Academic achievement, work-related experience, adaptability, and language skills are widely recognized as critical components of graduate employability (Kishino and Takahashi, 2019; Koen *et al.*, 2014; Tomlinson, 2017) and have become a trending topic in contemporary career studies (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017). These competencies are essential for helping individuals thrive in the labor market after completing their education and navigating the STWT. Such competencies are increasingly being integrated into teaching and learning programs across higher education institutions (Healy, 2023). However, there is a growing consensus that research in higher education and career development should mutually inform each other, providing a more holistic understanding of the preparations needed for successful STWT (Akkermans *et al.*, 2024). To address existing challenges, such as the relationship between educational attributes, industry needs, and the experiences of international graduates, there is a need to effectively integrate education and career development perspectives. Additionally, current support structures for international students often fall short, failing to adequately prepare them for the STWT and to make informed career decisions. Enhancing these preparatory measures is crucial for equipping international

graduates with the necessary employability to navigate the STWT successfully, thereby laying a strong foundation for their employment outcomes (Pham, 2021; Pham *et al.*, 2019) and long-term career development (Blokker *et al.*, 2023).

Graduate employability research has provided valuable insights into the skills that students can develop to enhance their employability, often demonstrated through various forms of capital (Tomlinson, 2017; Pham *et al.*, 2024). Increasing attention has been paid to the pivotal roles played by diverse institutional and societal contexts (Clarke, 2018; Donald, 2023; Forrier and Sels, 2003). For instance, Ma and Bennett's (2024) study indicates the importance of considering labor market conditions, which are shaped by the specific social context and significantly influence realistic employment prospects. Understanding these conditions is crucial for the initial employability development among Chinese students in different labor markets. This discourse is inherently tied to the unpredictable and challenging STWT, highlighting the importance of graduate employability, especially in navigating diverse cultural, organizational, and job market conditions. As an increasing number of international graduate students compete in the labor market, understanding how they prepare and develop employability has become important for their future employment success (Saito and Pham, 2020). Therefore, this study examines the role of lived international experience in employability preparation and development. It explores how graduates' decisions are shaped by integrating various qualities from both their home and host countries, potentially translating into a successful transition to the labor market.

Method
Research design
Chinese students studying abroad face unique challenges, as they navigate the transition from school to work. Unlike their peers, who remain in their home country, these students must adapt to different educational systems, cultural contexts, and job markets. These international experiences are nuanced and deeply personal, lending themselves well to qualitative investigation. This is in line with Richardson *et al.*'s (2022) invitation for more qualitative research designs in career research, which highlights the importance of understanding individuals' lived career experiences. We argue that a qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research, which allows for an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives and the subjective meanings these students assign to their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

To generate an understanding of the understudied lived experiences of Chinese students studying abroad and how these influenced their career decisions during the STWT preparation, we began with rich data as the foundation for our theorizing (Charmaz, 2014). We decided to collect data on individuals' experiences and lives, encompassing the past, present, and future (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Additionally, we adopted an interpretive approach, as described by Charmaz (2014), to investigate the initial school-to-work transition experiences of Chinese students. This interpretive approach is particularly effective for deeply exploring the subjective experiences and perspectives of social actors in understudied phenomena (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). Consequently, we position this study within a social constructivist ontology, operating on the assumption that individuals are knowledgeable agents within their socially constructed realities (Cohen *et al.*, 2004). For our specific study, social constructivism allows us to examine careers within their respective social, economic, cultural, and temporal contexts (Creswell and Poth, 2018), thereby aiding our analysis of how Chinese graduate students with international experience prepare for their careers and navigate the transition from school to work. We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore students' perceptions of their initial career development.

Sampling and data collection

We first applied the purposive sampling method and contacted Chinese students studying in the Netherlands to compose the sample. Purposive sampling refers to the sampling method widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). The sample group included Chinese students who were currently enrolled in master's programs in the Netherlands and were in the phase of six months to one year before graduation, thereby preparing for the transition from school to work. The inclusion criterion of six months to one year ensured that participants were undergoing the transition and recalled their lived experiences. Participation in our study was voluntary.

After purposive sampling, we continued using snowball sampling to enlarge our sample and identify additional respondents. Snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling, through which respondents are introduced to other potential respondents who meet the sampling criteria (Browne, 2005). All respondents were approached through email and social media (i.e. WeChat, Facebook, and LinkedIn). The combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensures that key demographics are included and helps reach additional participants, further enhancing the diversity and representativeness of the sample. We used a comparative method for theme saturation to determine the required sample size (Constantinou *et al.*, 2017). That is, we conducted coding immediately after the interviews and compared the new interviews with those of the others. Once we identified similar themes across the interviews, which occurred after 28 interviews, we checked for their reoccurrence in the two final and additional interviews. To prevent any bias in the identified themes, we randomly rearranged all 30 interviews and then performed a final check for the recurrence of these themes. Consequently, we reached saturation after 30 interviews with 8 male and 22 female Chinese graduate students. This is in line with the overall Chinese student population abroad, in which the proportion of females is also higher than that of males (Wang and Miao, 2022). See Table 1 for an overview of the respondents' demographics in the final sample.

To ensure data quality, we developed an interview protocol informed by our disciplinary perspectives and sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014), which was approved by the university's research Ethical Review Board. Sensitizing concepts are "some ideas and directions to explore" which provide "a start of inquiry not an end to it", thereby, being tentative tools that are "subject to correction and change" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 31). Specifically, the interview questions were organized into three sensitizing concepts related to the STWT: study motivations, career expectations, and career competency development. Initially, we conducted a pilot interview before the official interview process began (Locke, 2001). Based on the pilot interviews, minor modifications were made to the interview questions to avoid repetition. Each interview began with a brief introduction, including information on interview duration, data anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants were asked to briefly describe their educational backgrounds and experiences. The participants were also invited to share their international mobility experiences and encounter challenges. Finally, participants were asked to envision their future careers. The full interview protocol can be found in the Online Supplementary Material.

The interviews lasted for an average duration of approximately 60 min (ranging between 51 and 75 min). The variation in interview length was caused by the varying experiences of the participants who studied the stories. In addition, the first author established trust with the participants at the beginning of the interview, because they shared similar experiences and backgrounds, and the gap in power and status was not different, so the interviewees were willing to share their stories and experiences. Interviews were conducted during the non-studying time of the Chinese students to ensure a neutral and safe setting for them to express their experiences. Before the interviews, participants provided informed consent and agreed to be recorded. Data collection took place between March and June 2021. The

ID	Gender	Bachelor	Master
1	Female	China	Master in Marketing
2	Male	China	Master in Mechanical Engineering
3	Female	China	Master in Civil engineering
4	Male	China	Master in International Law
5	Female	China	Master in Data analysis
6	Female	China	Master in Computer Science
7	Female	China	Master in Business Administration
8	Female	China	Master in Computer Science (Big Data)
9	Female	Thailand	Master in Culture, organization, and management
10	Female	Netherlands	Master in Business Administration
11	Female	China	Master in Computer Science
12	Female	China	Master in Psychology/Sociology
13	Female	Netherlands	Master in Economics/Finance
14	Male	Netherlands	Master in Marketing
15	Female	China	Master in Anthropology/Sociology
16	Female	UK	Master in Strategy and organization
17	Female	China	Master in Accounting/Finance
18	Female	China	Master in International management
19	Male	Netherlands	Master in Human Resources Management
20	Male	China	Master in International Management
21	Male	Netherlands	Master in Finance
22	Female	China	Master in Food Engineering
23	Female	Germany	Master in Finance
24	Female	China	Master in Food Engineering
25	Female	China	Master in Food/Agriculture
26	Male	China	Master in Finance and International Management
27	Female	China	Master in International Law
28	Female	Israel	Master in Food Engineering
29	Male	China	Master in Food Engineering
30	Female	UK	Higher Education/Educational Technology

Source(s): Authors' work

interviews were conducted online via Zoom ($n = 23$) or in person ($n = 7$) depending on each participant's preferences and the COVID restrictions. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, the native or preferred language of the participants.

Data analysis
To facilitate our analysis, we transcribed the interviews verbatim and utilized NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, for the coding process. NVivo allows the researcher to refer back to the context of specific codes, which helps overcome concerns about reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Our analysis involved an iterative process in which we constantly made sense of our data through comparisons (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). As a consequence, we conducted multiple rounds of coding to establish a comprehensive data structure that accurately represented individuals' experiences.

Our data analysis consisted of the following steps. First, we employed a bottom-up approach to extract relevant ideas and codes from the data, aligning them with our research study's goals and sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, the first author transcribed the interviews and wrote free-flowing, theorizing memoranda about emerging codes and hunches, which nurtured sensemaking of the data and highlighted areas that required further analysis. The first-order codes were induced by coding the interview data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), which was a step that the first author did after every transcribed

interview. From the get-go, our data collection and coding occurred simultaneously. The first author compared codes with the entire dataset we had gathered and, if necessary, revised the codes. The first-order codes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) allowed her to access key elements that were important to our informants.

The first author checked and coded the original Chinese texts to retain the original tone, subtle meanings of our interviewees, and dimensionality of the data for analysis. To gain a more profound understanding, the first author translated important transcriptions from Chinese into English and discussed the emerging codes with the second and third authors. Specifically, at this stage of the analysis, we explored a deeper structure among first-order codes. We moved back and forth from data to puzzling preliminary insights. Prevalent patterns among the codes were clustered into inductively induced second-order codes (theoretical categories). These second-order codes transformed the insights, based on informants' meanings into a higher level of abstraction (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). No relationships or causalities have been theorized at this point. The main reason was that we saw a tendency to choose a specific career direction after graduation.

We alternated between the literature and our initial codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to identify relationships and explore different categories of international experiences that influence employability development and career decision-making. Moreover, the authors subsequently returned to the participants to ensure that the themes represented their lived experiences. The approach ensured validity and overcame the limitations and ambiguities of using the two languages in conducting data collection and analysis. We assigned higher-level abstractions to interviewees' meanings during this stage, merging codes to enhance overall understanding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), as discussed next.

Findings

Overall, we found that Chinese graduate students' experiences were diverse, and cultural perception and acknowledgment played a significant role in their preparation for the school-to-work transition. We also uncovered two major subgroups among the students, differentiating them in terms of wanting to return to their home country versus staying in the host country after graduation. Moreover, across those two groups, we identified four patterns based on their initial intentions before leaving the host country and their current intentions at the time of data collection: return–return, open–return, open–stay, and stay–stay, as shown in Figure 1. Although these labels imply an emphasis on geography, we only used these labels because they clearly distinguish the career directions of the students in each of the groups, each of which showed distinct patterns of career values, competencies, and actions. We present our findings based on these groups and patterns because they show meaningfully different processes related to employability and career competency development.

Return to the home country
Return–return. The return-return group is characterized by international students who initially planned to return to China before they traveled abroad and never changed those plans along the way. This group showed remarkable stability in their career-related plans and actions, all of which were aimed at strengthening their employability back home in China. More specifically, four respondents expressed a strong desire to return to their home country and pursue their career goals there after completing their studies abroad. They maintained the same career vision they had before leaving home and believed that returning home was necessary to establish a stable foundation upon which they could build their lives and develop their careers. They attributed this orientation to their family and cultural values
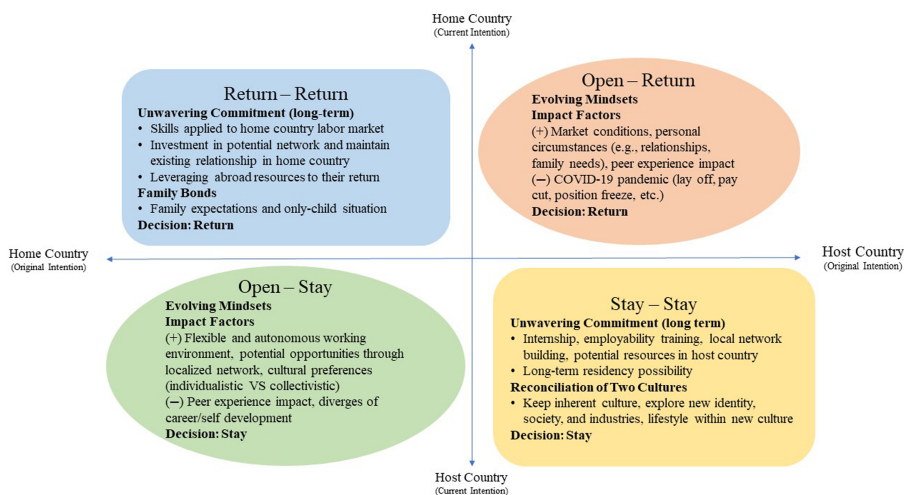
Note(s): For each category label, the initial term refers to the student's original plan before moving abroad, whereas the second one refers to their intentions at the time of being interviewed (e.g., "open-stay" means they were undecided about how and where they wanted to pursue their career when leaving China and ultimately decided they wanted to stay in the Netherlands

Source(s): Authors' work

as well as their circumstances, such as being the only child in the family. To meet their families' expectations, these respondents followed a consistent pathway toward achieving their career goals.

> Chinese people are more family-oriented, so they [Family members] are more inclined to encourage me to come back. [. . .]. I am an only child. I personally feel that the development here in the Netherlands of my career will not match our expectations [. . .]Thus, I am pretty sure I am going back to China. (P26)

The return-return group showed strong consistency in their career aspirations both before and while studying abroad, influenced by strong familial and cultural ties, and their motivation was to align their professional growth with the demands of the labor market in their home country. Interestingly, they did not see integrating into a new culture as a mandatory task or a challenge. Instead, they focused on maintaining a strong connection with their original goals while gaining new perspectives through international experience. Their primary focus was on honing their skills, leveraging their strengths, and identifying areas for improvement to better adapt to the labor market in their home country later on. They actively pursued resources to enhance their employability, such as engaging in internships and expanding their professional networks within Chinese companies, to explore potential job opportunities.

> I am doing an internship at a Chinese company to obtain and develop some potential opportunities and skills, I hope to prepare for the next step after graduation in China. If I am doing well, I could start a full-time job there. (P21)

The return-return group expressed less urgency in establishing or maintaining new relationships in the host country because they did not plan to develop their career there.

Instead, due to limited access to people back in their home country while studying abroad, they invested in maintaining existing relationships. For instance, they maintained close relationships with friends, classmates, and previous colleagues they had studied and worked with in their home country, whom they viewed as potential resources for job opportunities and recommendations upon their return. Overall, the findings showed that students in the return-return group saw their international mobility as an opportunity to strengthen their employability in their home country, leveraging the new resources they obtained in the host country to create a smooth school-to-work transition in their home country.

Open–return. Although the students in the open-return group ended with the same career plans as the return-return group (i.e. returning to China after graduation), they demonstrated a clearly different pattern of career behaviors along the way. The five respondents in the open-return group reported not being firmly committed to either staying or returning to their home country when they left to study abroad; instead, they maintained an open-minded attitude throughout their international mobility experience. However, their aspirations and ideas changed as they embarked on their journey and ultimately planned to return to their home countries.

During their time abroad, respondents were exposed to new cultures, working environments, and opportunities. They engaged in immersive experiences that broadened their horizons and challenged their abilities to live and study independently in a new country. These encounters triggered a series of reflections, causing their initial inclinations towards staying or returning to fluctuate and evolve during their studies abroad. The influence of various factors further contributed to the dynamic nature of their perspectives and shaped their aspirations, such as professional opportunities, market conditions, personal circumstances (e.g. relationships, family needs), and even chance encounters. Unexpectedly, the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of unpredictability to the decision-making process. The global crisis prompted them to reassess their priorities and to evaluate the potential benefits and drawbacks of staying or returning.

In addition to their international educational experiences, our research unveiled the significant role of unexpected and unplanned events in shaping individuals' career decision-making and personal growth, which is akin to what the career literature has called *career shocks* (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018). The occurrence of shocks during overseas education showcased the dynamic nature of individuals' future career paths and highlighted the impact of unforeseen circumstances on their decision-making. One respondent mentioned that the well-paid employment their peers attained in their home country sparked a reassessment of their aspirations and motivated them to consider returning to their home country. Although they expressed concerns about the unpredictable and uncertain market, they showed a willingness to go through one more transition back to their own culture and labor market, including collecting more information and market requirements. Additionally, they restarted building networks in their home countries for their potential returns.

> My peers in Shanghai have well-paid jobs, it's quite easy to find a job there with my study background, and there is a high demand for graduate students in this field, especially in some big cities, so I think it's easier to find a pretty nice job. (P05)

On the other hand, negative career shocks, such as unexpected challenges or limited professional prospects abroad, triggered a reflective process, leading them to re-evaluate their priorities and seek other career paths. The respondents mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic tremendously influenced their physical and mental well-being, and was the most prevalent negative experience. Because of being in lockdown alone and without support from family, the online study brought anxiety, including great fear of being infected and the uncertain separation from home and family. Moreover, the shrinking labor market with

fewer job opportunities and positions caused by the pandemic has caused additional uncertainty. They felt that returning home would provide them with a greater sense of security and stability in the face of uncertainty.

> Some of my friends need to face the risk of a lay-off. There were fewer jobs open for us[Chinese graduate students]. The main reason still was the pandemic, I made up my mind to go back to China after graduation. (P02)

To sum up, the open-return group's adaptable mindset allowed them to navigate the uncertainties and opportunities of international mobility effectively. Along their journey, they encountered various influencing factors that initially led to fluctuating intentions but ultimately converged on a common goal – returning home. This decision reflected a thoughtful alignment of personal aspirations and a recognition of the potential positive impact they could have in their home country.

Stay in the host country
Open–stay. Similar to the open-return group, the international students in the open-stay group originally left China undecided about their future career path. Also similar to that group was that their preferences evolved along the way and were influenced by career shocks. However, for this group, the specific shocks they experienced led them to navigate their preparation phase of the STWT in such a way that they favored staying in the Netherlands after graduation. 11 respondents initially had an open-minded view about their careers post-graduation but gradually expressed a desire to remain in the host country, where exposure to multicultural worldviews was an ongoing part of their career development. The respondents highlighted notable disparities in career aspirations in the two cultures. In collectivist cultures (in this case, China), career choices are primarily influenced by social norms and family factors. Conversely, individualistic cultures (in this case, the Netherlands) emphasize individual preferences and interests as the foundation for achieving career goals and personal fulfillment. However, as the respondents gained more experience, they reconciled these two cultural orientations and began to perceive the continuation of the STWT in the host country as viable and desirable. Through exploring international mobility and immersing themselves in a more independent and autonomous culture, the respondents gradually solidified their intention to stay in the host country, indicating a preference for the transition to a foreign setting. Furthermore, they did not feel the need to match their career goals with what was considered promising in their family or others' eyes, as would have been the case in their home country.

> I want to make the decision according to my interests, and what kind of career I want to have in the future after studying in this more self-centered country. [. . .]. Not like always asking parents or following the typical pathways. (P02)

Moreover, the respondents emphasized the significance of networking. However, unlike the approach adopted by the return-return group, this group placed great emphasis on maintaining and integrating their networks not only within their existing community but also in their academic and professional spheres in the new country. Their primary objective became to prepare for the STWT in the host country, leading them to actively establish and expand their social circles with diverse and localized connections. The respondents regarded their international classmates, teachers, and other acquaintances both on and off-campus as potentially valuable resources capable of directly or indirectly supporting their network and career development in the long run. To illustrate, one respondent mentioned accessing job resources through the parents of the family she babysat for. Ultimately, whether actively building and expanding or maintaining networks, the respondents shared their desire to

prepare early and equip themselves with the necessary networks and competencies to transition from education to work.

Like the open-return group, various experiences impacted the decision-making process for preparing for the next crucial transition. They also expressed that they began considering career paths intentionally because they participated in internships, company visits, and collaborative study courses. These experiences helped them realize how to enhance their employability in the host country's labor market and identify areas for improvement and development. Additionally, compared to their previous work-related experience, a more autonomous and flexible work routine enhanced their performance and sense of belonging, prompting them to reassess their future career prospects. Consequently, they believed that staying in the host country for early career development would be advantageous, leveraging the resources accumulated during their year of study and living there.

> Anyway, I want to try to look for jobs here in the Netherlands, because I have been studying and living here for almost two years, I like this country and get along with people I know here, friends, neighbors, classmates and colleagues I used to work with. They are also very important networking I have built up. (P01)

Some respondents experienced negative experiences in their home country that consolidated their decision to stay in the host country. These experiences were tied to personal circumstances and significantly impacted their thinking. For instance, one respondent decided to remain in the host country after learning about a tragic event (i.e. a suicide) that happened to a friend in the home country. Additionally, witnessing some friends' excessive overwork routines and the resulting burnout and health issues further shook their perspectives. These negative shocks prompted deep reflection on their future goals and expectations, ultimately shaping their career decisions.

> It was just a person who died of burnout or unpaid, you never thought of this could ever happen to someone who was actually close to you.[. . .] That's also why I want to stay and look for jobs here [host country] firmly now. (P06)

Overall, the students in the open-stay group used the international study opportunity in the host country to finalize their decisions, improve their employability in the local labor market, and match their interests for their future career paths. Thereby combining their inherent and newly obtained resources to create a start of school-to-work transition in the host country.

Stay–stay. Similar to the return-return group, the participants in the stay-stay group showed strong stability in how they approached their career plans and efforts. In this case, they initially wanted to move to the Netherlands to build their careers there and persevered in these plans throughout the process. Specifically, 10 respondents displayed an unwavering commitment to their initial goal, in this case, staying in the host country after completing their education abroad. Their strong desire to establish themselves in the host country stemmed from a multitude of factors, including the allure of a favorable lifestyle, an autonomous and flexible professional environment, and the potential for personal growth in their career. With a clear long-term plan and well-defined career vision, they actively pursued opportunities to engage in networking events, internships, and industry conferences, leveraging these platforms to establish meaningful connections and increase their employability in the local job market.

> I chose to stay in the Netherlands, since I decided to study here in the Netherlands, why wouldn't I stay longer, live and work for a longer time? I think it is better or necessary to apply for a long-term residence permit, so I will have more opportunities to choose in the local labor market." (P04)

Demonstrating their dedication to their career aspirations, they already started preparing for their career transition during their education phase. For example, they searched for

internships and other employability-related training to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in their chosen fields within the host country. Additionally, these individuals demonstrated a broad-minded approach to their career objectives while maintaining an open mindset toward integrating and reconciling both cultures. Recognizing the significance of adaptability and cultural dynamics in the job market, especially as foreigners lack extensive support from social and family networks, they proactively explored various aspects of identity, culture, society, and industries that aligned with their interests and prospects. Specifically, they actively blended their home culture with the new environment by taking language courses, volunteering in local organizations, and fostering connections with professionals from various cultures.

> I'm very focused on the results, which is how I can stay in the Netherlands, I think studying for a master's degree, working in the organizations, and volunteering in various groups, all of the things I am doing to some extent could guarantee me or lead me to where I want to land. [. . .] I actively volunteer in three local organizations, which could contribute to networking directly and finding a job in the future. (P15)

By actively seeking out opportunities for growth and learning in their new environment, they were able to establish a network of support and resources that further enhanced their career development. Their proactive approach to adapting to change not only helped them overcome challenges but also positioned them as resilient and resourceful professionals in their field.

Overall, the stay-stay group stood out due to their unwavering commitment to remaining in the host country. Similar to the return-return group, these respondents appeared less influenced by external events during their international studies, displayed remarkable resilience and consistency in pursuing their goals, and demonstrated a strong focus on long-term objectives. In contrast to the return-return group, however, these students deliberately directed their efforts toward activities that would enhance their employability in the host country. Instead, they were inclined to proactively assume control of their employability development in the host country.

Discussion
This qualitative research set out to answer the question: *How and why do Chinese graduate students form their initial career decisions regarding the school-to-work transition in the context of internationalization?* Based on semi-structured interviews among 30 Chinese students who traveled to the Netherlands for their studies, we found that their employability development and preparations for the transition into work depend on their initial and current aspirations about their future career destination. Specifically, we found four groups of students who all invest in their employability differently depending on these career aspirations: return-return, open-return, open-stay, and stay-stay. The students who changed their intentions during their studies (i.e. open-return and open-stay) mainly did this due to external events and cultural perceptions that caused them to reconsider their plans. Yet, the students who retained their initial intentions (i.e. return-return and stay-stay) showed a consistent approach to developing their employability to enhance their chances in the home country's labor market and did not change despite experiencing similar events. We discuss the implications of our findings next.

Theoretical implications
First, the present study contributes to the school-to-work transition (STWT) literature. Scholars have emphasized that this transition has become more complex and dynamic, requiring continuous learning and resource acquisition (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a, b).

However, research on contextual boundary conditions, such as the role of culture, is still scarce (Blokker *et al.*, 2023). Adding to the already complex transition due to the need to obtain more resources and remain employable (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021a, b), these Chinese students essentially navigate another transition in which they must reconcile their home country and host country cultures and labor market situations. This "double transition," as we would call it, shown in Figure 2, meaningfully influences and shapes their experiences and perceptions.

International students encounter challenges during the STWT, characterized by non-linear career paths involving diverse routes and multiple attempts as emerging adults establish themselves in the labor market (Schoon and Silbereisen, 2009). These challenges are further exacerbated by global events like COVID-19 (Donald *et al.*, 2022), which have heightened competition in the labor market. While international graduates often excel academically and possess strong technical knowledge—attributes that set them apart from local counterparts—these strengths alone are often insufficient for securing employment (Pham, 2021; Pham *et al.*, 2023). Our study reveals that Chinese graduate students abroad reconcile educational and professional expectations across different cultural norms and labor market requirements. Those planning to return home focus on leveraging international credentials and building valuable networks in their home country, while those staying abroad emphasize acquiring local work experience and adapting to host country cultures. These findings highlight the critical role of context-specific factors—such as the perceived value of foreign education and future labor market expectations—in shaping STWT navigation strategies and career management. This study advances the discourse on STWT by demonstrating that successful transitions require strategies tailored to individual aspirations and labor market conditions.

Second, this study significantly contributes to the field of graduates' employability by emphasizing the personal experiences and understandings of international graduates, as
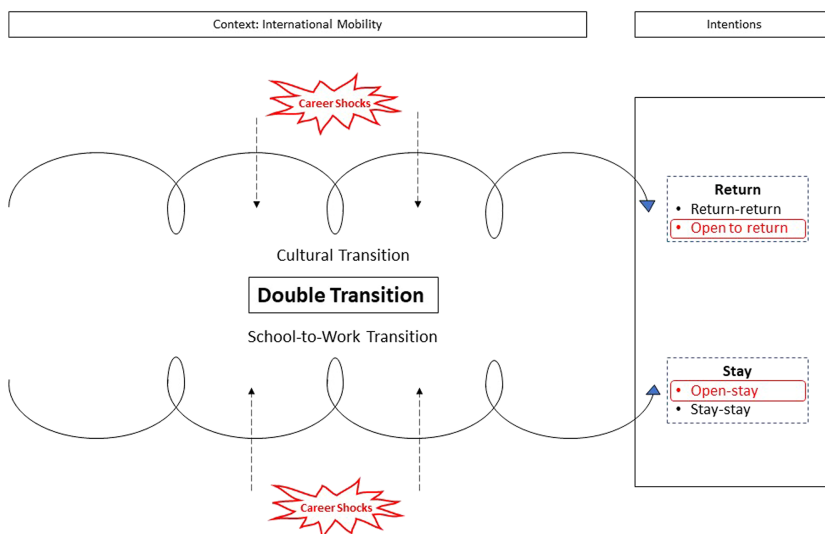

Figure 2.
Double transition model in the context of international mobility

Note(s): Career shocks highlighted in red indicate their influence on the two groups that deviate from initial expectations

Source(s): Authors' work

evidenced in studies by Pham (2021) and Pham *et al.* (2023). Our research highlights how graduates utilize their personal perceptions and lived experiences to integrate their education, life, and job market experiences, aligning these with their career goals. Our findings revealed that Chinese graduates, especially those with open-minded perspectives, actively navigate challenges and constraints imposed by personal circumstances and external conditions. In contrast, other Chinese students with consistent career goals experience less influence by external factors in their career direction. However, this does not mean that are exempt from addressing challenges and difficulties during the STWT. They all need to manage the impact of unpredictable factors on their initial careers by developing proactive strategies (Jiang *et al.*, 2023). These include managing diverse resources, pursuing professional and personal growth opportunities, and navigating life and career changes. These are significant for cultivating self-initiated learning, self-efficacy, and adapting skills among international students to navigate the protean career (Hall, 2004).

Crucially, our research underscores the invaluable nature of participants' international experiences as assets for future careers. Through deliberate relationship-building and network development, international students strategically leverage social capital to bolster their employability, gaining a nuanced understanding of values, norms, and practices in different labor markets. For instance, good relationships that Chinese graduates developed with lecturers, supervisors, peers, and industry people were crucially important for their immediate employment. This also emphasizes the "knowing-whom" competency in collectivistic culture (Mouratidou *et al.*, 2023), which is critical and necessary for initial career development and affects the ability to how and why to work. These relationships often assist someone to build resources for the target career or to access future employment opportunities either in the home or host country. For instance, the return-return group primarily focuses on strategic resource building for the Chinese market, while the stay-stay group actively cultivates networks within the host country, including the ethnic community and local society. Similarly, both groups pay attention to turning social networks into social capital. As highlighted by Pham *et al.* (2019) and Pham *et al.* (2024), as well as Donald *et al.*'s (2023) employability capital growth model, emphasizing the role of social capital.

Our research reveals the intricate process by which Chinese students studying abroad integrate and reconcile diverse cultural contexts, notably Eastern and Western cultural paradigms. For instance, experiences in individualistic cultures contribute to accumulating culturally valued knowledge, enhancing self-directed learning, self-efficacy, and adaptability. Simultaneously, they retain collectivist values, such as networking and relationship-building, contributing to their employability. These factors significantly influence the employability and functioning of graduate students in the labor market, constituting their cultural capital (Donald *et al.*, 2023). Recognizing the influence of cultural contexts is essential, as it emerges as a critical determinant of employability development and decisions during the transition period. Graduates who return to their home countries benefit from their tight cultural bonds and familiarity with the local networks and professional expectations, which facilitates their integration into the job market. Conversely, those who choose to stay abroad must navigate and integrate into the local cultural norms and professional environments, adapting to different cultural expectations. This ability to manage and reconcile cultural transitions significantly impacts how they develop and manage their employability, setting a foundation for long-term career success (Blokker *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, our study brings the notion of career shock (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018), which is defined as "disruptive and extraordinary events that are, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one's career" (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). The findings highlight their significant influence on individuals' decisions, particularly in the open-stay/return groups. These external and unexpected events, including the suicide of a close friend, incidents of

overwork, or personal crises like health issues trigger their career reflection and ultimate decision change. Conversely, in return-return or stay-stay groups, while unpredictable events do occur, their impact on the career decision is lesser, indicating these events do not constitute career shocks. Additionally, we observed that international graduate students experience both negative and positive shocks within the double transition. The findings suggest that career shocks not only potentially serve as a trigger for a particular type of employment during the STWT, for instance from wanting to pursue a career in academia in the host country to opting for industry roles due to unexpected changes in their family. But shocks can even alter the chosen career path to start the STWT. Some of the respondents initially focused on wanting a career only, however, career shocks triggered them to realize the importance of health and autonomy in their career planning and development. Thus, career shock may lead international graduates to pursue different forms and types of careers.

Practical implications

The research provides insightful information for international students, career practitioners and coaches, and university career services. First, the findings indicate that international graduates could benefit from the ability to transform their capital and embody cultural aspects in the mainstream society of either their host or home country. For instance, four different groups of students focused on developing various resources and capital that could benefit them in starting their careers. To achieve this, international graduates should pay attention to how to set career plans early in their studies, focusing on identifying career goals, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and developing strategies to leverage existing resources and opportunities. This preparation enables graduates to negotiate between their inherent advantages and market structural obstacles, finding opportunities that match their "labor-market persona", including skills, abilities, experiences, and choices. Additionally, international students must learn to adapt flexibly to changes and challenges, such as cultural adjustments and other unexpected events that might impact their career trajectories. Building social and cultural capital is essential but also long-term accumulation, this suggests that international students should receive early guidance on career planning and engage in various work-related activities, allowing them sufficient time to gather and integrate potential resources.

Second, career coaches and practitioners play critical roles in supporting transitions and guiding foreign students toward successful career paths. Those who focus solely on the local environment may struggle to adequately assist students with international backgrounds in navigating the transition process and exploring diverse career opportunities. Insights from our research can help these professionals by emphasizing the importance of creating and promoting collaborative opportunities and activities. These can include cross-cultural mentorship programs, international networking events, and workshops on global job market trends. Additionally, as the transition does not end after graduation, it is pivotal that coaching continues at the workplace, in a similar vein. This continuity ensures that international graduates receive the necessary support to navigate upcoming challenges in their early career stages. By fostering cross-cultural contact and competence development, career coaches and practitioners can better align their guidance in the long run with students' future career plans, helping them build the necessary skills and networks to thrive in a global job market.

Furthermore, Healy's (2023) study underscores that universities are increasingly prioritizing employability as a primary goal of investment in higher education. To better prepare international students for the labor market, universities should enhance their employability by integrating both theoretical knowledge and practical skills through industry-academic programs. This includes providing hands-on learning experiences and simulations that mirror real-world workplace challenges. Moreover, universities can strengthen partnerships with industry stakeholders to develop collaborative research

projects and facilitate internships that offer international students direct exposure to professional environments.

Limitations and directions for future research
The study has several limitations that suggest avenues for future research. First, our sample exhibited a higher representation of female graduates compared to male graduates, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings on career decision-making processes across genders within the population. Nevertheless, the research design is replicable in different contexts, meeting transferability criteria. The adequate sample size and variation provide a robust foundation for our findings. Further research is warranted to investigate whether similar mechanisms apply to other demographic groups and genders.

The study adopts a social and phenomenological-constructionist stance (Gibbs, 2007), reflecting subjective experiences and perceptions of Chinese graduate students regarding international mobility and career decision-making. Our current study primarily focused on the pre-transition phase, during which students begin preparing for their initial transition into the workforce. Our cross-sectional data, combined with a qualitative approach, provided valuable insights into students' past experiences and future career aspirations. We also believe a longitudinal qualitative design is necessary to be able to capture these dynamic changes over time, so we call for more longitudinal studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the full STWT process.

Furthermore, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has greatly impacted individuals' career decisions and their career trajectories and were regarded as a career shock (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). It introduced an unprecedented context, which consisted of many uncertainties that may affect the generalizability of our findings to non-pandemic contexts. Future research could undertake comparative analyses to explore lived experiences and perceptions from other years, specifically those who graduated when global-level chance events did not suppress the demand for international graduates' career choices, such as what other career shocks might be and how these affect individuals' decision-making process and transition outcomes has potential for further study.

Conclusion
This qualitative study explored how and why Chinese graduate students form their initial career decisions during the STWT in the context of internationalization. The findings revealed that their decision-making processes are influenced by various factors, including lived experiences abroad, perceptions of different cultural environments, and career shocks encountered. Importantly, international graduates must develop employability while navigating both cultural and school-to-work transitions. We hope this study encourages higher education and career researchers to employ longitudinal methods to better understand how context shapes international graduates' careers and employability development throughout the entire STWT. By doing so, more comprehensive strategies can be developed to support graduates in their career development.

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Supplementary material
The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online.

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