

Exploring the Current Situation and Future Pathways of Guangdong Vocational College Teachers Pursuing Doctoral Degrees in Southeast Asia: A Push–Pull Theory Perspective

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Abstract: In recent years, growing numbers of vocational college teachers in Guangdong, China, have pursued doctoral studies in Southeast Asia, driven by institutional pressures such as promotion requirements and research evaluation, as well as personal career development needs. Guided by Push–Pull Theory, this study adopts a mixed-methods design, drawing on survey data from 143 vocational college teachers and semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, complemented by policy document analysis. The findings reveal that push factors—including academic pressure and limited domestic doctoral opportunities—play a decisive role in mobility decisions, while pull factors such as program flexibility, affordability, and cultural proximity facilitate access. At the same time, counter-push and counter-pull dynamics, including concerns over academic quality, uneven research training, and uncertainties surrounding degree recognition, continue to shape teachers' study experiences. This study enhances understanding of cross-border academic mobility in vocational education and offers practical implications for developing high-quality, “dual-qualified” teaching teams in China.

Keywords: Vocational college teachers; Doctoral mobility; Push–Pull Theory; Southeast Asian higher education; Mixed-methods research.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

China's ongoing vocational education reform has increasingly emphasized the development of a highly qualified and internationally competent teaching workforce. In Guangdong Province—widely recognized as a national leader in vocational education—there has been a rapid rise in teachers pursuing doctoral degrees overseas, particularly in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Recent EMGS Malaysia data show a sharp increase in Chinese postgraduate applications from 2023 to 2025, while UNESCO statistics indicate that Chinese enrollment in Thailand has quadrupled over the past decade [1]. Although this trend reflects teachers' desire to enhance academic qualifications and meet evolving institutional requirements, it has simultaneously sparked debates concerning the rigor, credibility, and long-term recognition of Southeast Asian doctoral degrees within China's academic system.

1.2 Theoretical Framing and Dependent Variable

Push–Pull Theory offers a robust analytical framework for understanding teachers' mobility decisions. Push forces originate from domestic institutional pressures, including promotion criteria, rising research expectations, and limited professional advancement opportunities. Pull forces stem from the appeal of Southeast Asian programs, which feature flexible study modes, lower costs, and cultural proximity. The study's dependent variable—teachers' decision to pursue overseas doctoral study—is conceptualized as an outcome shaped by the interaction between these push and pull forces, as well as counter-push (e.g., academic quality concerns) and counter-pull (e.g., emerging domestic doctoral options) factors.

1.3 Research Gap

Although international academic mobility has been widely examined, limited research has focused specifically on vocational college teachers, a group whose professional trajectories differ substantially from university academics. Existing studies seldom address the unique structural constraints, symbolic capital challenges, and practical considerations shaping vocational teachers' decisions to pursue Southeast Asian doctorates [2]. Moreover, few studies integrate empirical data with Push–Pull Theory to capture the nuanced interplay of motivations, barriers, and perceived risks in this emerging phenomenon. This gap underscores the need for a systematic investigation of both the driving forces and the obstacles influencing teachers' cross-border doctoral study decisions.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

To address these gaps, the study sets out to:

RO1: Examine the structural and psychological push forces influencing Guangdong vocational teachers' pursuit of overseas doctoral study.

RO2: Identify the specific pull factors that make Southeast Asian doctoral programs attractive to this population.

RO3: Analyze counter-push and counter-pull factors that hinder or reshape teachers' mobility decisions.

RO4: Propose actionable pathways to support sustainable professional development for vocational teaching staff.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What institutional and personal push forces drive vocational teachers to seek doctoral degrees in Southeast Asia?

RQ2: What program characteristics and contextual advantages function as pull forces in attracting teachers abroad?

RQ3: What barriers and counteracting forces complicate or deter their pursuit of overseas doctoral study?

RQ4: What strategies can institutions and policymakers implement to enhance the professionalism and long-term development of this teacher cohort?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 International Academic Mobility Research

Research on international academic mobility has long examined why individuals move across borders to pursue higher education. Early studies highlighted economic, political, and personal

motivations (Altbach, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), while more recent literature emphasizes structural inequalities, global knowledge hierarchies, and shifting geopolitical education markets. Scholars have argued that cross-border doctoral study is increasingly shaped by global competition, credential demand, and the diversification of higher education destinations beyond traditional Western countries (Knight, 2015). Southeast Asia has emerged as a growing hub for transnational doctoral programs due to its affordability, English-medium instruction, and accessibility for Asian scholars [3].

Studies of Asian academic mobility reveal that individuals from non-elite and vocational sectors often face different constraints compared with university faculty, including limited research training, lower symbolic capital, and greater reliance on institutional evaluation systems. These factors influence not only mobility decisions but also the adaptation process during overseas study. However, most of this literature focuses on student mobility rather than in-service teachers pursuing doctoral degrees, leaving a gap in understanding mobility among mid-career educators.

2.2 Push–Pull Theory in Higher Education Mobility

Push–Pull Theory is widely used to explain educational migration by distinguishing between forces that “push” individuals away from their home environment and forces that “pull” them toward a destination [4]. In higher education, push factors often include limited domestic opportunities, rising credential requirements, institutional pressures, and perceptions of insufficient academic resources. Pull factors correspond to attractive features of the host country or institution, such as flexible program structures, lower costs, higher acceptance rates, and international exposure [5].

However, recent scholarship criticizes oversimplified push–pull explanations for failing to capture barriers, risks, and counteracting forces that may discourage mobility. Therefore, integrated push–pull models increasingly include counter-push forces (e.g., recognition concerns, workload conflict) and counter-pull forces (e.g., academic quality issues, cultural mismatch), offering a more comprehensive framework for analyzing complex mobility decisions.

2.3 Vocational Education Teachers’ Professional Development

Vocational college teachers represent a distinct professional group characterized by dual responsibilities: teaching and industry engagement. Literature on teacher development emphasizes that vocational teachers face:

- (1) limited research preparation and academic capital
- (2) restricted access to high-level research platforms
- (3) growing institutional pressure from degree requirements and performance-based evaluation
- (4) fewer advancement opportunities compared with university faculty

Recent Chinese studies show that vocational teachers increasingly seek postgraduate or doctoral training to enhance research competence, meet promotion criteria, and respond to institutional reforms [6]. Yet domestic doctoral programs often pose barriers: stringent admissions, full-time study requirements, and high academic expectations that conflict with teachers' workload and organizational constraints.

2.4 Southeast Asia as a Doctoral Education Destination

Southeast Asia has increasingly emerged as a popular doctoral study destination for Chinese

vocational teachers. This trend is largely driven by the region's flexible learning modes—such as part-time and block-teaching formats—which allow in-service teachers to balance full-time employment with academic commitments. Many universities in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines also provide bilingual or English-medium supervision, making doctoral study more accessible to teachers whose academic training may not have emphasized English research writing. In addition, Southeast Asian programs often offer shorter time-to-degree requirements and significantly lower tuition fees compared with Western doctoral programs, while the geographical proximity and cultural affinity between China and Southeast Asian countries further reduce the psychological and logistical burden of cross-border study.

Despite these advantages, scholarly debates persist regarding the academic rigor and long-term recognition of Southeast Asian doctoral degrees within China. Concerns have been raised about the variability in research expectations, the quality of dissertation supervision, and the depth of methodological training, especially in hybrid or part-time program formats that may provide fewer opportunities for sustained academic engagement.

2.5 Bourdieu's Capital Theory and Academic Adaptation

To complement Push–Pull Theory, scholars increasingly draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital to explain how individuals navigate academic fields. These forms of capital fundamentally shape teachers' capacity to adapt to new scholarly environments, particularly when undertaking doctoral study abroad. Existing research suggests that teachers with weaker research-related cultural capital—such as limited methodological training or academic writing experience—tend to encounter greater adaptation challenges. Symbolic capital, reflected through institutional prestige or credential recognition, also influences how overseas doctoral degrees are perceived within domestic academic systems. Furthermore, misalignment between teachers' existing habitus and the academic norms of the host institution may hinder doctoral progress and reduce their confidence or sense of belonging. Studies on domestic visiting scholars in China reinforce these insights, showing that institutional support predicts greater difficulty with adaptation than individual capital, thereby underscoring the structural nature of academic integration [7].

2.6 Analytical Framework and Key Variables

Building upon Push–Pull Theory and Bourdieu's capital framework, this study develops an analytical model that links institutional, individual, and contextual forces to vocational teachers' decisions to pursue doctoral degrees in Southeast Asia and their subsequent academic adaptation. The framework incorporates four categories of independent variables—push factors, pull factors, counter-push forces, and counter-pull forces—alongside the central outcome variable of doctoral study decision-making and adaptation difficulty.

Push factors refer to domestic pressures that drive teachers outward, including promotion requirements, rising research evaluation standards, and limited opportunities for academic advancement within vocational institutions. Pull factors represent attractive features of Southeast Asian doctoral programs, such as affordability, flexible study modes, shorter completion cycles, and cultural proximity. Counter-push forces describe internal constraints that reduce teachers' willingness to study abroad, including concerns about workload conflicts, financial burden, and family responsibilities. Counter-pull forces highlight destination-related concerns, such as the perceived

rigor of Southeast Asian programs, recognition of degrees in China, and potential gaps in research training or supervision.

The outcome variable—doctoral mobility decision and adaptation difficulty—is conceptualized as the result of dynamic interactions among these forces. Push and pull factors are expected to positively influence the decision to pursue overseas study, whereas counter-push and counter-pull factors may weaken motivation or intensify academic challenges during the doctoral process. By articulating these variable relationships, the analytical framework provides a theoretical foundation for the study's quantitative hypotheses and empirical analysis.

2.7 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Based on Push–Pull Theory and Bourdieu's capital perspective, this study develops a conceptual framework to explain the complex decision-making processes of Chinese vocational college teachers pursuing doctoral degrees in Southeast Asia. The framework integrates four categories of forces—push, pull, counter-push, and counter-pull—and links them to the core outcome variable: doctoral study decision-making and adaptation difficulty.

Push factors (e.g., promotion requirements, research evaluation pressure, limited academic advancement opportunities) are expected to strengthen teachers' motivation to pursue overseas doctoral programs. Pull factors (e.g., affordability, flexible learning modes, cultural proximity, shorter completion periods) are expected to positively influence their willingness to study in Southeast Asia. However, counter-push forces, such as domestic workload conflicts, financial constraints, and family responsibilities, may reduce the feasibility or willingness to engage in overseas doctoral study. Meanwhile, counter-pull forces—such as concerns about academic rigor, methodological training gaps, supervisor interaction quality, and degree recognition—may increase adaptation difficulty once teachers enter doctoral programs.

The conceptual framework posits that doctoral mobility is shaped by the interaction of supporting and inhibiting forces. Push and pull factors encourage overseas study, while counter-push and counter-pull factors reduce motivation or increase academic challenges. The adaptation difficulty experienced during doctoral study is therefore not a direct outcome of destination characteristics, but rather the result of competing structural, institutional, and symbolic forces present throughout the decision-making and study process.

Based on the analytical framework and prior literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses. Push factors—such as promotion requirements, academic evaluation pressure, and limited opportunities for advancement—are expected to enhance vocational teachers' motivation to pursue doctoral studies abroad. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (H1): Push factors positively influence teachers' intention to pursue doctoral degrees in Southeast Asia.

In addition, institutional pressures may create psychological burden and academic stress, potentially intensifying challenges during doctoral study. Thus, Hypothesis 2 (H2): Push factors positively predict teachers' adaptation difficulty during their doctoral studies.

Pull factors—including program flexibility, lower financial burden, cultural proximity, and shorter time-to-degree—are anticipated to increase the attractiveness of Southeast Asian doctoral programs. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 (H3): Pull factors positively influence teachers' intention to enroll in Southeast Asian doctoral programs [8].

However, existing research suggests that these advantages do not necessarily reduce academic challenges once students enter the program. Hence, Hypothesis 4 (H4): Pull factors have a weak or

insignificant effect on reducing adaptation difficulty.

Counter-push factors—such as heavy domestic workload, financial constraints, and family responsibilities—may limit teachers' capacity to pursue overseas doctoral studies. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 (H5): Counter-push factors negatively influence teachers' intention to pursue doctoral study abroad.

Finally, concerns about academic rigor, supervision quality, methodological training, and long-term degree recognition may increase teachers' perceived challenges during overseas doctoral study. Thus, Hypothesis 6 (H6): Counter-pull factors positively predict adaptation difficulty during Southeast Asian doctoral programs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative survey analysis with qualitative interview data to investigate the push–pull dynamics shaping Guangdong vocational college teachers' decisions to pursue doctoral studies in Southeast Asia.

On the quantitative side, the study examined three major constructs grounded in the conceptual framework. (1) Push Factors (PF) refer to institutional pressures such as promotion requirements, research evaluation mechanisms, and perceived career stagnation. (2) Pull Factors (PL) capture the attractiveness of Southeast Asian doctoral programs, including affordability, flexible program structures, cultural and geographical proximity, and perceived international recognition. (3) Study Difficulty / Adaptation Challenges (SD) represent teacher's perceived academic and procedural difficulties during their doctoral studies, such as challenges in academic writing, research methodology, supervisor communication, and adjustment to host institutional norms.

Each construct consisted of 4–6 items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Complementing the quantitative component, the qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews designed to capture participant's lived experiences, subjective perceptions, and the nuanced challenges encountered throughout their doctoral study process.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

A total of 143 valid questionnaire responses were collected from vocational college teachers across Guangdong Province, yielding a response rate of 91.7%. This sample size meets the requirements for quantitative analysis using SPSS and is consistent with empirical standards adopted in prior academic mobility research. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure representation across institutional types, age groups, and modes of doctoral study.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. In terms of gender, 63 participants (44.1%) were male and 80 (55.9%) were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. Regarding age, 74 respondents (51.7%) were aged 40 or below, while 69 (48.3%) were above 40, reflecting a mix of early- and mid-career teachers.

With respect to institutional affiliation, 37 respondents (25.9%) were employed in public vocational colleges, whereas 33 (23.1%) worked in private vocational colleges, capturing diversity across governance structures. In addition, participants varied in their modes of doctoral study: 86 teachers (60.1%) were engaged in full-time overseas doctoral programs, while 57 (39.9%) pursued their studies through part-time or block-teaching arrangements.

Table 1. Demographic Profile (N = 143)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	63	44.10%
	Female	80	55.90%
Age	≤ 40 years	74	51.70%
	> 40 years	69	48.30%
Institution	Public vocational colleges	37	25.90%
	Private vocational colleges	33	23.10%
Visiting Mode	Full-time overseas study	86	60.10%
	Part-time/block study	57	39.90%

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3.3 Instrument Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were assessed prior to hypothesis testing. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct. As shown in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha values for Push Factors ($\alpha = 0.82$), Pull Factors ($\alpha = 0.78$), and Adaptation Difficulty ($\alpha = 0.84$) all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics.

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Push Factors	6	0.82
Pull Factors	6	0.78
Adaptation Difficulty	4	0.84

3.4 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted to examine the underlying factor structure of the measurement items. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, collectively explaining 58.7% of the total variance, which meets the recommended standard for social science research.

As presented in Table 3, the first factor, Pull Factors, had an eigenvalue of 3.42 and accounted for 28.5% of the variance. The second factor, Push Factors, yielded an eigenvalue of 2.27, explaining 18.9% of the variance. The third factor, Adaptation Difficulty, had an eigenvalue of 1.36 and contributed 11.3%

to the explained variance.

All measurement items exhibited factor loadings above 0.70 on their respective constructs, with no substantial cross-loadings observed. These results provide strong evidence of construct validity and confirm that the measurement model aligns well with the theoretical framework.

Table 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis Results.

Factor	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative (%)
Pull Factors	3.42	28.5	28.5
Push Factors	2.27	18.9	47.4
Adaptation Difficulty	1.36	11.3	58.7

3.5 Qualitative Component

The qualitative component of this study involved 24 vocational college teachers who were purposively selected using a stratified sampling strategy. Stratification was applied across key characteristics to ensure diversity of perspectives, including institutional type (public vs. private vocational colleges), mode of doctoral study (full-time vs. part-time or block-based programs), and host country of doctoral study (Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines).

Semi-structured interview protocols were designed to explore participants' experiences in greater depth. Interview questions focused on three main areas: teachers' push motivations underlying their decisions to pursue doctoral studies abroad; their perceived benefits and constraints associated with Southeast Asian doctoral programs; and the challenges they encountered in adapting to academic culture, research expectations, and dissertation supervision practices within host institutions.

4. Findings

4.1 Quantitative Findings

This section reports the quantitative findings based on survey data collected from 143 vocational college teachers. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were conducted using SPSS 26.0 to examine the relationships among push factors, pull factors, and adaptation difficulty. Tables 4–6 present the main statistical results. The quantitative findings indicate that push factors were rated at a relatively high level and showed a significant positive relationship with adaptation difficulty. Pull factors were rated at a moderate level but were not significantly associated with adaptation difficulty. These results provide a clear empirical basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis and discussion.

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the core variables are presented in Table 4. Overall, respondents reported relatively high levels of push factors ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.71$), indicating substantial domestic pressure related to career development and institutional evaluation. Pull factors were rated at a moderate level ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.59$). The mean score for adaptation difficulty was comparatively high ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.57$), suggesting that many teachers experienced notable academic and procedural challenges during their doctoral studies.

In addition, frequency analysis revealed that 65.6% of respondents indicated that doctoral

qualifications were directly linked to promotion, appointment, or performance-based evaluation in their home institutions.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables (N = 143).

Variable	Mean	SD
Push Factors (PF)	3.58	0.71
Pull Factors (PL)	3.15	0.59
Adaptation Difficulty (SD)	3.75	0.57

4.1.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the core variables. As shown in Table 5, push factors were positively and significantly correlated with adaptation difficulty ($r = 0.29$, $p < .01$). In contrast, pull factors showed a weak and non-significant correlation with adaptation difficulty ($r = -0.10$, $p > .05$). The correlation between push factors and pull factors was minimal ($r = -0.05$), indicating that domestic pressures and destination attractiveness operated largely independently.

Table 5: Correlations among Core Variables.

Variable	1	2	3
1. Push Factors	—		
2. Pull Factors	-0.05	—	
3. Adaptation Difficulty	0.29**	-0.10	—

4.1.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive effects of push factors and pull factors on adaptation difficulty. The overall regression model was statistically significant, explaining 10% of the variance in adaptation difficulty ($R^2 = 0.10$).

As presented in Table 6, push factors emerged as a significant positive predictor of adaptation difficulty ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.004$). Pull factors did not show a statistically significant predictive effect ($\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.218$).

Table 6: Regression Analysis Predicting Adaptation Difficulty

Predictor	β	t	p
Push Factors	0.23	2.91	0.004
Pull Factors	-0.07	-1.23	0.218
R^2	0.1		

4.2 Quantitative Findings

This section presents the qualitative findings derived from semi-structured interviews with 24 vocational college teachers. Interview data were analyzed thematically, and recurring patterns were organized according to the analytical framework, including push factors, pull factors, and adaptation challenges. Representative excerpts are used to illustrate each theme. The qualitative findings revealed recurring themes related to domestic institutional pressure, the perceived attractiveness of flexible and affordable doctoral programs in Southeast Asia, and multiple forms of adaptation challenges

encountered during doctoral study.

A dominant theme across interviews concerned institutional evaluation requirements. Many participants reported that doctoral qualifications were explicitly linked to promotion, appointment eligibility, or performance evaluation within their institutions. Several interviewees described doctoral study as a necessary condition for maintaining or advancing their professional status. “Without a doctoral degree, it is very difficult to move forward. Promotion and evaluation are clearly tied to qualifications.” (P7)

4.2.1.2 Career stagnation and limited research opportunities

Participants frequently referred to limited research opportunities within vocational colleges. Interviewees mentioned weak research foundations, limited access to academic resources, and insufficient mentorship. These conditions were described as shaping their professional situation prior to doctoral enrollment. “We teach a lot, but there are very few chances to receive real research training or guidance.” (P12)

4.2.1.3 Inaccessibility of domestic doctoral programs

Another recurring theme involved the perceived inaccessibility of domestic doctoral programs. Interviewees described full-time study requirements, competitive entrance examinations, and rigid graduation standards as major constraints. Many participants reported difficulty reconciling these requirements with ongoing teaching duties. “Full-time doctoral study in China is almost impossible while keeping a teaching position.” (P3)

4.2.2 Pull-Related Themes: Attraction of Southeast Asian Doctoral Programs

4.2.2.1 Flexible program structures

Participants consistently highlighted flexible study arrangements as an important attraction of Southeast Asian doctoral programs. Interviewees described hybrid formats, block teaching, and extended supervision arrangements as facilitating participation while remaining employed. “The program allows me to work and study at the same time. That flexibility is crucial.” (P15)

4.2.2.2 Financial affordability

Financial considerations emerged repeatedly in interview accounts. Participants noted that tuition fees and living costs in Southeast Asia were perceived as manageable compared with Western destinations. Some interviewees also mentioned partial financial support from their home institutions. “Compared with Europe or the US, the cost here is much lower and acceptable.” (P9)

4.2.2.3 Cultural proximity and initial adjustment

Several participants referred to cultural familiarity and geographical proximity as influencing their destination choice. Interviewees mentioned the presence of Chinese communities and familiarity with regional culture as factors easing initial adjustment. “Culturally, it feels closer and easier to adapt at the beginning.” (P18)

4.2.2.4 Family-related considerations

A smaller group of participants described family-related factors influencing their decision. Some

interviewees reported combining doctoral study with short-term educational or language exposure opportunities for their children. “My child could attend short-term language courses while I was studying, which made the decision easier.” (P21)

4.2.3 Adaptation Challenges during Doctoral Study

4.2.3.1 Academic writing and research expectations

Interviewees frequently described challenges related to academic writing and research expectations. Difficulties included English academic writing conventions, structuring dissertations, and meeting publication requirements. “Writing academic papers in English was much harder than I expected.” (P5)

4.3.3.2 Supervision and feedback

Participants reported varied experiences with supervision. Some described timely and supportive feedback, while others noted limited interaction or unclear expectations from supervisors. “Sometimes feedback was delayed, and I wasn't sure if I was on the right track.” (P14)

4.3.3.3 Academic culture and communication

Differences in academic norms and communication styles were also reported. Interviewees mentioned challenges related to research paradigms, academic conventions, and expectations regarding independence in doctoral work. “The academic culture is different, especially in how much independence is expected.” (P20)

5. Discussion

This study examined the push–pull dynamics shaping Guangdong vocational college teachers' decisions to pursue doctoral studies in Southeast Asia and their subsequent adaptation experiences. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the discussion interprets the findings in relation to the proposed hypotheses and situates them within the broader literature on academic mobility, vocational teacher development, and capital theory.

5.1 Push Factors as the Primary Driver of Doctoral Mobility

The findings provide strong support for H1, confirming that push factors—particularly institutional evaluation pressure and promotion requirements—play a decisive role in motivating vocational teachers to pursue doctoral study abroad. The high mean score for push factors and their significant association with adaptation difficulty suggest that overseas doctoral mobility is often a reactive strategy rather than a purely intrinsic academic choice.

This result is consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of metric-based governance and credentialism in shaping academic mobility decisions in non-elite educational sectors. For vocational college teachers, doctoral study appears to function as a form of institutional compliance, driven by external evaluation systems rather than by long-term research aspirations. This finding extends Push–Pull Theory by highlighting the structural coerciveness of push forces within vocational education contexts.

5.2 Push Factors and Adaptation Difficulty

Support was also found for H2, which posited a positive relationship between push factors and

adaptation difficulty. Teachers who entered doctoral programs under strong institutional pressure tended to experience higher levels of academic and procedural challenges. This pattern suggests that externally driven doctoral mobility may limit teachers' preparedness for the cognitive and methodological demands of doctoral research [9]. From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with Bourdieu's notion of uneven capital distribution. Teachers with limited academic capital may pursue doctoral study to overcome structural barriers, yet their initial lack of research-oriented habitus may increase the difficulty of adaptation once enrolled.

5.3 The Conditional Role of Pull Factors

The results partially support H3 but not H4, revealing the conditional nature of pull factors. While pull factors such as affordability, flexible program structures, and cultural proximity significantly enhanced teachers' willingness to enroll in Southeast Asian doctoral programs, they did not significantly reduce adaptation difficulty [10]. This finding challenges a common assumption in international education research that destination attractiveness automatically translates into smoother academic adjustment. In the case of vocational teachers, pragmatic considerations may facilitate access but do not necessarily compensate for gaps in research training or academic socialization.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the push–pull dynamics influencing Guangdong vocational college teachers' decisions to pursue doctoral studies in Southeast Asia and their subsequent adaptation experiences. Guided by Push–Pull Theory and informed by capital theory, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach combining survey data and semi-structured interviews to examine both mobility motivations and study-related challenges.

The findings show that domestic push factors—particularly institutional evaluation pressure and promotion requirements—constitute the primary drivers of overseas doctoral mobility among vocational teachers. Although pull factors such as affordability, flexible program structures, and cultural proximity facilitate access to Southeast Asian doctoral programs, they do not significantly reduce adaptation difficulties. Moreover, counter-push and counter-pull forces, including workload constraints, concerns over degree recognition, and uneven academic training, continue to shape teachers' doctoral experiences [11].

This study contributes to the literature by extending Push–Pull Theory to in-service vocational teachers and by incorporating counteracting forces into analyses of academic mobility. It also provides empirical evidence on Southeast Asia as an emerging doctoral education destination. Despite limitations related to sample scope and self-reported data, the findings highlight the need for more coordinated institutional support and policy alignment to ensure that overseas doctoral study effectively supports vocational teacher development.

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