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# Soft Power of Chinese Cities: Factors that Attract International Students to Study in Changchun City

Xiaolong Zou<sup>1\*</sup> and Xiling Zhu<sup>1</sup>

*1 School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University*

\* Corresponding to Xiaolong Zou, at Email: [zou\\_xl@jlu.edu.cn](mailto:zou_xl@jlu.edu.cn)

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**Abstract:** More and more international students come to China for higher education, and their host cities become key platforms for demonstrating China's image and soft power. So far, many studies have analysed international students' language learning and cultural adaptation, however, very few focus on what factors attract international students to certain Chinese cities instead of others. This study aims to determine the key factors attracting international students to study in Changchun, a city in northeast China, from a qualitative approach. The authors apply both survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews to obtain insights and determine the underlying reasons influencing their selection. Results from a total of 190 questionnaires and 59 interviews are collected for analysis. The results indicate that certain factors, including economic factors, such as the cost of living and scholarships, political factors, such as government coordination, and sociological factors, such as religious tolerance, play dominating roles in their decision-making process. Additionally, the discussion and policy recommendations of each section offer useful insights for policy-makers for attracting and accommodating international visitors to cities like Changchun.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Changchun, the capital city of Jilin Province, is located in north-eastern China with a metropolitan area of 4,789 square kilometres and a population of 7.54 million ([Changchun Municipal Government, 2017](#)). Changchun city is regarded as China's cradle of movies, automobiles, optical instruments, pharmaceutical drugs and railway vehicles. Besides this, Changchun is also known as "the Forest City" and "the Science, Culture and Education City", and was awarded "China's Happiest City" from 2003 to 2013 ([Antonicelli & Roman, 2014](#)).

Historically, Changchun was taken over by Communists in October 1948 and, after a three-year recovery, the government began construction and various movements in order to rebrand Changchun as an industrial city. The Commission of the First Five-Year Plan (FYP) selected the outskirts of Changchun for the site of the First Automobile Works (FAW) ([Liu & Wang, 2012](#)), and it has since transformed the city into an industrial base. During

operation of the FAW, many grand industrial projects were built in the city and yielded profound achievements.

Currently, although beset by the economic slowdown and outbound migration, Changchun is still significant to north-eastern China. Under the guidance of the National Congress of the 18th Communist Party of China, Changchun has decided to pursue the revitalization of Jilin Province. Additionally, Changchun is also aiming to develop itself into a central, core city in Northeast Asia by building a wealthy society ([Jilin Provincial Network, 2017](#)). The municipal government of Changchun has also developed a six-part master plan that focuses more on hard power and economic fields to facilitate this goal ([Changchun City News, 2017](#)).

One equally important aspect is the soft power of a city, which is often neglected, but has gained more attention in recent years. The concept of soft power was originally developed by professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University, which, applied to international relations, describes the ability of actors to persuade and attract other parties towards certain goals, in place of more coercive, forceful measures. Soft power entails aspects of culture, political values, foreign policies, etc. that could influence foreign populations and actors. In this paper, soft power refers to any means of increasing a city's international influence or reputation, however, it is not our intention or purpose to offer a specific definition or discuss the legality of this terminology.

As China has become the second largest destination for international students, Chinese cities are the main platforms for attracting them to particular destinations and local hosts. However, north-eastern Chinese cities, with Changchun city as a typical example, are less attractive than “tier-one” cities or major eastern coastal cities. Although Changchun has received a large number of international students compared to the greater Jilin Province, or even the whole north-eastern region, it is still far less internationally recognised than cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (BSGS).

This paper attempts to determine the major factors and underlying reasons international students choose Changchun for their studies. The main approach is through surveys and interviews with the international students studying at Jilin University. Through analysis of the results, a number of policy recommendations are offered that could improve Changchun city's international attractiveness and image. This could also shed new light on other regions' major central cities' international exposure in terms of policy, governance and management, and eventually contribute to China's grand strategy of boosting its soft power in general ([Xi, 2017](#)).

The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature regarding factors that influence students' selection of overseas study destinations; Section 3 describes the methods for factor selection, survey questionnaire design and interview, as well as how the data is collected and analysed; Section 4 illustrates the analysis results and policy recommendations based on the analysis; and Section 5 brings a concluding remark to this study and points to potential directions for further study.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is abundant literature on the factors that influence students' selection of overseas study destinations. Most of these studies analysed the “pulling” or “pushing” factors for non-native English speaking students studying in English speaking countries, such as the UK, Canada, the US, New Zealand

and Australia ([Phang, 2012](#)). There are a few studies addressing international students studying in China, but mainly these are focused on educational disciplines. For example, [Yu, Baohua \(2008\)](#) studied the language acquisition and cultural adaptations of international students studying Chinese in China; [Sumra \(2012\)](#) analysed the faculty and staff perspectives on the problems that international students face in Beijing; [Yu, Bin et al. \(2014\)](#) examined the factors that lead to international students' accumulative stress levels at universities in Wuhan city. There is no study analysing why international students come to a particular city in China and their underlying reasons for doing so. Therefore, it is necessary to understand what factors influence their selection so that more cities in the less developed regions of China can develop policies to attract foreign students and the potential benefits they can bring.

When it comes to the students' selection of overseas study destinations, [Chapman \(1986\)](#) applied the consumer behaviour theory to explain their rationales. Three models explaining student choice were summarized by Ivy (2010) ([cited in Phang, 2012, p. 14](#)), namely, the economic, sociological, and information processing models: the economic model of student choice emphasises cost-related aspects; the sociological model of student choice emphasises issues like family influence, personal motivation and ability, as well as other influences; the information processing model combines both the economic and sociological model to determine the decision-making and selection process of students.

Two clusters of "push" and "pull" factors are identified as influencing international students' decisions ([Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002](#); [McMahon, 1992](#)). [Phang \(2012\)](#) compiled a list of major influencing factors based on previous studies carried out by scholars across multiple countries. A total of 22 factors have been summarised based on Phang's review, addressing various aspects such as economic, social, political and cultural factors. It was observed that factors such as "education access", "career prospects", "costs", "culture", "environment", "family/network influence", "reputation", "competence", and "language (English)" are frequently mentioned, reflecting the common concerns for students going overseas for higher education.

However, there is an overlap between a number of factors and due to the lack of any specific definitions and the different circumstances under which these studies were conducted, it is less appropriate to use these factors directly. Therefore, a further screening and selection of these factors are needed before using them as inputs for survey design. Local conditions must also be considered as important criteria for factor selection.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Three major steps were followed in conducting this research: first, to screen and select accurate indicators, a group discussion with international students was conducted, based on which, a number of indicators were selected and finalised for survey questionnaires; second, a questionnaire was designed based on the previous inputs, and distributed to the target respondents in the form of closed-ended, self-administered surveys. After this, a total of 59 in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain qualitative insights and underlying reasons that influenced their choices; third, both survey data and interview content were collated. These are analysed for interpretation and discussion and a number of policy recommendations are proposed accordingly (refer to Figure 1).

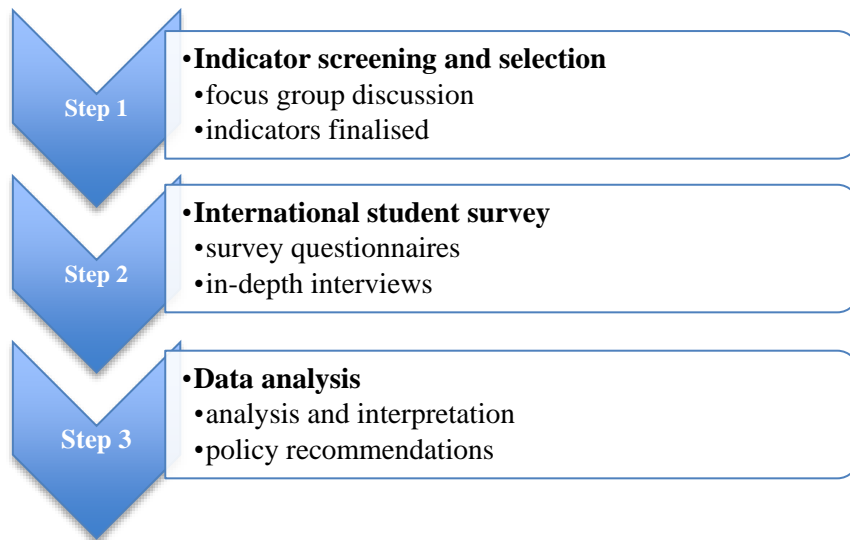


Figure 1. Research design: A three-step approach

### 3.1 Focus-group discussion

The study began with a discussion with 15 international students. The discussion aimed to discover the most relevant factors that led to their selection of Changchun as a study destination. These factors are then categorised and used in the survey questionnaire for quantitative analysis. These 15 students are in postgraduate courses at Jilin University. All of their answers are recorded and transcribed for content analysis and referenced for indicator selection. Table 1 entails a basic profile of the group members.

Table 1. Basic profile of the focus group members

Country	Gender	Student Description
Indonesia: 2 students	M (1) F (1)	Both have work experience, educational and official backgrounds, and will resume work after studying.
Ghana: 5 students	M (4) F (1)	All have work experience and governmental job backgrounds from different sectors. One male is a PhD student. They will all resume work after studying.
Russia: 2 students	F (2)	Both have part-time work experience, no job positions at home, and plan to work in China.
The Philippines: 1 student	F (1)	Has rich work experience, especially with ASEAN, and will resume their previous position after studying.
Laos: 1 student	F (1)	No working experience, Diplomat's child, no plan yet after studying.
Vietnam: 1 student	M (1)	Two years of work experience, business sector background, and no job planned after studying.
Venezuela: 1 student	F (1)	Years of work experience, worked as a diplomat, and will resume the position after studying.
Zimbabwe: 2 students	M (2)	Years of work experience, worked as government officials, and will resume work after studying.

Note: F – Female, M – Male, (#) denotes quantity of students.

As can be seen from the above table, these international students come from different continents and various work backgrounds. Most of them have governmental backgrounds. A few of them are fresh college graduates who came to Changchun to study immediately afterwards. During the discussion, they were asked why they chose Changchun as their study destination and the factors that influenced their decisions. They were also asked for suggestions

to make Changchun more attractive internationally, and their answers are integrated in the later questionnaire data analysis and policy recommendations.

Based on the discussion, a total of 15 influencing factors have been identified and finalized according to relevance and applicability. Despite some overlap, these factors can be categorized in three ways, namely, “Economic Factors”, “Sociological Factors”, and “Political Factors” (refer to Table 2 for details). These indicators are then used for the question design of the survey.

Table 2. Finalised factors that influenced international students’ choice to study in Changchun

<b>Economic Factors</b>	<b>Sociological Factors</b>	<b>Political Factors</b>
<b>Scholarship</b> (Including financial incentives like financial aid or loans)	<b>Climate</b> (Local climate and natural environment)	<b>Government coordination</b> (Government allocation and suggestions mandated by scholarship)
<b>Tuitions</b> (Local institute’s tuition fees)	<b>Host hospitality</b> (Hospitality and accommodation of local host/institutes)	<b>International reputation</b> (Local city/host’s international reputation)
<b>Living cost</b> (Local living costs)	<b>Quality of Life</b> (Local living conditions and quality of life)	<b>Alumni recommendation</b> (Recommendations from local city/host’s alumni networks)
<b>Part-time job</b> (Local availability for doing part-time jobs during study)	<b>Religious tolerance</b> (Local tolerance towards their religion and cultures)	<b>Geo-political proximity</b> (Advantages of local city’s geo-political proximity towards other regions)
<b>Employment</b> (Local opportunities for seeking full-time employment after graduation)	<b>Curriculum</b> (Local institute’s provided curriculum, courses and programmes)	<b>International access</b> (Local city’s access to various international resources)

### 3.2 Survey and question design

The questionnaire consists of four major sections. The first section asks for general information from the respondents, such as their country of origin, gender, education level, and whether they had heard about Changchun city before. The next three sections are based on the previous summarised three categories (economic, sociological and political), each of which consists of five corresponding questions. Using the Likert Scale, the respondents are asked to give their opinions on the provided question by choosing from five options of “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, “Strongly Disagree”.

Next, the full questionnaire is transferred to a cloud-based software (SOJUMP or “Wenjuanxing” in Chinese) and output as an online self-administered survey for distribution. Due to the time constraints of holidays, the target respondents were surveyed via WeChat, and this software was designated particularly for this purpose. According to the international student office of Jilin University, between 250 to 300 international students graduate from Jilin University each year, so an estimate of 275 is taken as the intended respondent number. Over two weeks, a total of 190 valid survey results were obtained, reaching a response rate of over 69%, which is considered significant for valid analysis and conclusions.

### 3.3 In-depth Interviews

To obtain more qualitative insights, in-depth interviews were then conducted. Students were asked why they chose Changchun as their study destination instead of other Chinese cities, what facilitated their decisions, as well as asked for their evaluation and suggestions for making Changchun more internationally attractive. A total of 59 valid, in-depth interviews were conducted, with most of the conversations recorded upon consent and transcribed by student assistants (refer to Appendix for the list of interviewed international students) for later analysis.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The contents of the survey and interview results were then qualitatively analysed. No statistical analysis is applied due to the nature of these surveys. Combining the inputs from the interviews, the underlying reasons are summarised and the possible reasons that led to these results is discussed. Next, suggestions for policy recommendations are proposed for improving the identified issues, with the aim of increasing and enhancing Changchun city's attractiveness to international students.

## 4. FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 General information from respondents

As shown in Figure 2, there are a total of 190 valid results obtained. Among the respondents, about 60%<sup>1</sup> are male and 40% are female. Most of them are in post-graduate courses, with almost half (49%) of them Master's students and one third (33%) of them PhD students. This indicates that, currently, most international students in Changchun are coming for post-graduate studies, and comparatively fewer of them are starting at undergraduate level.

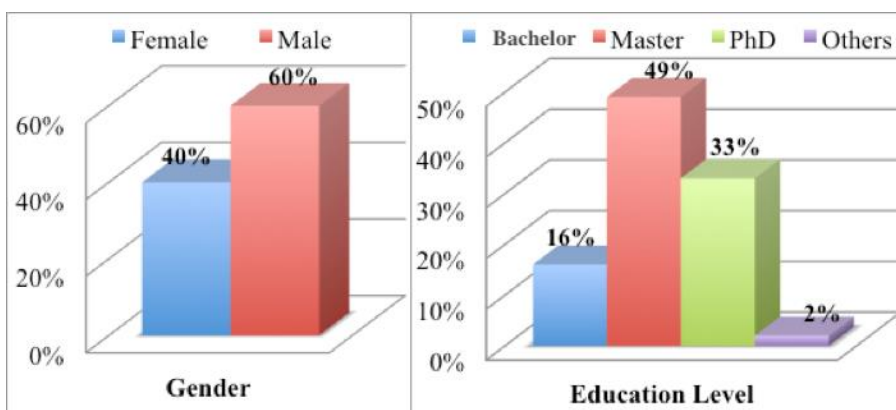


Figure 1. Gender and education level of the respondents (n=190)

More than half (54%) of the responding international students had not heard of Changchun city before they came (in Figure 3), which indicates that Changchun is comparatively less well-known overseas. This also reveals a

<sup>1</sup> The percentage has been rounded up with no decimal for the purpose of easier comprehension, and the exact percentage of each can be seen from Table 3 to Table 5.

problem with Chinese cities’ international exposure in that cities such as Changchun are not competitive with the internationally renowned ones like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Shenzhen. This suggests branding the city and promoting its identity to an international audience could raise the city’s profile overseas.

Additionally, the majority (81%) of the students are scholarship recipients, sponsored by different governmental bodies (i.e. Chinese Ministry of Education or Chinese Ministry of Commerce), while merely one fifth (19%) of them are self-financed. This suggests that unlike the US or the UK, China still devotes large funds to attract international students.

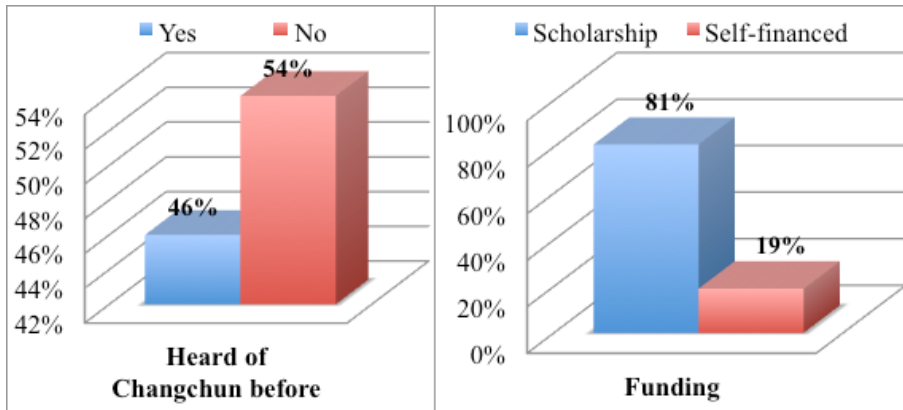


Figure 2. General information of the survey respondents (n = 190)

## 4.2 Economic Factors

There are five economic factors examined in this section of the survey, namely, “scholarship”, “tuition fees”, “living cost”, “part-time job”, and “employment”, as shown in Figure 4 (refer to Table 3 for the detailed percentages of each factor). A dominating 75% of the respondents agree with the notion that scholarships or other financial incentives are the major influencing factor for their selection of Changchun as a study destination. This result confirms the common notion that financial incentive plays a key role in their decision-making process.

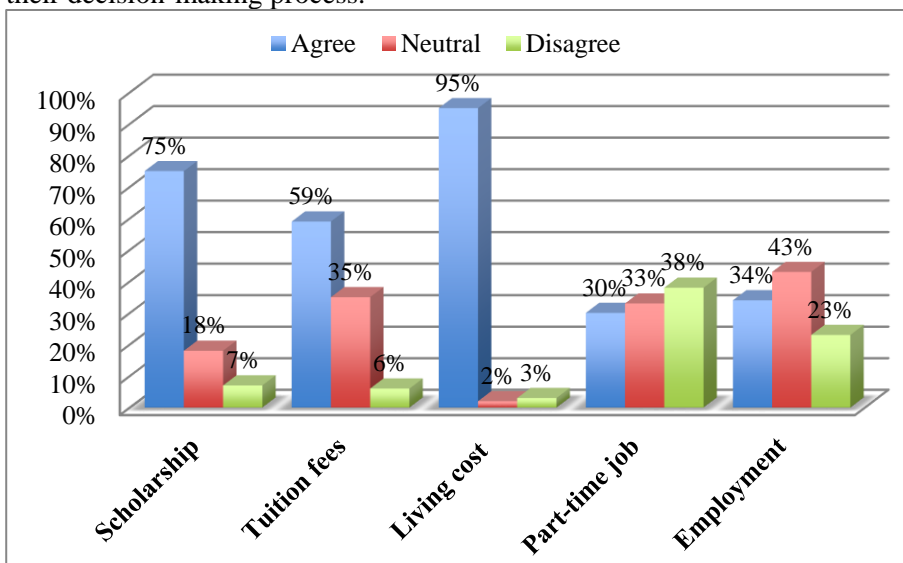


Figure 3. Economic factors survey results (n = 190)



Table 3. Individual Survey Results for Economic Factors (n = 190)

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neural	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Scholarship	31.1%	44.2%	17.9%	2.6%	4.2%
Tuition fees	16.8%	42.1%	34.7%	6.3%	0.0%
Living cost	61.1%	33.7%	2.1%	3.2%	0.0%
Part-time job	11.6%	17.9%	32.6%	24.2%	13.7%
Employment	12.6%	21.1%	43.2%	17.9%	5.3%

Slightly more than half of the respondents (59%) agree that local tuition fees are an important factor for choosing Changchun for their studies. This is mainly because of the largely standardized Chinese public university tuition fees, which do not vary much between different cities. Top Chinese universities not only charge standard tuition fees, which are heavily subsidized by the Chinese government, but they also have opportunities for various scholarships, particularly for overseas students who want to study in China. Therefore, the local institutions' tuition fees are comparatively less restrictive.

Local living cost receives the largest share of agreement, with only a very small percentage of the respondents thinking otherwise (3% disagree or strongly disagree). It is concluded from this that the local living cost is the most important or most influential. It reveals that for cities like Changchun to be more internationally attractive, the local affordability is a selling point for international branding.

Opinions vary most regarding the other economic factors, namely, part-time jobs and employment. More respondents (Neutral – 33%, Disagree – 38%) do not think access to part-time jobs helped them in choosing Changchun as a study destination. There are similar results for the employment factor, with less than one third (34%) in agreement. As is shown previously, the majority of these students have job positions back home and intend to resume work after their studies in China. Another possible reason is that they see fewer opportunities for working in Changchun after graduation due to various sociological barriers, such as language, culture or religion, which was mentioned in some of the interviews.

#### 4.2.1 Summary and policy recommendations

For the five listed economic factors, living costs and scholarships are the most influential factors for international students to consider. Tuition fees are important, but not as determining or influential as the previous two factors, as indicated by the data results. The other two factors, part-time jobs and employment, weigh significantly less in comparison, suggesting that the international students might find less motivation from these two aspects in their decision-making process.

There are a number of reasons for this: many government scholarship recipients are required not to take any additional part-time work; access to proper part-time jobs for them is limited for multiple reasons, such as the language barrier, and ethnic and religious concerns; similar reasons could also explain their lack of motivation in seeking employment in Changchun after graduation. Therefore, addressing these two aspects could increase Changchun city's international attractiveness.

Based on the analysis, the authors put forward the following policy recommendations to increase Changchun's international attractiveness for overseas students:

- Promote international branding of Changchun as an affordable city with low living costs and a good quality of life;
- Continue financial incentives, such as government scholarships and other forms of financial aid or student loans; and
- Improve access to part-time jobs and employment opportunities after graduation, making Changchun city more competitive in attracting international talent to settle in the city.

### 4.3 Sociological factors

This section examines the influence of five sociological factors, “climate”, “host hospitality”, “quality of life”, “religious tolerance” and “curriculum” (as are shown in Figure 5). Less than half (47%) of the respondents consider “climate” as a major influencing factor in coming to this city (refer to Table 4 for detailed percentages of each factor). Although Changchun is literally translated as “ever spring” in English, some of the interviewed students, particularly those from Southeast Asian or African countries, find it too cold in winter. Despite the initial excitement during their first few encounters with snowfall, the harsh cold does present some challenges to those who are not accustomed to such temperatures. It can be concluded that local climate does affect students to a certain extent.

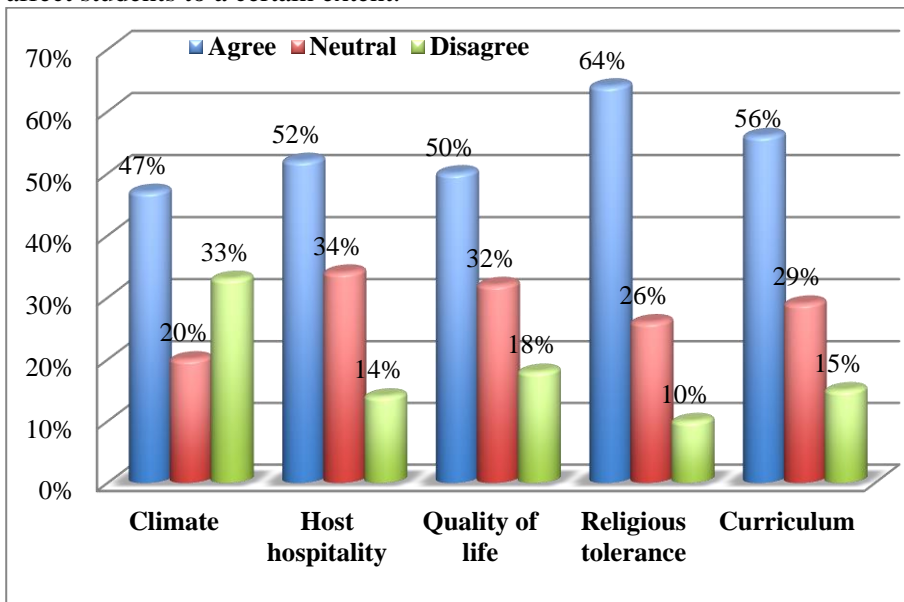


Figure 4. Sociological factors survey results (n = 190)

Table 4. Individual Survey Results for Sociological Factors

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neural	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Climate	15.8%	30.5%	20.0%	27.4%	6.3%
Host hospitality	18.9%	32.6%	33.7%	12.6%	2.1%
Quality of life	14.7%	34.7%	31.6%	16.8%	2.1%
Religious tolerance	23.3%	41.1%	25.6%	6.7%	3.3%
Curriculum	10.5%	45.3%	29.5%	11.6%	3.2%

Changchun city has been selected as “the most accommodating Chinese city” for seven years in a row, indicating the city’s hospitality towards its residents and visitors (Antonicelli & Roman, 2014). The survey result for host hospitality consolidates this impression with slightly more than half (52%) of the respondents in agreement. This suggests that their local hosts or institutes

are sufficiently caring and accommodating. There is, of course, room for improvement as nearly half of them do not hold strong affirmative opinions.

As the capital of Jilin province, Changchun's living expenses and housing prices are lower than Tier 1 cities like BSGS, which makes it more affordable. In terms of quality of life, half (50%) of the respondents agree that Changchun's living quality is attractive. Different from the local cost factor in the economic domain, their definitions of quality of life are influenced not only by living costs, but a number of other reasons, such as religion, ethnicity, culture, and habits. This is why there is a considerable percentage gap between these two factors.

Another major influential factor reflected in this part of the survey is religious acceptance, which received the highest share (61%) of affirmative votes amongst the five factors in this section. This result shows the importance of religion for the majority of international students coming to study in China. Changchun is a multi-racial city due to geo-historical reasons, Han being the major ethnic group, with multiple large minority groups, such as Korean and Manchu; this possibly contributes to a more racially and religiously tolerant culture. Changchun should embrace and enhance this local feature and competitive edge.

Regarding the curriculum, or courses offered in their host institute, more than half (56%) of the respondents agree with its importance in their selection. This indicates, to some extent, that good curriculums would indeed attract certain groups of students. Jilin University, as China's largest university with the most disciplines and schools, could contribute to offering such incentives to an international audience.

#### **4.3.1 Summary and policy recommendations**

Generally speaking, all five factors in this part of the survey influence students' selection. Religious tolerance remains one of the most influencing factors suggested by the survey result. Climate could potentially become a pushing factor that hinders or concerns certain groups of international students. Local hospitality, quality of life and the curriculum play a certain positive role in influencing their selections.

The influence from weather and regional climate in Changchun is not as relevant to policy-makers, however, it can be used as an advantage particularly for those students from tropical areas who have never experienced snow. Many of the African and Southeast Asian students were excited to first experience snow in Changchun, but less so through the peak of a harsh winter season. Of course, more can be done to enhance the already positively received local hospitality, particularly regarding the religious aspects, as suggested during some of the interviews.

Based on the survey results and interview contents, a number of policy recommendations could be amended or proposed:

- Repackage Changchun's local climate features as selling points or make it appealing to certain groups of international students;
- Continue strengthening the local hospitality and liveability at home and on campus, and build feature slogans for promoting Changchun city; and
- Create a more culturally accepting, religiously tolerant atmosphere and living conditions to accommodate international students with diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, to make

Changchun not only the most hospitable city for domestic residents, but also for international visitors, both short-term and long-term.

#### 4.4 Political factors

The five sociological factors included in this session are “government coordination”, “international reputation”, “alumni recommendation”, “geo-political proximity” and “international access” (refer to Table 2 for detailed descriptions of each factor). It is clear that the most influential factor is the government coordination, with the highest votes of 70% in this group. The other four factors are considered by the respondents as “less important” since none of them received more than 50% of the affirmative votes, as is indicated in Figure 6 (refer to Table 5 for detailed percentages of each factor).

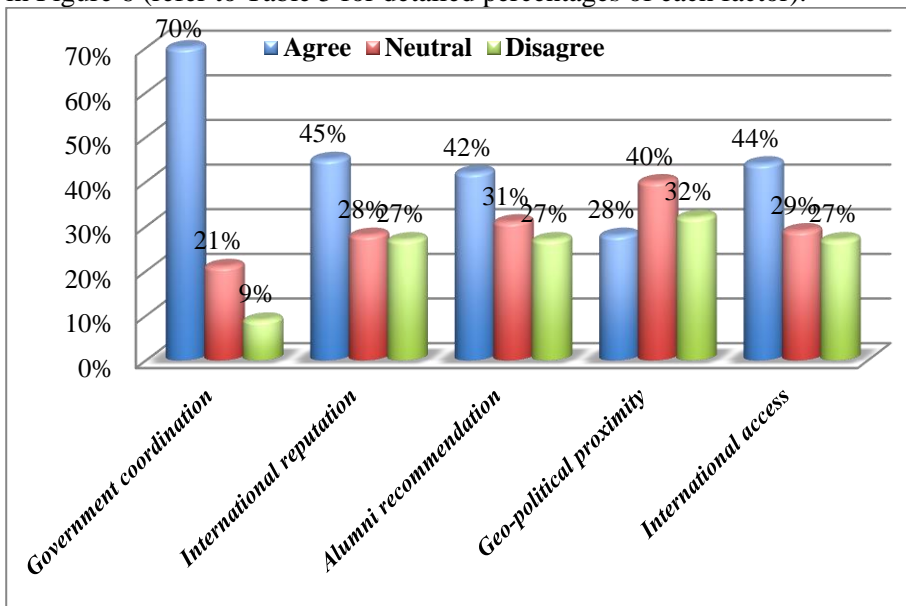


Figure 5. Political factors survey results (n = 190)

Table 5. Individual Survey Results for Political Factors

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neural	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Government coordination	23.2%	46.8%	21.1%	7.9%	1.1%
International reputation	7.4%	36.8%	28.4%	18.9%	8.4%
Alumni recommendation	12.6%	29.5%	30.5%	23.2%	4.2%
Geo-political proximity	7.4%	21.1%	40.0%	23.2%	8.4%
International access	10.5%	32.6%	29.5%	23.2%	4.2%

As mandated by the Chinese government scholarship providers (such as the Ministry of Education (MoE) or Ministry of Commerce (MoC)), international students are asked to register for their desired institutes and locations, which might not always guarantee their selection. Many of the non-BSGS cities are lesser-known to those who have never set foot in China before. Therefore, government coordination became one the determining factors in the selection of Changchun city. According to some of the students, they had never heard of Changchun before their scholarship sponsors sent them to Jilin University. If not for the scholarship, they would likely have gone to cities

like BSGS or other internationally renowned cities. This confirms the role of governmental administration in resource allocation to cities like Changchun.

In contrast to the previous question, although more respondents (44%) agree that international reputation plays a key role in attracting them than those who disagree (26%), the affirmative rate does not surpass the 50% benchmark for a majority. This again reflects the fact that cities like Changchun are less competitive when compared to those more internationally renowned cities, suggesting the necessity for Changchun to extend its overseas influence and reputation.

Slightly more than one third (42%) of the surveyed students agree that the host institute's alumni or network recommended them to study in Changchun. This, on the one hand, strengthens the previous notion of Changchun city's lower international recognition; on the other hand, it indicates a possible lack of endorsement from graduates of institutes in Changchun, and possibly China. From a broader perspective, this also reflects the state of China's soft power in general. While the Chinese government has made continued effort to improve its international image and soft power, the results may not yet have followed.

Another obstacle or disadvantage that impairs Changchun's international attractiveness is the geo-political proximity factor. Less than one-third (28%) of the respondents consider it influential for their choices; however, for some groups, such as the South Korean, Japanese or Russian students, Changchun is a good place to study due to his geographical proximity. This, in turn, could be an advantage for Changchun if marketed properly.

Following this, more students agree (43%) that Changchun provides more access to international connections than those who disagree (27%). One possible explanation is that most of the international students are embedded within international communities through their classrooms, dormitories or student groups. They have high exposure to their peers from other countries, but relatively less exposure to their Chinese peers. Some of the interviewed students said they spent some time with a few Chinese language volunteers, but comparatively little with Chinese graduate students. This is both good and bad news for the administration when designing their study and living configuration. More interaction with local Chinese communities would give students more opportunities to develop a positive impression of Changchun city and Chinese people.

#### **4.4.1 Summary and policy recommendations**

From this section of the survey results, it can be concluded that government coordination is the most influential factor determining the choice of Changchun city. Other factors did not have as much influence over its attractiveness, and, in some cases, they led to concerns or obstacles that had the opposite effect. Therefore, several policy recommendations are proposed based on this part of the analysis:

- Strategically coordinate for more international students to relocate to north-eastern cities like Changchun to study;
- Strengthen international branding and increase Changchun's overseas reputation via professional marketing or alumni networks; and
- Promote more local geo-political advantages to target geographically closer countries.

Changchun city, in order to become a major city of Northeast Asia, needs to increase its international soft power. Increasing its international attractiveness is crucial for the development of its image. Compared with other mega cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, Changchun faces the challenges of a second-tier city: it requires multi-level governmental support in a number of areas to become more competitive, as suggested in the analysis. The Chinese central government is, without any doubt, the most important impetus for injecting financial incentives and mobilising international student resources; local government and institutes also need to play their part in accommodating international students with proper consideration for their social and political needs, in order to promote the local image and nurture the appeal of China in the future.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

China is now the second largest economy in the world and has become increasingly involved in global affairs; there is a growing need to match this growth with soft power. As China becomes the second largest destination for international students, Chinese cities, especially lower-tier cities, should become more internationally attractive to cope with these rising global demands, and more importantly to compete for the potential resources brought by hosting these foreign students. For policy makers and urban researchers, while continuing infrastructure construction, urban planning and engineering, it is of some significance to develop aspects such as local culture, hospitality and international exposure.

For Changchun city, a tier-two capital city in north-eastern China, it is very challenging to compete with tier-one mega cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen for multiple reasons. By conducting interviews and surveys of the international students in Changchun, some determining factors and their underlying reasonings can be summarised and interpreted as the following:

- Financial incentives, such as living costs and scholarships are the dominating factors that influence their choice of Changchun. Without scholarships, most of them would likely not have come, since they would have applied for other countries' scholarships.
- Local tuition fees, living quality and curriculum design are important factors for their consideration of Changchun over other cities (like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen), because they could have better quality of life with similar financial benefits.
- Other forms of incentives, such as part-time or full-time employment opportunities are less important factors in determining their choice of Changchun, since they found it less promising or even difficult sometimes to obtain access during or after their study.
- Changchun's climate features are somehow perceived negatively, due to the rather extreme climate conditions in summer and winter, for some students. On the other hand, some consider it quite pleasing due to this change of setting compared to their home countries.
- Religious tolerance is an important factor from a sociological perspective, though favourably received by the interviewed international students, more consideration should be given in this regard.

- Government coordination, like the financial incentives, is a dominating factor for the selection of Changchun city. This can be regarded as one of the most influential for prospective students.
- Jilin city's geo-political proximity, international reputation, alumni recommendations and the accessibility it provides to international resources are less important factors as reflected by the survey results, which also indicate a potential for improvement.

Based on the previous analysis, the four most important factors are local costs, scholarships, religious tolerance, and government coordination, all of which offer major incentives across different aspects. The other factors also influence either favourably or negatively to a certain extent, but not as significantly as these four. To address the revealed problems and improve Changchun city's international soft power, several policy recommendations are summarised below:

- The central government should offer more financial incentives and policies encouraging more international students to come to Changchun (or other similar cities);
- The local government and institutes should create more part-time or full-time employment opportunities for international students to settle in these cities;
- By promoting religious tolerance, cultural and racial friendliness, lesser-known cities could obtain a more competitive edge with students with religious backgrounds;
- Local governments also need to improve their city branding towards international audiences and respect the potential of existing foreign students to be future alumni ambassadors who would become the spokespeople for host cities or institutes; and
- Additionally, local governments should consider turning negatively perceived local geo-political features into their advantage through awareness campaigns targeting specific student groups that emphasise Changchun as a central Northeast Asian city.

Needless to say, to implement these policies requires an integrated effort from all levels of government, institutes and involved stakeholders.

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#### Appendix List of In-depth Interviewed International Students

Student NO.	Country of Origin	Sex	Major	Influence Factors Summary
1	Turkey	F	Chinese	Scholarship, curiosity about Changchun;
2	South Korea	F	Literature	Network recommendation, Geopolitical proximity;
3	Mali	M	Economy	Cheap cost for living;
4	Maldives	F	Medicine (Ph.D.)	Not expensive to live, local hospitality;
5	Pakistani	M	Engineering	Network recommendation;
6	Mali	M	IR	Institutional reputation;
7	Laos	F	Chemistry	Network recommendation;
8	Tajikistan	M	Chinese	Network recommendation;
9	India	M	IR (Ph.D.)	Scholarship;
10	Singapore	F	N.A.	Climate (winter);
11	Canada	M	N.A.	Self-financed, Culture attraction;
12	Ethiopia	F	Public Diplomacy	Institutional reputation;
13	India	F	Medicine	Network recommendation, Scholarship;
14	Yemen	M	Medicine	Network recommendation;
15	Pakistan	F	IR (M)	Scholarship;
16	Japanese	F	Chinese	Access to study resources;
17	South Korea	M	Economy	Partner uni. Network;
18	South Korea	M	Economy	Partner uni. Network;
19	South Korea	M	Economy	Partner uni. Network;
20	India	M	Medicine	Institutional reputation, curriculum, local hospitality;
21	Nigeria	M	Chinese	Climate (winter), quality of life;
22	Somalia	F	Medicine	Network recommendation;
23	Japanese	M	Pharmacology	Local cost, hospitality, partner uni. Network, geo proximity;
24	Kazakhstan	F	Business	Climate, geo proximity, curriculum;
25	Ukraine	M	Business	Scholarship, government coordination;



26	Mongolia	F	Business	Scholarship, government coordination, employment;
27	Kyrgyzstan	F	IR (M)	Scholarship;
28	Tajikistan	F	IR	Network recommendation, her brother is studying here;
29	Papua New Guinean	M	IR (M)	Government coordination, scholarship;
30	Nepal	M	IR (M)	Government coordination, scholarship;
31	Kenya	M	Medicine	Scholarship, Network recommendation;
32	South Korea	M	IR (M)	Institutional reputation, geopolitical proximity, cost of living;
33	Nepal	M	IR (M)	Institutional reputation, Geopolitical proximity;
34	Mali	M	Pharmacy	Local hospitality, Network recommendation;
35	Nigeria	F	Chinese	Climate (winter), quality of life;
36	Russia	F	Business	Geopolitical proximity;
37	Russia	F	Chinese	Network recommendation (parent's work);
38	Japan	M	Sinology	Partner uni. Network (exchange program);
39	Japan	M	Humanities	Network recommendation (his Chinese friend);
40	Iraq	M	Medicine	Network recommendation (his brother is here);
41	Tajikistan	M	IR	Government coordination, scholarship;
42	Argentina	F	Linguistics	Partner uni. Network, quality of life, network recommendation;
43	South Korea	M	Engineering	Government coordination, low cost of living;
44	Tajikistan	M	Chinese	Climate (winter), quality of life, religion tolerance;
45	Ukraine	F	Chinese (M)	Partner uni. Network, local hospitality;
47	Libya	M	Diplomacy (M)	Network recommendation (his Chinese friend), scholarship;
48	Algeria	M	Diplomacy (M)	Scholarship;
49	Kuwait	M	English	Institutional reputation, network recommendation;
50	India	M	Medical Science	Network recommendation (his friends);
51	Mo Zambia	F	Medicine	Scholarship, quality of life, urban hardware;
52	Zambia	F	Medicine	Network recommendation, her brother is studying here
53	India	F	Medical Science	Government coordination, scholarship;
54	South Korea	M	Public Diplomacy	Family reasons;
55	South Korea	M	IR (Ph.D.)	Institutional reputation, Geopolitical proximity;
56	India	M	Medical Science	Institutional reputation, girlfriend;
57	Sudan	M	Engineering	Alumni (he used to study here), local culture;
58	India	F	Medicine	Local hospitality;
59	Mali	M	IR	cost of living, potential careers;

Note: "IR" stands for "International Relations", "(M)" denotes Master's study; "(Ph.D.)" denotes PhD study; "N.A." stands for "Not Available"