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SEEKING KNOWLEDGE IN CHINA: EXPLORING MOTIVATION AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF INDONESIAN MUSLIM STUDENTS

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Abstract

As the largest contributor to the global pool of international students, China's position as a destination for international study has risen significantly over the past decade, in line with its advancements in various fields. This article examines Indonesian Muslim students' motivations and learning experiences pursuing their studies at Chinese universities. Using in-depth interviews with 20 Indonesian Muslim students currently studying at, and alumni of, Chinese universities, this study explores how the motivations and experiences of Indonesian students with Islamic religious identities have influenced their decision to study at Chinese universities in recent years. The findings reveal that Indonesian Muslim students' motivations are diverse, with scholarship opportunities as the primary driver. Additional motivations include China's rapid economic development and the alignment of their studies with career aspirations. Their learning experiences as Muslims on campus are predominantly positive, as they encounter a competitive, disciplined, and open academic environment. Unlike some previous studies that have documented religious discrimination against international Muslim students in non-Muslim-majority countries, this study found no reported experiences of such discrimination among its Indonesian Muslim students in China.

Keywords: Motivation, Learning experience, Chinese universities, Muslim students, Indonesia

Abstrak

Sebagai kontributor terbesar terhadap jumlah mahasiswa internasional di dunia, posisi Tiongkok sebagai tujuan studi internasional telah meningkat secara signifikan selama dekade terakhir, seiring dengan kemajuannya di berbagai bidang. Artikel ini mengkaji motivasi dan pengalaman belajar mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia yang menempuh studi di universitas-universitas di Tiongkok. Dengan menggunakan teknik wawancara mendalam terhadap 20 mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia yang saat ini sedang belajar serta alumni universitas di Tiongkok, penelitian ini secara khusus mengeksplorasi bagaimana motivasi dan pengalaman mahasiswa Indonesia yang memiliki identitas keagamaan Islam memengaruhi keputusan mereka untuk menempuh studi di universitas-universitas Tiongkok dalam beberapa tahun terakhir. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa motivasi mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia sangat beragam, dengan motivasi utama berupa kesempatan memperoleh beasiswa. Motivasi lainnya meliputi pesatnya perkembangan ekonomi Tiongkok serta kesesuaian program studi yang mereka ambil dengan aspirasi karier mereka. Pengalaman belajar mereka sebagai Muslim di lingkungan kampus pada umumnya bersifat positif, karena mereka

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menemukan lingkungan akademik yang kompetitif, disiplin, dan terbuka. Berbeda dengan kajian-kajian sebelumnya yang mencatat diskriminasi keagamaan terhadap mahasiswa Muslim negara-negara mayoritas non-Muslim, penelitian ini tidak menemukan diskriminasi terhadap mahasiswa Muslim dari Indonesia di Cina.

Kata Kunci: *Motivasi, Pengalaman belajar, Universitas-universitas Cina, Mahasiswa muslim, Indonesia*

مستخلص

باعتبار الصين أكبر دولة مُسهمة في العدد الإجمالي للطلاب الدوليين على مستوى العالم، فقد شهدت مكانتها بوصفها وجهةً للدراسة الدولية صعودًا ملحوظًا خلال العقد الماضي، بالتزامن مع ما أحرزته من تقدم في مجالات متعددة. وتتناول هذه المقالة دوافع الطلاب المسلمين الإندونيسيين للالتحاق بالجامعات الصينية وخبراتهم التعليمية فيها. واستنادًا إلى مقابلات معمقة أُجريت مع عشرين طالبًا مسلمًا إندونيسيًا من الدارسين حاليًا في الجامعات الصينية وخريجيها، تستكشف الدراسة الكيفية التي أسهمت بها دوافع هؤلاء الطلاب وخبراتهم، في ضوء هويتهم الدينية الإسلامية، في تشكيل قراراتهم المتعلقة باختيار الجامعات الصينية ،وجهةً للدراسة خلال السنوات الأخيرة. وتكشف النتائج عن تنوع دوافع الطلاب المسلمين الإندونيسيين حيث تمثل فرص الحصول على المنح الدراسية الدافع الرئيس لاختيار الصين وجهةً للدراسة، إلى جانب دوافع أخرى، من أبرزها النمو الاقتصادي المتسارع الذي تشهده الصين، ومدى توافق تخصصاتهم الدراسية مع تطلعاتهم المهنية المستقبلية. كما تُظهر النتائج أن خبراتهم التعليمية بوصفهم طلابًا مسلمين داخل الحرم الجامعي كانت إيجابية في معظمها، إذ وجدوا بيئةً أكاديميةً تنافسيةً ومنضبطةً ومنفتحةً. وخلافًا لبعض الدراسات السابقة التي وثقت تعرض الطلاب الدوليين المسلمين لأشكال مختلفة من التمييز الديني في البلدان ذات الأغلبية غير المسلمة، لم تكشف هذه الدراسة عن أي تجارب أو إفادات تشير إلى تعرض الطلاب المسلمين الإندونيسيين في الصين لمثل هذا النوع من التمييز

الكلمات الرئيسية: الطلاب المسلمون الإندونيسيون؛ الجامعات الصينية؛ دوافع الدراسة؛ الخبرات التعليمية؛ الهوية الدينية؛ الطلاب الدوليون.

A. Introduction

The global landscape of international student mobility has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with China playing a dual role as both the largest sender and an increasingly influential host country. According to the 2015 Open Doors Report, Chinese students accounted for a substantial proportion of international enrolments in the United States.[1] Beyond this, Chinese students also represented the largest group of international students in several other major destinations, including Japan, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.[2] This

[1] Christine Farrugia dan Rajika Bhandari, *Open Doors 2015: Report on International Educational Exchange* (Institute of International Education, 2015), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED661386.

[2] M. A. Jiani, "Why and How International Students Choose Mainland China as a Higher Education Study Abroad Destination," *Higher Education* 74, no. 4 (Oktober 2017): 563–79, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0066-0.

trend reflects China's long-standing position as a dominant contributor to global student mobility.

In China, however, the situation has been reversed, with this country becoming one of the leading countries for foreign students. China has seen significant reforms in its education system and a strengthening of state policies to internationalize and educate Chinese nationals in the country, and is now the most popular study country in Asia and one of the top three worldwide.[3] This is reflected in several statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE 2016), as the number of foreign students in China has increased from approximately 41,000 in 1998 to almost 500,000 in 2018, more than 12 times higher in 20 years. It is rapid growth in universities and colleges, the establishment of many programs with international orientation, and the realization of various scholarship schemes, which have contributed to this growth.

Foreign students' status in China also reflects the trend of global changes. Most students are from Asian countries, and recently students from other countries and Africa are coming to China to study,[4] which shows China's influence extending beyond its geographical limits. These trends show how China has evolved from a peripheral player to a central one in the international student mobility market in higher education. Against this backdrop, this study addresses four main research questions. First, why has China pursued the reform and internationalization of its educational system, and what strategies has it adopted to achieve these objectives? Second, what motivates Indonesian Muslim students to pursue higher education in China? Third, how do these students experience and negotiate their religious identity within Chinese universities? Fourth, how do these experiences challenge dominant assumptions about Muslim minority vulnerability in non-Muslim contexts?

Many studies have been conducted from different angles regarding the reasons and experiences of international students' studies. The literature on the topic of 'Chinese students' can be summarized as follows in the Chinese context: First, there is a considerable literature that concentrates on the motives of Chinese students for studying overseas. In these studies, there are also pull and push factors mentioned: pull factors include better opportunities in the Western education system, good international experience, and reputation; push factors include

[3] Mathias Guiaké, Dianbing Chen, dan Tianxue Zhang, "Meteoric Rise of China as a Host Country for Studies: Exploring the Choice of International Students' Perspectives," *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education* 13, no. 5 (Desember 2021): 202–17, https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i5.2786.

[4] Mei Li, *From Periphery to Centre: The Road of Internationalization of Higher Education in China* (London: Routledge, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003424611.

intense academic competition and the conviction that the education systems in the West are better.[5]

Second, the motivations of international students' choice for studying in China are investigated. This literature highlights growing Chinese influence in the world, the scholarship opportunities, and the relatively low tuition fees, as well as the increased internationalization policies of Chinese higher education.[6] Unlike the traditional Western destinations, China is sometimes touted as an emerging and pragmatic alternative, especially to students from developing countries.

Third, studies on international students' experiences at Chinese universities have also been conducted. The results of these studies show a complex landscape: on the one hand, students gain academically from the opportunities provided by studying abroad, and on the other, they face difficulties with linguistic, social, and cultural integration and the challenges of the different teaching and learning styles they experience.[7] Other studies also point to a lack of interaction with local students and a lack of institutional support.

These studies, however, are analytically unlinked and show several significant gaps. First, little has been done to explore Muslim students' experiences in contexts other than the West and liberal societies, such as in China, where the political, ideological, and institutional landscape is very different from that of the West. Second, although there has been a lot of debate on Chinese language study motivation, most of the research focuses on the generalizations of

[5] Jessica Griner dan Allison Sobol, "Chinese Students' Motivations for Studying Abroad. | EBSCOhost," *Global Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (Mei 2014): 2, https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-4432/CGP/v07i01/40893; Shuiyun Liu, Wenyan Liang, dan Ying Zhang, "Brighter or the richer? Understanding Chinese college students' choices to study abroad," *International Journal of Educational Development* 102 (Oktober 2023): 102856, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102856; Yixi Lu, Jason Jean, dan Zheng Lu, "To study abroad or not, and why? Exploring Chinese university students' postgraduate intentions," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 18 (November 2023): 4598–620, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2270326; Wei Sun dkk., "Research of Competitive Pressure on Undergraduates' Intention to Study Abroad in Chinese Non-Elite Universities," *Qeios*, advance online publication, 12 Januari 2024, https://doi.org/10.32388/AD0987; Man Yang, "A Dialogue Between Chinese Academic Elitism and Western Postcolonialism on Students' Motivation to Study Abroad," *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media* 77 (Januari 2025): 181–87, https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/2024.19618.

[6] Maguatcher Jeremie, Gulinuer Maimaiti, dan Ning Ru, "Examining International Graduate Students' Career Willingness in China: Influencing Factors and Integration of Professional Development," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 28, no. 5 (November 2024): 835–56, https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153241262463; Hu Ke, Diao Junfeng, dan Li Xiaojing, "International Students' University Choice to Study Abroad in Higher Education and Influencing Factors Analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (Oktober 2022), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1036569; Wen Wen dan Die Hu, "The Emergence of a Regional Education Hub: Rationales of International Students' Choice of China as the Study Destination," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 23, no. 3 (Juli 2019): 303–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315318797154.

[7] Yang (Frank) Gong dkk., "Cultural adaptation challenges and strategies during study abroad: New Zealand students in China," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 34, no. 4 (Oktober 2021): 417–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2020.1856129; Jeremie, Maimaiti, dan Ru, "Examining International Graduate Students' Career Willingness in China"; Jasvir Kaur Nachatar Singh dan Amrita Kaur, "Is teaching and learning in Chinese higher education classrooms internationalized? Perspectives from international students in China," *Higher Education Research & Development* 42, no. 5 (Juli 2023): 1283–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2197196; Yujie Su dkk., "Cultural Integration and Adaptation Challenge: A Study of International Students in Wenzhou," *Journal of Educational Technology and Innovation* 7, no. 2 (Juni 2025), https://doi.org/10.61414/se6ngt57.

international students' motivations, and the effects of identity-related factors such as religion on Chinese language study motives have not been detailed. Third, Muslim student studies tend to be conducted in a framework of marginalization and discrimination, with little consideration of contexts in which this might not be the case. This means that the link between international student mobility, religious identity and host-country context is still under-theorized.

To address these gaps, this study examines Indonesian Muslim students in China by integrating analyses of motivation and learning experience with a focus on religious identity. It suggests that a critical point is that the motivations of Indonesian Muslim students are in large part spurred by structural opportunity, the existence of state-sponsored scholarships and perceptions of the increasingly global role of China. More significantly, the study shows that the minority identity of Muslim students in China is not necessarily construed in a discriminatory way as is often assumed in Western literature.[8] On the contrary, however, their experiences are a display of pragmatic adaptation and negotiated coexistence in the state-organized academic environment. The study draws attention to this pattern, which runs contrary to the dominant narratives on the vulnerability of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim contexts and provides a different lens to understand how religious identity is performed in a transnational context of student mobility.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on transnationalism to analyze the motivations and mobility of Indonesian Muslim students in China. Transnationalism is commonly understood as the processes through which individuals create and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link their societies of origin and destination, including social, cultural, economic, and institutional connections across national borders. In the context of student mobility, international students are often seen as transnational actors who maintain multiple attachments across countries, reflecting a form of simultaneity in which they remain connected to their home society while engaging with life in the host country.

Yet, transnationalism also brings to the fore the institutional aspects of transborder mobility at the macro level. The approach recognizes that international study is not simply a personal decision, but also the result of the relationship between the aspirations of students and the structural factors, such as state policies, institutional structures and international power

[8] Courtney A. Colgan dkk., "A Qualitative Exploration of Muslim American College Students' Experiences of Discrimination and Coping.," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 95, no. 5 (2025): 535–48, https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000808; Khadija Khaja dan Wafa Alhajri, "Bullying Faced by Muslim Students in Public Schools," *Children & Schools* 48, no. 2 (April 2026): 99–108, https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdag002; Khaja dan Alhajri, "Bullying Faced by Muslim Students in Public Schools."

dynamics.[9] States, especially, are involved in creating and coordinating mobility in various ways, including the use of policy tools like scholarship programs, internationalization strategies and cross-border academic cooperation. In this sense, mobility is not just made possible but is also purposefully built in a transnational education system.

Using this framework, the choice of studying in China for higher education by the Muslim students of Indonesia can be analyzed as part of the transnational field. With its extensive scholarship programs, institutional efforts to attract students and the strengthening of its geopolitical position, China has been making a bid to become a central point in international academic mobility. Thus, a student's motivation is not only motivated by preference but also influenced by his/her position in a transnational system of differential opportunity, resource and knowledge distribution across countries.

This study also utilizes the insight of religious minority studies to understand how Indonesian Muslim students negotiate their religious identity in a non-Muslim environment. In general, religious minorities are people whose beliefs and practices diverge from those of the majority, who may encounter structural and everyday obstacles like restricted access to religious institutions, stereotyping, and difficulties in fulfilling religious duties.[10]

However, more recent studies indicate that the experience of the minorities is not always marginalized. Rather, they are determined by contextually specific interactions among institutional structures, cultural, and individual agency.[11] In this respect, minority status is not an automatic barrier to inclusion but can also lead to processes of accommodation and negotiation, and to selective integration.

From this lens, Muslim international students can be considered active participants in ongoing processes of accommodation, negotiation, and adaptation of their religious commitments—including prayer, diet, and dress—in the contexts of the host society. In addition to constraints, they experience institutional support and the sociocultural environment. This framework is especially pertinent to this study because it allows for an analysis beyond

[9] Lucia Lo, Wei Li, dan Yining Tan, "Students on the move? Intellectual migration and international student mobility," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49, no. 18 (November 2023): 4621–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2270331.

[10] Tri Astutik Haryati, Annisa Mutohharoh, dan Amat Zuhri, "Local Religion in a Majority-Dominated Society: A Study of Resiliency and Adaptation," *Pharos Journal of Theology*, no. 106.5 (November 2025), https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.517; Bahar Tanyas, "'I Was Told That People Might Hurt Me': Experiences of Religious Discrimination among Jewish, Christian, and Alevi Youth in Turkey," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 5 (2024): e2872, https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2872.

[11] Ada Hui dkk., "Institutional Injustice: Implications for System Transformation Emerging from the Mental Health Recovery Narratives of People Experiencing Marginalisation," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 4 (April 2021): e0250367, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250367; David M. Silverman dkk., "The Ongoing Development of Strength-Based Approaches to People Who Hold Systemically Marginalized Identities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 27, no. 3 (Agustus 2023): 255–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683221145243.

prevailing notions of discrimination and more of a complex view of what it means to be a Muslim student in China. It provides an opportunity for this study to explore a setting which could be both challenging and accommodating for religious minorities, such as the lack of prayer facilities and the scheduling of religious services, alongside the provision of halal food and the avoidance of explicit discrimination.

In addition, this study uses identity negotiation theory by S. Ting-Toomey (2005) to explore how Indonesian Muslim students negotiate their religious identity in the context of Chinese universities in terms of the sociocultural and institutional environment. Identity is seen as not stable but fluid, contextual, and constantly negotiated in social interaction.[12] People embody several identities (religious, national, academic, etc.) which are enhanced and negotiated according to context.[13] This process can be more complicated in a transnational context because norms, expectations, and institutional constraints vary as well. One of the core components of this is identity negotiation, a process in which people actively manage and change their identities in response to the outside world.[14] They do not simply acculturate or reject but adapt pragmatically to create coherence in their own beliefs. This is a close parallel to contextual identity performance, in which identity is manifested in different ways in various contexts, but is not lost.

B. Method

Research Design

The research method used in this research is a qualitative case study. This methodology is suitable for questions of "how," "what," and "why," such as how a phenomenon is experienced and perceived on the ground.[15] Moreover, it helps gain an in-depth understanding of the current contextual deficits and their causes at the social or institutional level. Overall, the design offers empirical means to explore the complex motivations and lived experiences of Indonesian Muslim students in the specific political-ideological context of Chinese higher education.

[12] Stella Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory: Crossing cultural boundaries," dalam *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2005), 211–33.
[13] Stella Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory," dalam *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, t.t.), 418–22.
[14] Ylva Svensson dan Karin Flensner, "The Construction and Negotiation of Social Identities Following a School Desegregation Initiative in Sweden," *Identity* 25, no. 1 (Januari 2025): 115–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2024.2383760.
[15] Sarah Crowe dkk., "The Case Study Approach," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 11, no. 1 (Juni 2011): 100, https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-100.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected by combining purposive sampling with snowball sampling. This approach was used to identify information-rich cases that aligned with the study's aims, while simultaneously reaching eligible participants who are typically hard to access. While purposeful sampling is widely utilized to select cases related to the phenomenon of interest, snowball sampling serves as a purposeful pathway for accessing participants through strategic referrals.[16] The participants in this study were enrolled in premier Chinese universities under Project 211 or Project 985, specifically Peking University, Tsinghua University, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), Fudan University, and Jilin University.

Focusing on Indonesian Muslim students is theoretically imperative. Coming from the world's largest Muslim-majority country, these students transition from a socio-cultural environment where Islamic practices are structurally normalized to a secular-communist context where they constitute an extreme minority. This drastic shift provides a unique analytical lens to observe how majoritarian religious identities are renegotiated in a non-Western, non-liberal host state. The student-level inclusion criteria required that participants were:

1. Indonesian citizens,
2. Practicing Muslims (those who affiliate with Indonesian Muslim organisations such International branch of NU and Muhammadiyah in China), and
3. Currently enrolled in or alumni of higher education institutions in Mainland China.

A total of 20 student participants were interviewed. The sample size was determined by data saturation, the point at which further data collection ceases to generate new analytical insights, codes, or thematic dimensions regarding student mobility and identity negotiation. To enhance empirical validity and achieve robust data triangulation, this study also integrated an expert stakeholder interview through elite sampling.[17] The stakeholder participant was one of the staff in the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Beijing, providing institutional policy context regarding Indonesian student mobility, university-to-university partnerships, and student welfare support in China. The descriptive profile of the student participants is structured in Table 1:

[16] Ricarda B. Bouncken, Wojciech Czakon, dan Florian Schmitt, "Purposeful Sampling and Saturation in Qualitative Research Methodologies: Recommendations and Review," *Review of Managerial Science* 20, no. 2 (Februari 2026): 579–615, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11846-025-00881-2; Lawrence A. Palinkas dkk., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5 (September 2015): 533–44, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y.

[17] Rebecca S. Natow, "The Use of Triangulation in Qualitative Studies Employing Elite Interviews," *Qualitative Research* 20, no. 2 (April 2020): 160–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119830077.

Table 1. Aggregate Profile of Student Participants (N = 20)

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Number of Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	11	55%
	Female	9	45%
Study Level	Master's Degree	14	70%
	Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)	6	30%
Current Enrollment Status	Active Students	18	90%
	Alumni	2	10%
Field of Study	Social Sciences & Humanities	12	60%
	STEM & Engineering	5	25%
	Economics & Business	3	15%
Geographic Location in China	Tier 1 Cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen)	13	65%
	Other Regions (Wuhan, Changchun, Hangzhou, etc.)	7	35%

The non-monolithic understandings of being Muslim evident in the data of Table 1 are directly influenced by the demographic diversity of participants who are to be understood as experiencing Muslim identities in a non-monolithic way, with respect to their performance of visual identity (hijab) and spatial-temporal ritual negotiating (Friday prayers). Moreover, the differences in study-level significantly affect student agency, as the students of Master level (S2) find it difficult to practice their faith because of their fixed study time with the lecturer, while the Doctoral (S3) students have more time to practice their faith flexibly with intensive research.

Data Collection and Fieldwork Duration

The full research project took approximately 6 months (from recruitment of participants to semi-structured interviews, through to observations). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to obtain primary data as the interviews were flexible enough to explore unanticipated avenues of enquiry and allow for a focus on key topic areas.[18] The interview protocol for the student participants focused on three analytical aspects – institutional and

[18] Svend Brinkmann dan Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716665.

personal pull-push factors influencing students' decision to study in China, their daily religious adaptations (halal food, prayer, hijab), and possible experiences of discrimination.

At the same time, a special elite interview protocol was used for the institutional stakeholder (KBRI Beijing Education Attaché). The themes of the interview were macro-level trends: Government-to-Government (G2G) and University-to-University (U2U) educational partnerships, structural development of Chinese government scholarship schemes, institutional monitoring of student security, and diplomatic frameworks ensuring cultural and religious accommodations on Chinese campuses. The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes. Considering geographic dispersion, 14 student interviews were conducted on the secure digital platform of Zoom, and 6 student interviews as well as the stakeholder interview were conducted in person. For enrichment of the data, participatory observation took place at Fudan University (Shanghai) and Peking University (Beijing) in physical visits to the campus to provide context on the spatial layout and cross-cultural interactions within a day. State Education Policies and Embassies Archives were used to triangulate secondary data and increase the empirical validity of the data.[19]

Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data in this study were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis, which was used to analyze the qualitative data collected in this study.[20] This analysis was an ongoing iterative process of three concurrent streams of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation was applied to sort, prioritize, eliminate, and arrange raw data obtained from interviews and policy documents; it was conducted first. First, data condensation was done to sort, focus, eliminate, and arrange the raw data from the interviews and policy documents. At this stage, data on the government education policies of the Chinese authorities and on the motives of the foreign students were coded systematically. Second, data display was employed to display the condensed data in structured matrices, charts, and networks. This form allowed for an accurate analysis of what international students learned in China and how Indonesian Muslim students differed in their learning motivations and adaptations. Finally, drawing conclusions and verification were used to spot common patterns,

[19] Norman K. Denzin, "Critical Qualitative Inquiry," *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (Januari 2017): 8–16, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864.
[20] Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, dan Johnny Saldana, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (SAGE, 2014).

themes, and causal explanations in the structured outlines to guarantee the rigor and validity of the final analytical results.

C. Result and Discussion

1. China's Education Policies: Reform and Internationalization

A thought-provoking question worth exploring is why China has become the world's largest contributor of international students while also being the third-largest destination for international students globally and the first in Asia. Many researchers attribute this phenomenon to several factors, particularly China's innovative educational reforms and economic transformations.[21]

The internationalization of education in China began in the mid-19th century. The historical development of education in China can be divided into two phases: Phase One (1978–1992). During this period, educational policies focused on sending students, scholars, and professors to study in English-speaking countries. The Chinese government and universities provided funding to send professors and administrators abroad to learn effective teaching methods and practices for serving international students. Upon their return, they were expected to teach effectively at Chinese universities. The government also implemented policies to invite scholars and experts to China.

Besides, Phase Two marked a shift toward making China an attractive destination for international students. Education policies and reforms were focused on building internationally oriented higher education institutions. These efforts included the development of international curriculum systems and expanding the number of international students at these institutions. Policies also included international student exchange programs and strengthening international support frameworks.[22]

The development of international higher education institutions in China was based on the '211 and 985 Projects.[23] Initiated in 1995, Project 211 aimed to fulfil national standards for the development of 100 universities and 800 critical disciplines, although some programs reached international levels. The number of higher education institutions in China doubled from

[21] Huili Si, "Higher Education Evolution in China: A Systematic Review of the Internationalisation of Higher Education in China," *Higher Education Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2026): e70088, https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.70088; Wen dan Hu, "The Emergence of a Regional Education Hub"; Jeremie, Maimaiti, dan Ru, "Examining International Graduate Students' Career Willingness in China."
[22] Guiaké, Chen, dan Zhang, "Meteoric Rise of China as a Host Country for Studies."
[23] Guiaké, Chen, dan Zhang, "Meteoric Rise of China as a Host Country for Studies."

1,045 in 1995 to 2,491 in 2013.[24] Meanwhile, Project 985, launched in 1999, aimed to establish world-class universities and international-standard research institutions to attract international students. These projects had a significant impact on advancing the internationalization of higher education in China.

Before the implementation of these projects, in 1989, only two universities in China were legally conducting international education: The Hopkins Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies[25] and the Goethe-Institut in Beijing. Through Project 985, the Ministry of Education encouraged Chinese universities to provide international education. By 1999, 70 higher education institutions in China were offering cross-border education in partnership with foreign counterparts. Among them, 30 programs were offered by 27 Chinese universities in collaboration with 25 foreign universities.[26].

In line with the internationalization program, the Chinese government initiated the development of curricula and programs tailored to meet the expectations of international students. To implement these programs, textbooks were imported from Western universities. The Ministry of Education encouraged universities offering international programs to use English and bilingual instruction to attract international students to their campuses.

To further attract foreign students, the Chinese government introduced various scholarship schemes and established Confucius Institutes in several countries. Studies have shown that scholarships play a significant role in attracting international students to host countries. Scholarships were provided for degree programs, while Confucius Institutes offered non-degree programs for foreigners.

Scholarships for international students in China included government scholarships, provincial scholarships, municipal government scholarships, corporate scholarships, and scholarships from Confucius Institutes. Government scholarships were the largest contributor to international student funding, while other types of scholarships were relatively smaller in scale. In 2015, the Chinese government awarded 40,600 scholarships to international students.

[24] Dan Liu dan W. John Morgan, "Students' Decision-Making About Postgraduate Education at G University in China: The Main Factors and the Role of Family and of Teachers," *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 25, no. 2 (April 2016): 325–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-015-0265-y.

[25] Norton Wheeler, "Educational Exchange in Post-Mao U. S.-China Relations: The Hopkins-Nanjing Center," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (Leiden, The Netherlands) 17, no. 1 (2010): 56–88, https://doi.org/10.1163/187656110X519406.

[26] Futao Huang, "Policy and Practice of the Internationalization of Higher Education in China," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 7, no. 3 (September 2003): 232–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303254430.

This number increased to 56,649 scholarships by 2018.[27] A rise in the number of scholarships provided has accompanied the increasing number of international students. The Chinese government also grants international students the right to work post-study and offers permanent residency policies.

2. Structural Opportunities and Transnational Mobility Motivations

The empirical results for the second research question, what makes Indonesian Muslim students want to further their studies in China, indicate an important dynamic between the micro-level personal aspirations and macro-level state architecture. International student mobility is not just a free market individual choice, but a strategic production, management, and structuring of the mobility generated through the instruments of host-state policies[28] and evolving global power dynamics[29]. This can be seen from the statement of one respondent:

> "Honestly, I chose to study in China because there are many scholarships available – for example the CGS, the CIS and many others that are university-specific. Also, the requirements for admission for these scholarships are not as high as in the UK or the US, where you would require very high TOEFL scores."

The findings from the 20 participants show that the first conception of the "identity" of China as a destination country is not based on academic cultural features but rather on the large-scale use of structural opportunities (i.e., state-sponsored capitalization). Mostly, the Muslim students from Indonesia did not assess the respective Chinese universities or their programs before their enrollment, but rather after they could generate financial leverage through the Confucius Institute funding networks or the Chinese Government Scholarships (CGS). This pattern is evidence of the host state actively building international student mobility by reducing economic obstacles and creating a transnational field of mobility that is not previously a Western-oriented student market. As another one remarked about this evolving consciousness:

> "The main reason I have come here is that China is massively providing scholarships and for the students of Indonesia, the opportunity is really huge and too good to miss as well; however, upon seeing the university profile later on, I realized the quality of the campus is really good too."

[27] Donald Lien dan Liqin Miao, "International Student Mobility to China: The Effects of Government Scholarship and Confucius Institute," *International Journal of Chinese Education* 12, no. 3 (September 2023): 5, https://doi.org/10.1177/2212585X231213787.

[28] Yvonne Riaño, Christof Van Mol, dan Parvati Raghuram, "New directions in studying policies of international student mobility and migration," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 16, no. 3 (Mei 2018): 283–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2018.1478721.

[29] Peidong Yang, "China in the global field of international student mobility: an analysis of economic, human and symbolic capitals," *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 52, no. 2 (Februari 2022): 308–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1764334.

This is a macro-structural enablement, which can be confirmed based on institutional data from the elite stakeholder interview with an informant from Indonesian Embassy in Beijing. He emphasized that the government-to-government (G2G) and the university-to-university (U2U) cooperation in the field of education has been institutionalized, and scholarship information is now made very visible and accessible through the eight Confucius Institutes strategically deployed in major public and private universities in Indonesia. Hence, the host state sets up an institutional system that is able to intercept and direct the aspirations of local students from the moment they land on Chinese territory.

More importantly, the participants' references to these motivations suggest that they are very rational and analytical transnational actors. A very strong "transnational imagination" of the changing centers of global capital from Western to Eastern countries heavily influences their educational mobility.[30] The participants do not look at China from an 'ideological or religious' angle but look at it from a more 'practical' economic angle and consider what it is going to do for their careers and geopolitical futures. For instance, Ron, a doctoral student at Jilin University, talked about his mobility in a macroeconomic transition:

> If we refer to the book by Fareed Zakaria, titled Post-American World... one of the book's conclusions is that new points of progress have emerged outside of America. There is India, there is China... the development of the world today is moving from the West to the East. If we look at the economic performance in the Western world, it is declining...

The business student, Ron, has a macroeconomic perspective similar to Ada, who eagerly gave up her active scholarship applications to an Australian university to opt for China. Her logic was very pragmatic; the Chinese government had announced the acceptance earlier, and she had a firm expectation that in the future China would become an absolute "economic giant," so she made the pragmatic, quick reallocation of her transnational path. Like Verdi, the eminent composer chose instead to join the academic framework in Singapore, despite its lack of prestige, to find his own place in the new political and economic structure of the East.

These stories suggest, from a transnationalism perspective, a notion of "simultaneity" as students anticipate their global positioning but at the same time remain strongly connected to the career needs of their home society.[31] This is further evidenced by the experiences of

[30] Chris R. Glass dan Natalie I. Cruz, "Moving towards Multipolarity: Shifts in the Core-Periphery Structure of International Student Mobility and World Rankings (2000–2019)," *Higher Education* 85, no. 2 (Februari 2023): 415–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00841-9; Xing Xu, "Reconceptualizing International Student Mobility: A Multipolar Structure Lens," *Journal of International Students* 13, no. 2 (Mei 2023): i–iv, https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v13i2.5868.

[31] Alison Taylor, Catalina Bobadilla Sandoval, dan Sameena Karim Jamal, "Dreaming the life: international students and the temporal complexity of employability," *Journal of Youth Studies* 28, no. 2 (Februari 2025): 446–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2271869.

students such as Nufus, a researcher in the field of international relations who specialized in Chinese territorial and literature studies at her undergrad days in Indonesia:

> "I studied Chinese literature for my bachelor's degree (in Indonesia) ... Besides learning the language, my decision to pursue a master's degree there was also driven by career requirements, so I chose to study in China. I never considered studying anywhere else before choosing China."

Within this cohort, the decision to enter higher education in China is a conscious choice to build up a person's linguistic ability in Mandarin, regional knowledge, and a personal network of contacts, which are currently in relatively low supply but in high demand in the academic and policy worlds in Indonesia. When they learn the language and politics right in the country they are going back to, they can be sure they will get high returns at their jobs on return.

Previous studies have predominantly interpreted international student mobility through the push-pull framework,[32] whereby students are pushed by educational or economic constraints in their home country and pulled by the attractive characteristics of destination countries, such as scholarships, institutional reputation, or educational quality.[33] This perspective is influential in the understanding of students' decision-making processes among international students, but it is often presented as an attribute of the host country and that the host country has not been actively constructed by the host state. The present results suggest otherwise. Instead of merely reacting to existing push and pull factors, Indonesian Muslim students make strategic choices in an institutional landscape purposefully created by the Chinese state via scholarship programs, bilateral educational cooperation and transnational policy networks.

Thus, the answer to RQ 2 is more than a traditional 'push-pull'. Limited opportunities at home and the appealing features of universities abroad are not the only factors that "push" or "pull" Indonesian Muslim students. Instead, they are targeted by state-sponsored, planned structural opportunities, and they take them up and use them strategically to gain transnational socioeconomic capital through education opportunistically and pragmatically.

[32] Stephanie Doyle dkk., "An Investigation of Factors Associated With Student Participation in Study Abroad," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 14, no. 5 (November 2010): 471–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309336032.

[33] Tim Mazzarol dan Geoffrey N. Soutar, "'Push-pull' factors influencing international student destination choice," *International Journal of Educational Management* 16, no. 2 (April 2002): 82–90, https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540210418403; Ahmad Bayiz Ahmad dan Mahsood Shah, "International Students' Choice to Study in China: An Exploratory Study," *Tertiary Education and Management* 24, no. 4 (Desember 2018): 325–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2018.1458247.

3. Pragmatic Adaptation and Halal Infrastructure Accommodation

The third research question is how Indonesian Muslim students experience and negotiate their Muslim faith in Chinese universities. To address this analytically, the empirical data must be situated within a wider academic discourse on religious minority studies. The literature on transnational Muslim migration has predominantly based its analysis on the idea of baseline vulnerability, which anticipates that Muslim students in non-Muslim, Western, or communist-ideological environments would be prone to being marginalized or losing their identity or experiencing structural Islamophobia.[34] But the collected data of the 20 subjects contradict these assumptions and illustrate an intricate set of negotiated coexistence arrangements mediated through institutional accommodation in the host state.

Strict adherence to diet (Halal) is the main point of conflict for every practicing Muslim in a non-Muslim society, regarding physical survival. In contrast, the participants in this study had a very organized form of institutional support despite the international Muslim students on Western liberal campuses reporting severe psychological stress and geographic displacement because of the complete lack of institutional options for halal. Fudan University, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), Tsinghua University, and Jilin University are major universities in China that have incorporated separate halal canteens into their campus infrastructure. Ron, a doctoral student at Jilin University, investigated the structural difference critically from his first-hand observations:

> Halal food is available in major universities in China, including at Jilin, where I'm studying, and in my university, it is on the third floor of the campus canteen - which is a special floor for Muslim students - so Chinese universities are already prepared to accommodate Muslim students and provide halal food, unlike in Australia... everything is done according to halal standards.

The above empirical reality indicates that China's internationalization of its higher education system is a well-designed, pragmatic process of making the education system adaptable to foreign students, which is deliberately managed. The university administration provides separate rooms for Muslims, for example, a whole third floor in a campus dining hall, so that it is not so stressful for Muslims to live as minority students while meeting their religious needs. It will help to reduce the normal arguments about food and help students to keep on

[34] Nadin Abu Khalaf dkk., "The Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Students: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *School Psychology Review* 52, no. 2 (Maret 2023): 206–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2022.2075710; Hassina Alizai, "Impact of Islamophobia on post-secondary Muslim students attending Ontario universities," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 24, no. 3 (Mei 2021): 357–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798388; Andaç Mamati dan Monika Kovács, "The Experiences and Challenges of Muslim Male Students in European Higher Education: A Scoping Review and Thematic Analysis," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 34, no. 2 (Juni 2026): 343–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265251374206.

insisting on their courses without any worry. Moreover, this institutional setting directly applies to salient indicators of religious identity (gendered markers). The results revealed that there was no restriction or discrimination by the faculty, either from the head or local peers, experienced by the female Muslim respondents who wore hijab. As one female respondent shared, "I have never faced any restrictions on wearing the hijab anywhere; there is no prohibition from my professors, and my peers fully accept me." The finding is important and should be interpreted critically in the light of current geopolitical narratives. In Western media, the Chinese government's handling of its Muslim minorities in the western provinces, like Restrictions in Xinjiang, is described as severe and expanding,[35] and its citizens are generally presumed to have no right to any religious expression at all.[36] Within the walls of the Chinese international universities, however, the hijab is completely removed from the political stigma and is considered a religious garment worn by the individual.

In the physical spaces of Fudan University (Shanghai) and Peking University (Beijing), the author carried out participatory observations to verify that these halal canteens are not "halal zones," but rather functional areas of interaction between different cultures, where foreign Muslim students express their religious identities without alienation. Within this structural security, students can out and express their identities smoothly within the framework of the university. However, a closer examination suggests that this type of lodging is very pragmatic and constrained by structure. The university gives Muslim students physical support for food and dress, but it does not change the physical environment of the university daily to accommodate the cultural practices of Muslim students. This results in small, everyday conflicts over the matter, especially in terms of space and sanitation, and water infrastructure. The participants were consistently stating that public toilets on Chinese campuses are not "Muslim-friendly" because they are built according to the local preferences of non-Muslims and do not offer running water facilities for Islamic ritual purification (Wudu or cleaning after using the toilet). Also, students complained about the cold weather conditions while travelling from one dormitory to another and from the dormitory to the academic hall. To overcome these infrastructural and seasonal problems, the respondents resorted to using alternative solutions to

[35] Ross Holder, "On the interrelatedness of human rights, culture and religion: considering the significance of cultural rights in protecting the religious identity of China's Uyghur minority," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 5 (Mei 2021): 771–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1725487.

[36] Limeng Sun, "China – Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-Radicalization: On 新疆维吾尔自治区去极端化条例, Promulgated by the Standing Comm. People's Cong. of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China, Mar. 29, 2017, Effective Apr. 1, 2017.," *Journal of Islamic Law* 2, no. 1 (Mei 2021), https://doi.org/10.53484/jil.v2.sun.

ensure proper Islamic sanitation on a day-to-day basis. This is reflected in the daily lives of one of the participants who shared with them the following:

> I always carry a portable bidet with me to camp in China because they don't have water to clean in the toilets. Also I didn't see any dedicated Wudu area, which makes it difficult for me to perform ablution in the restroom sinks, although it requires me to raise my feet to the sink. I like to walk back to my dormitory when I have to pray. But if it is cold, I pray inside the University library in hallways that don't have too many people around me.

In analytical terms, in the sense of identity theory, the students do not view the above-mentioned gaps in the infrastructure as systematic religious discrimination or persecution, but as "baseline" environmental or bureaucratic inconveniences which are part of any transnational mobility experience. The main features of their religious identity – eating halal and wearing coverings – are structurally supported by the university, so that the students willingly use individual agency to comply with these minor physical restrictions (e.g., carrying portable water bottles to drink). The response to RQ3 thus shows that the negotiation of religious identity in China is a "pragmatic accommodation" on the part of the institution and "selective adaptation" on the part of the students. The secular-communist university state does not insist on absolute assimilation or secularization from the international students in the university, but it provides the necessary infrastructural resources to support the basic Islamic practices of the international students, with the result of negating the traditional narratives of the absolute vulnerability of minorities in non-Western contexts.

4. Contextual Identity Performance and Academic Negotiation

The fourth research question is a critical review of the theoretical aspect of this study, discussing how the experiences of the Indonesian Muslim students problematize the assumption of the vulnerability of Muslim minorities in non-Muslim environments. The orthodox sociological and migration literature presents a non-Muslim, secular-communist political context such as China as a potential danger, threat, or secularization of religion.[37] This study adopts Ting-Toomey's (2015) Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) as an analytical framework and research lens to argue that minority vulnerability is not a structural doom. Instead, it is a very fluid reality that is managed through contextual identity performance.[38] For the participants, the structural friction found on Chinese campuses—with no designated prayer

[37] Aymeric Xu, "Typologies of Secularism in China: Religion, Superstition, and Secularization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 66, no. 1 (Januari 2024): 57–80, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417523000348; Bozhen Zhang, "An Analysis of China's Muslim-Related Policies from the Perspectives of Ethnic Heterogeneity, Sinicization and 'Anxiety Management,'" *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 7 (Januari 2022): 45–55, https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.7.1.0045.

[38] Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory" (t.t.).

rooms, and lectures being conducted across the same time and day on Friday—was not an ideological problem or a secularization device, but instead a dynamic that they were able to engage with using what Ting-Toomey calls communicative resourcefulness.

INT suggests that people exist in an unfamiliar culture at the same time that they experience the dynamics of security versus insecurity in their identity as well as inclusion versus exclusion.[39] It is apparent from the field data that Indonesian students did not deal with this emotional vulnerability with ideology, but with a tactical management of their multiple selves as Muslim and disciplined academic citizens. Private space negotiation (identity consistency) was done differently in private and public spaces: In a private space, when a critical lecture happened simultaneously with communal Jummah prayers, students showed high individual agency by replacing it with Dhuhr prayer in their dormitories. According to one of the respondents:

> "At that time, the public lecture went on as normal, but Friday prayers were taking place as well, and the material was very important and could not be missed, so at the end of the lecture, I started to perform the Dhuhr prayer in my dormitory as a replacement for Jummah prayer."

From INT's point of view, it is a strategic compromise to keep identity a consistent and secure property within a secure private domain in the face of structurally disruptive public routines.[40] The religious belief is preserved in the core group and the personal identity is adaptable to the demands of the situation. Secondly, negotiation of public space (identity validation): On the other hand, when students asserted their agency in the institutional sphere by asking permission from the local professors to attend Friday prayers, they were actively trying to get positive validation of their identity. Ting-Toomey suggests that the sense of belonging is experienced when the group that one wishes to belong to is affirmed in the interaction. The field data supports this INT dynamic; the institutional response was conducive:

"The class schedule continuously overlapped with the Friday prayer. However, I requested permission from my professors; they understood my situation and consistently granted it."

This small-scale interaction is evidence that the Chinese academic environment is not an ideologically hostile environment. Rather, it is a place for face validation between the local actors (professors) and the students' religious selves, where the latter are allowed a certain degree of pragmatics. Moreover, this negotiation involves the local academic norms being

[39] Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory" (2005); Stella Ting-Toomey, "Communicative resourcefulness: An identity negotiation perspective," dalam *Intercultural communication competence*, International and intercultural communication annual, Vol. XVII, 1993 (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1993), 72–111.
[40] Ting-Toomey, "Identity negotiation theory" (t.t.).

incorporated. The Indonesian students are not feeling the psychological alienation or feeling threatened by the outgroup in this case, because they face the extreme academic competitive environment of local students who are studying in the library until 11:00 PM. They embodied this secular work ethos through conscious attunement as a challenge to motivation:

> "Usually, they (local students) go to campus at 08:00 AM and back home at 08:00 PM, and this made them feel challenged in being as committed as the Indonesian Muslim students in studying."

This is an example of selective integration in the process of transnational identity negotiation. The students are not secularizing or letting go of their religious selves, but are extending their learning process in the context of the elite host-country setting and cloaking their religious responsibilities in private or structurally secured spaces (such as a halal canteen and dormitory). Therefore, the application of Ting-Toomey's INT to these empirical facts directly undermines the prevailing paradigm of Western interpretation on the marginalization of Muslim minority groups. Firstly, it shows that there are infrastructural limits and structural protections in a non-liberal environment (visual dress freedom and halal networks). Second, individual religious needs are catered to in a more pragmatic and tolerant manner, without the use of ideological warfare. Thirdly, international Muslim students are not helpless, easy-to-be-affected players who are 'victimized' by structure, but are strategic agents who are interculturally competent and negotiate multiple layers of identity strategically to maximize their transnational academic achievement. It breaks the simple dichotomy of the "tolerant West" vs the "authoritarian East" that is the base dichotomy in contemporary mobility studies.

5. Practical Implications

This study presents practical implications for the different institutional stakeholders and potential international students beyond its theoretical contribution to the expansion of the boundaries of Western-centric religious minority theories. The empirical results show that KBRI Beijing is strategically important at the macro-policy level with regard to the role of the Education and Culture Attaché in dealing with institutional monitoring and welfare support for students. When designed to be open, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and engaged, rather than fortress-like, spaces can contribute to social well-being in the Embassy.[41] These findings can benefit KBRI Beijing's efforts to improve the capacity to track cultural and religious

[41] Verica Krstić, Ivan Filipović, dan Jelena Ristić Trajković, "Cultural Sensitivity and Social Well-Being in Embassy Architecture: Educational Approaches and Design Strategies," *Sustainability* 16, no. 20 (Januari 2024): 8880, https://doi.org/10.3390/su16208880.

accommodations at the system level across Chinese campuses to guarantee the sustainability of state-sponsored and institutional students' pathways and their support.

In a micro-operational sense, the findings of this study can be used as a tactical adaptation guide for prospective students to identify tangible environmental and infrastructure obstacles of host institutions. In particular, the structure of the toilets in Chinese universities is built to local preferences, and they do not have facilities for running water that is necessary for Islamic ritual purification (Wudu), so prospective foreign students must prepare their own purification facilities, such as portable bottles of water for washing hands, feet, and face, before coming. In addition, as per the theory of identity negotiation, students are encouraged to take an active role rather than face structural alienation.[42] It may be possible to do this by carefully arranging class timetables with faculty members within the local community, where the required secular school timetables and the fixed time frame of Friday communal prayers (Jummah) coincide.

Finally, these results provide a practical indicator to universities and scholarship networks, including Confucius Institute, which is strategically placed at key public and private universities of Indonesia, to improve their structural and informational relationships. Relationships could be further strengthened in the future with other educational institutions and bilateral contracts, which are not only academic and economic in nature. Rather, institutional actors need to proactively engage in discussions regarding physical spatial changes, such as the possible formalization of individual religious leave permits, or the negotiated establishment of designated prayer spaces on campus. These multi-layered practical interventions can make transnational academic environments more inclusive, reducing everyday tensions and facilitating international students' various identity performances.

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the educational mobility of Indonesian Muslim students to China is influenced by the intersection of state-provided structural opportunities and Muslim students' strategic agency rather than the traditional push–pull factors. Chinese government scholarships, bilateral educational cooperation, and institutional support mechanisms promote transnational mobility and provide students with the opportunity to build up academic, linguistic, and professional capital. The results also indicate that religious identity is negotiated based on

[42] Chit Cheung Matthew Sung, "Identity Conflicts and Negotiations: Narratives of Asian International Students' Experiences in Hong Kong," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2022): 639–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2022.2063818.

pragmatic accommodation, in which universities offer essential support for halal food and freedom of religious expression, while there are certain infrastructural restrictions, such as the lack of prayer spaces and sanitation facilities for Muslims. Students are not taken aback by these constraints but instead negotiate their identities through context while continuing to express their religious identities. The study thus casts doubt on the prevalent Westernized views that Muslim minorities are inherently vulnerable in non-Muslim contexts, arguing instead that the way the minority communities live and survive depends on the permeability of institutions, tolerance of others, and the ability of individuals. The results provide additional insights into the development of structural transnationalism and discussions on identity negotiation, and have practical applications for universities, scholarship sponsors, and the Indonesian Embassy to support international Muslim students to build a more inclusive environment. Importantly, these dynamics provide a new lens to understand how minorities construct identity in a non-Western secular communist academic context. This study does not see identity as a mere outcome of structural victimisation/alienation, but rather as an active and fluid process of identity construction via ‘selective integration' and ‘communicative resourcefulness'. In this view, minority identity is not at risk or diminished but rather is configured strategically, with careful religious consistency in safe private places (like dormitories), and engaging in the search for face validation and the adoption of local work ethic in public institutional settings.

But there are some drawbacks to this article that may be explored in the future. First, this study tends to focus on the phenomenon from the viewpoint of international students and neglects the responses of institutions and faculty towards Muslim students' specific religious needs. This discourse can be enhanced by future research that directly examines the perception of academic staff and enactment of institutional policy on the ground. Second, the demographic profile reflects a sample of diversity, but the current analysis assumes the experience of Indonesian Muslims is relatively homogeneous. It does not take into account the more complex gender-specific dimensions (e.g., considerations of the presence of the hijab in the daily lives of female students) and neglects different career paths of master’s students (S2) and Doctoral students (S3). Therefore, future studies should employ a comparative analytical framework to systematically examine how specific gender identities and different academic levels intersect with the negotiation of religious and professional lives in transnational education contexts.

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