

# Linguistic Proficiency as Economic Capital: A Case Study of How Fluency in Chinese Creates Employment for Alumni Returnees from Universities in Mainland China

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how proficiency in Chinese language functions as a form of economic capital for alumni returnees from universities in mainland China. The study explores the processes through which proficiency in Chinese language is acquired and the ways in which it is mobilized non-Chinese speakers who studied in China to secure employment in home-country labor markets as well as the sectors that offer them employment. Anchored in Bourdieu's theory of capital, the research conceptualizes language proficiency as a form of linguistic capital that can be converted into economic outcomes under specific social and structural conditions. The study employs qualitative case study design with snowball sampling to involve 23 participants. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and data was analysed using thematic approach.

The findings reveal that the acquisition of proficiency Chinese is a cumulative and context-dependent process shaped by four key pathways which are structured classroom learning, immersive social interaction, self-directed learning practices, and engagement in academic and professional contexts. In terms of employment outcomes, the study identifies four primary mechanisms through which returnees convert their linguistic capital into economic capital which are direct recruitment by Chinese firms, the mobilization of alumni and professional networks, the strategic use of Chinese proficiency as a competitive advantage in the labor market, and the creation of entrepreneurial opportunities in translation and intermediary services. Five major sectors of employment, construction, trade and logistics, technology and telecommunications, translation services, and manufacturing, within which returnees predominantly occupy intermediary roles bridging Chinese and local actors. The findings demonstrates the growing importance of Chinese language skills as a strategic resource for employability in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

**Keywords**-Chinese language; linguistic capital; economic capital; alumni returnees; proficiency;

## BACKGROUND

In today's global economy, language proficiency has increasingly been seen as a communicative skill and also as a form of capital with measurable economic returns. According to the linguistic capital rooted in Bourdieu's theory of capital, language competence functions as both cultural and economic capital, influencing individuals' access to employment opportunities, income levels, and career mobility (Bourdieu, 1986). Recent research shows that language proficiency operates as an important part of human capital, shaping employability and organizational outcomes in multilingual and globalized labor markets (Bhar & Chua, 2025). The rise of China as a global economic powerhouse has elevated the importance of Chinese language proficiency, precisely Mandarin, as a strategic asset in international labor markets. Empirical evidence indicates that proficiency Mandarin (Putonghua) yields significant economic returns, with wage increases ranging from approximately 10.5% to 49.9% (Zhang et al., 2023). This suggests that linguistic competence in Chinese not only enhances individual productivity but also aligns workers more effectively with labor market demands. Consequently, fluency in Chinese is increasingly recognized as a valuable form of economic capital in both domestic and transnational employment contexts.

The growing importance of proficiency and fluency in Chinese language is also closely tied to expanding global economic linkages, such as trade partnerships, foreign direct investment, and educational exchanges (Akbar, 2025). Studies conducted in contexts like Pakistan and Central Asia reveal that Chinese language proficiency is becoming a critical resource for accessing employment opportunities in sectors linked to Chinese investment and cooperation (Akbar, 2025; Ding et al., 2024). These developments show the transformation of Chinese into a global “market language,” particularly in regions integrated into China-led economic initiatives. As a result, individuals who possess Chinese linguistic competence are better positioned to participate in emerging economic networks and transnational labor markets.

At the same time, the internationalization of higher education in China has led to a growing number of international students acquiring Chinese language skills and cultural competencies through academic training in mainland Chinese universities. These graduates who are often referred to as alumni returnees upon re-entering their home countries carry a combination of linguistic, cultural, and educational capital (Akbar, 2025). Research suggests that such international student migrants accumulate global linguistic capital during their studies, which can be mobilized in diverse labor market contexts (Lee, 2019). Language proficiency has been identified as a decisive factor influencing graduates’ employability, career planning, and adaptability in competitive labor markets (Yang & Sikakaew, 2024). Employers increasingly perceive language skills as a key indicator of both technical competence and cross-cultural capability (Li, 2021). Nevertheless, the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital is mediated by additional factors, including social networks, institutional recognition, and labor market structures.

Even though there is growing body of literature on language and employment, there remains a notable gap concerning the specific experiences of alumni returnees from universities in mainland China. In particular, limited research has systematically examined how fluency in Chinese functions as economic capital for these graduates in their home-country labor markets. While some studies highlight the general benefits of Chinese language proficiency, others point to challenges such as skill mismatch, limited institutional support, and difficulties in labor market integration (Ding et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate how linguistic proficiency in Chinese translates into employment opportunities for alumni returnees from mainland Chinese universities.

### **Research Questions**

1. How did alumni returnees from Chinese universities acquire fluency in Chinese during their studies in China?
2. How do alumni returnees from Chinese universities use their fluency in Chinese to gain employment in their home countries?
3. What types of jobs or industries do alumni returnees work in after returning home?

### **Economic Capital in the Bourdieusian Framework**

The concept of economic capital is central to Pierre Bourdieu theory of capital and social reproduction. Bourdieu (1986) defines economic capital as resources that are directly convertible into money and institutionalized in forms such as property rights. However, in Bourdieu’s relational framework, economic capital should not be understood only as material wealth, but also as the final form into which other capitals may be converted when they acquire exchange value within a particular social field. This means that resources such as education, language competence, and social networks become economically meaningful when they can be mobilized to secure paid employment, occupational mobility, or income-generating opportunities. Within this framework, economic capital is interconnected with other forms of capital such as cultural, social, and symbolic capital which can be transformed into economic advantages under specific conditions (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu refers to this as the convertibility of capital, where non-financial assets acquire market value depending on the rules and demands of the field in which actors compete. This interconvertibility highlights the importance of examining how non-material resources like language proficiency may generate tangible economic returns.

In modern global labor markets, language proficiency is increasingly recognized as a form of human and linguistic capital that contributes to employability and productivity. From a Bourdieusian perspective, language

is not merely a neutral communicative tool but a form of embodied cultural capital that carries differential value in linguistic markets. The ability to speak a socially and economically valued language gives individuals strategic advantages because it enhances their legitimacy, credibility, and usefulness in professional exchanges. Empirical research shows that language skills significantly influence labor market outcomes. For example, Labour Economics research demonstrates that Mandarin proficiency yields measurable wage premiums and improves job allocation efficiency in China's labor market (Zhang et al., 2023). This supports the argument that language skills function not only as communicative tools but also as economically valuable assets.

A growing body of literature further supports the idea that multilingual language competence enhances labor mobility, cross-cultural communication, and access to international employment opportunities (Bhar & Chua, 2025). Within Bourdieusian analysis, these advantages can be interpreted as evidence that linguistic capital acquires exchange value when employers perceive it as useful for organizational productivity and market expansion. Employers increasingly value multilingual employees for their ability to operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The global rise of China has significantly increased the economic value of Chinese language proficiency. As China expands its global economic presence through trade, infrastructure development, and foreign direct investment, Mandarin has emerged as a strategically important language in many regions. Studies show that proficiency in Chinese enhances employment prospects in sectors connected to Chinese enterprises (Ding et al., 2024). Besides, Chinese language skills facilitate labor market integration by reducing transaction costs in communication and improving access to information and networks. These mechanisms are in line with human capital theory, which holds that skills and competencies increase productivity and, consequently, economic returns (Becker, 1993). Yet, this study places stronger emphasis on Bourdieu's notion that the profitability of such competence depends on whether the labor market recognizes Chinese proficiency as scarce and exchangeable capital. In this sense, Mandarin proficiency operates at the juncture of human capital and linguistic capital to generate both individual and organizational benefits.

The internationalization of higher education in China, driven by state-sponsored scholarship schemes, educational diplomacy, and broader global engagement strategies, has led to a steady increase in the enrollment of international students in mainland Chinese universities (Lien & Miao, 2023). This expanding cohort of foreign graduates is significant because it represents a new category of internationally trained human resources who return home with not only academic qualifications, but also Chinese linguistic proficiency, familiarity with Chinese institutional culture, and transnational experiences that may be mobilized in local labor markets (Lee, 2019). These individuals, often referred to as returnees, possess what has been described as global linguistic capital (Lee, 2019). This form of capital includes proficiency in Chinese, familiarity with Chinese institutional practices, and cross-cultural communication skills. However, the conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital is not automatic. Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that the value of capital depends on the social field in which it is deployed. In other words, the same Chinese language skill may produce high economic returns in one labor market but limited returns in another depending on employer demand, institutional legitimacy, and the density of China-related economic activities. In labor market contexts, this means that the economic returns to Chinese language proficiency depend on factors such as employer demand, institutional recognition, and the structure of local economies. Therefore, this study treats alumni returnees' Chinese fluency not simply as a language skill, but as a convertible linguistic resource whose economic value is determined by how successfully it is exchanged for employment opportunities, salaries, and career advancement in their home-country labor markets. Research indicates that while returnees often possess valuable skills, they may face barriers such as limited job opportunities or institutional constraints that affect their employment outcomes (Ding et al., 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how proficiency Chinese language functions as economic capital among alumni returnees from universities in mainland China. The case study approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary social phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the social environment are not clearly separable (Yin, 2018). In this study, the bounded case consists of alumni returnees who obtained higher education in mainland China and subsequently entered the labor markets of their home countries. Within this case study design, narrative interviews were employed as the primary means of generating rich accounts of

participants' lived experiences, enabling the researcher to capture how they perceived, negotiated, and utilized Chinese language proficiency in their employment trajectories.

Such an approach allows for in-depth exploration of processes such as conversion of linguistic capital into economic capital. The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions. This perspective aligns with the Bourdieusian framework particularly in emphasizing that the value and convertibility of capital are context-dependent and shaped by specific social fields (Bourdieu, 1986).

### **Research Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study consists of alumni who completed their higher education in mainland China and subsequently returned to their home countries. These individuals are positioned to provide insights into how Chinese language proficiency, acquired through academic immersion and other means, is utilized in local labor markets. A snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which existing participants refer the researcher to other potential participants within their social networks (Noy, 2008). This approach was suitable for the present study due to the relatively dispersed and network-based nature of the target population.

Recruitment began with a small number of initial contacts who met the inclusion criteria. These individuals were asked to recommend other alumni returnees with similar educational backgrounds. The process continued iteratively, with each participant facilitating access to additional participants, until a total of 23 participants were recruited. This method proved effective in reaching individuals who might otherwise have been difficult to identify through formal channels.

### **Participant Characteristics**

The study included 23 participants who had completed undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in mainland China and had returned to their home countries at the time of data collection. The participants involved only those who have acquired jobs, because of the proficiency in the Chinese language in their home countries. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines and were employed across various sectors due to the ability speak and understand Putonghua (Standard Chinese). All participants possessed at least intermediate proficiency in Chinese (Mandarin), with many reporting advanced or near-native fluency. This linguistic competence was typically acquired through a combination of formal instruction and immersion in Chinese-speaking environments during their studies.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and this allowed for both consistency across participants and flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. An interview guide was developed based on the study's research questions. Key areas focused on during the interviews were participants' educational experiences in China, acquisition and use of Chinese language skills, employment trajectories after returning home, perceived value of Chinese proficiency in the labor market, and the challenges in converting linguistic skills into economic opportunities. Interviews were conducted either in person or via online communication platforms, depending on participants' availability and location. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data generated from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic data analysis technique is a qualitative method that facilitates the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns within a dataset into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process was iterative and involved several interconnected stages. First, the researchers engaged in a process of familiarization by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the

data and to identify preliminary patterns. This was followed by initial coding, where meaningful segments of the data were systematically labeled to capture key ideas related to Chinese language use, employment experiences, and economic outcomes.

Subsequently, the codes were examined and grouped into broader categories which were used to develop themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants' narratives. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and consistency, as well as alignment with the research questions and objectives. The final stage involved interpreting the themes through the lens of the Bourdieusian theoretical framework, paying attention to how linguistic capital is converted into economic capital within specific social and institutional contexts. This analytical approach enabled the study to capture both shared experiences and individual variations.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

To ensure the Credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several established qualitative research criteria were applied throughout the research process. Credibility was ensured through sustained engagement with the data and careful, reflexive interpretation of participants' accounts to have in-depth understanding of their experiences. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a transparent and systematic record of the research procedures, including detailed documentation of data collection and analysis processes. Confirmability was addressed by ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' narratives rather than the researcher's subjective biases or assumptions. This was achieved through close adherence to the data during analysis and interpretation. All these measures contributed to the overall robustness and methodological integrity of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for social science research, and ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant departmental research committee prior to data collection.

Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and codes were used in reporting the findings. In addition, interview recordings, transcripts, and related documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher to minimize risks of unauthorized disclosure. Given that participants were alumni discussing employment experiences, particular care was taken to ensure that no information capable of revealing their identities or workplaces was included in the final analysis. For transparency, generative artificial intelligence (ChatGPT) was used only at the post-writing stage for limited language editing, sentence restructuring, and improving the chronological flow of presentation.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings show that Chinese language proficiency among alumni returnees is developed through a cumulative process combining formal university instruction, immersive everyday communication, deliberate self-directed learning, and later academic or professional use of Chinese in specialized settings. After returning home, this fluency is strategically converted into employment opportunities through Chinese firm recruitment, transnational networks, labor-market signaling, and entrepreneurial language services. Returnees are primarily concentrated in China-linked sectors such as construction, trade, logistics, technology, translation, and manufacturing, where their language skills function as a key bridge for communication and coordination in transnational economic activities.

### **RQ1. How do alumni returnees from universities in mainland China acquire proficiency Chinese language?**

The analysis of interview narratives from the 23 participants reveals that the acquisition of Chinese language proficiency was neither linear nor dependent on classroom teaching alone. Rather, fluency emerged as a cumulative process shaped by the interaction of institutional instruction, communicative immersion, self-directed linguistic discipline, and advanced domain-specific application. Across participants' accounts, Chinese

proficiency developed not as a single educational outcome but as an actively constructed resource that required sustained exposure, repeated use, and strategic personal investment. Four interrelated pathways through which this fluency was acquired emerged from the data.

### **Formal Foundational Instruction as Initial Linguistic Capital Formation**

All participants identified formal university language instruction as the first stage through which basic Chinese competence was established. Intensive Mandarin classes, preparatory language years, and structured university language programs provided participants with initial mastery of pinyin, pronunciation, grammar, and basic vocabulary. This institutional foundation was repeatedly described as necessary for survival within the Chinese academic environment and for enabling subsequent communicative development.

Participant 4 explained, “When I first arrived, I couldn’t even introduce myself properly. The university language classes gave me the basic pinyin, tones, sentence structure. Without that, I wouldn’t have survived outside the classroom.” Similarly, Participant 11 noted, “We had Chinese classes every day, sometimes four to five hours. It was very intensive, but it helped me to quickly move from beginner to intermediate level within one year.”

These narratives show that classroom instruction functioned as the initial stage of linguistic capital accumulation by supplying the formal structures of the language. However, participants consistently stressed that this formal competence remained limited to textbook communication and did not automatically produce practical fluency. As Participant 2 observed, “In class, you learn the correct way to speak, but real conversations are different.” This indicates that institutional teaching generated foundational but incomplete linguistic capital that required further social activation.

### **Immersive Communicative Dependency**

Beyond formal instruction, the strongest and most consistently reported pathway to fluency was prolonged immersion in Chinese-speaking social environments where participants became communicatively dependent on the language for everyday functioning. Living with Chinese roommates, interacting with local peers, buying food, using transport, and navigating daily bureaucratic routines created situations in which Chinese was not an academic subject but a practical necessity.

Participant 7 stated, “My roommates were Chinese, and they didn’t speak English. At first, it was very difficult, but after a few months, I was forced to speak Chinese every day. That’s when my fluency really improved.” Likewise, Participant 15 explained, “Simple things like buying food, taking taxis, or asking for directions helped me a lot. You practice without even realizing it.”

The significance of this immersion was not simply exposure, but enforced communicative dependency. Participants who deliberately avoided international student enclaves and inserted themselves into predominantly Chinese-speaking environments reported the fastest gains in fluency. Participant 9 narrated that moving into a dormitory occupied only by Chinese students, joining Chinese social clubs, and avoiding English-speaking circles initially produced loneliness and frustration but later resulted in language development “faster than anyone I knew.” Such accounts suggest that fluency emerged when participants were deprived of linguistic alternatives and compelled to negotiate meaning continuously in Chinese.

This pattern was also evident in intimate personal relationships. Participant 18 described how dating a Chinese partner accelerated his linguistic development because he had to learn “not just classroom Chinese but intimate Chinese... how to express feelings, apologize, and talk about fears.” These narratives demonstrate that advanced communicative fluency was largely socially produced through repetitive high-stakes interaction rather than classroom memorization.

### **Deliberate Self-Engineering of Fluency**

While social immersion was important, participants emphasized that fluency did not develop passively. A major analytical theme across the interviews was the deliberate self-engineering of Chinese proficiency through conscious and sustained personal discipline. Participants described actively constructing Chinese-speaking

micro-environments around themselves through digital media, mobile applications, entertainment, social networking platforms, and strict self-imposed communication rules.

Participant 21 explained:

“I installed WeChat on my phone and only added Chinese friends. I followed Chinese influencers on Douyin. I watched Chinese dramas without subtitles... I changed my phone language to Chinese... that constant exposure, even when I was alone in my room, made Chinese feel like my second nature.”

Similarly, Participant 23 maintained a personal routine of learning at least ten new words daily and forcing their usage in conversation, while Participant 5 intentionally avoided speaking English even in uncomfortable situations.

These narratives reveal that participants treated language acquisition as an active long-term project requiring strategic self-management. Rather than depending solely on university provision, they deliberately intensified the frequency of contact with Chinese until it became cognitively habitual. The data therefore suggest that high-level proficiency was not merely the result of being in China, but of sustained learner agency in manufacturing continuous linguistic exposure.

### **Advanced Academic Professionalization of Chinese Competence**

A final pathway involved the movement from everyday communicative fluency to advanced specialized proficiency through Chinese-medium academic work and professional engagement. Participants enrolled in degree programs taught in Chinese, internships, and workplace placements reported that these settings pushed them beyond conversational competence into formal, technical, and discipline-specific language use.

Participant 10, whose major was taught entirely in Chinese, explained that repeated lecture recording, office-hour consultations, and textbook review gradually enabled him to follow lectures “faster than some Chinese students.” Participant 12 similarly emphasized that writing research papers in Chinese transformed her from being able to “speak Chinese” to being able to produce “formal, academic Chinese,” a skill later central to her legal translation work.

Internship and workplace exposure generated similar forms of linguistic specialization. Participant 18 noted that professional interactions required “more precision and professionalism” than ordinary social communication, while Participant 1 reported that working in a Chinese company developed her command of “business Chinese and formal communication.”

These stories indicate that the highest level of Chinese proficiency emerged when participants were required to perform academically or professionally in Chinese under evaluative pressure. This stage transformed general communicative ability into domain-specific linguistic capital that later became highly exchangeable in labor markets.

### **RQ2: How do alumni returnees from Chinese universities use their fluency in Chinese to gain employment in their home countries?**

The analysis reveals that Chinese language fluency did not translate into employment automatically upon participants’ return home. Rather, returnees actively converted this linguistic competence into economic opportunities through a set of identifiable labor market strategies shaped by China’s expanding commercial footprint in their domestic economies. Across the 23 interview narratives, participants repeatedly emphasized that Chinese proficiency became economically valuable only when it was strategically mobilized in relation to employer demand, transnational social connections, and visible demonstrations of scarcity. In this sense, the findings show that returnees used Chinese fluency not merely as a communication skill, but as a convertible market resource deployed through four principal channels.

## **Institutional Recruitment Pipelines**

The most dominant pathway through which participants secured employment was direct recruitment by Chinese firms operating in their home countries. Participants consistently reported that Chinese companies involved in construction, logistics, trade, manufacturing, and infrastructure faced recurring shortages of local employees capable of communicating efficiently with Chinese headquarters, technical teams, and managerial staff. This created an institutionalized recruitment demand for Chinese-educated returnees whose language skills could immediately reduce communication barriers.

Several participants described being recruited even before graduation through university campus fairs, online Chinese-speaking job boards, and referrals from internship supervisors in China. Participant 10 explained that during a university campus fair designed specifically for international students, company representatives were less interested in academic specialization than in one decisive question: whether the student could speak Chinese and return home to work with local branches. As he noted, “My Chinese fluency was literally the only reason they hired me.”

Participant 4 similarly narrated that after listing his HSK certification and Chinese degree credentials on an online job platform, he was directly contacted by a recruiter from a Chinese logistics company without submitting a conventional application. His Chinese proficiency, in his own words, “made me visible to recruiters who were actively searching for people like me.”

These narratives suggest that Chinese firms had effectively created parallel recruitment pipelines in which Chinese-speaking returnees occupied a privileged labor category. Rather than entering open labor competition in the traditional sense, participants were often absorbed into targeted institutional demand generated by the communication needs of transnational Chinese enterprises.

## **Activation of Transnational Alumni and Professional Networks**

A second major pathway involved the strategic use of interpersonal and professional networks established during participants’ years in China. Unlike formal recruitment pipelines, this mechanism operated through the maintenance of durable social ties with Chinese classmates, internship supervisors, alumni associations, and fellow international graduates. Participants repeatedly emphasized that these networks became valuable not simply because of friendship, but because they functioned as trust-based channels through which their Chinese competence was already socially verified.

Participant 13 described how a former Chinese classmate with whom she maintained regular WeChat contact later informed her about a translation opening in a relative’s company and personally vouched for her language ability. She explained that “his recommendation carried more weight than any certificate” because he knew that her Chinese was “real, not just textbook Chinese.”

Similarly, another participant described alumni associations in the home country as informal labor circulation spaces where senior alumni already employed in Chinese companies routinely identified and recommended younger returnees for vacancies. Such recommendations were often accompanied by shorthand endorsements such as “same university” and “good Chinese,” indicating that the social credibility accumulated in China traveled back with participants into domestic labor markets.

The significance of this finding is that participants were not using language proficiency in isolation; they were activating Chinese fluency through social capital embedded in transnational educational relationships. Linguistic capital became economically productive precisely because it was reinforced by networks of trust, recognition, and insider referral.

## **Scarcity of Linguistic Competence in the Open Labor Market**

Not all participants entered Chinese companies through direct recruitment or alumni referrals. A substantial number entered the broader domestic labor market and then strategically used Chinese fluency as a scarcity

signal that differentiated them sharply from otherwise similar candidates. In these cases, Chinese proficiency functioned as a visible marker of specialized usefulness that employers often had not initially identified but quickly recognized once demonstrated.

Participant 11 described applying for a business administration position where Chinese language was not listed in the job advertisement. Yet once the interview panel discovered that he had studied in China and could communicate in Chinese, he immediately became the only candidate capable of solving the company's hidden communication difficulties with Chinese partners. As he put it, "My Chinese fluency solved a problem they did not even know how to articulate in the job posting."

Participant 20 similarly transformed an initial rejection into a new job offer by explicitly reframing herself as the only applicant capable of handling Chinese legal documents and Chinese client communication. Instead of competing on standard legal writing criteria alone, she repositioned her Chinese ability as a niche institutional solution.

Other participants reported placing HSK certificates prominently on their CVs, speaking Chinese spontaneously during interviews, or intentionally using public demonstrations of fluency to establish themselves as unusually marketable. These strategies indicate that returnees understood Chinese proficiency not merely as a background qualification, but as a signaling device used to force employer recognition of their scarcity value within competitive hiring environments.

### **Entrepreneurial Self-Commercialization**

A fourth and particularly revealing pathway involved participants who did not wait for formal employment opportunities but instead created their own income streams by commercializing Chinese fluency directly. These participants positioned themselves as freelance translators, interpreters, sourcing intermediaries, contract negotiators, or communication brokers between local businesses and Chinese counterparts. In such cases, Chinese proficiency itself became the central commodity being sold.

Participant 12 explained that he began by offering document translation services on online freelancing platforms for firms requiring Chinese-language support. Within a short period, the demand became sufficient to generate more work than he could handle. Participant 14 similarly reported charging businesses for accompanying them to supplier meetings, translating contracts, and facilitating phone negotiations with Chinese partners.

Most notably, Participant 18 described building a social media brand around his Chinese translation expertise by posting sample interpretations, discussing common translation mistakes, and marketing himself as a specialist communication bridge. Over time, his online visibility converted directly into both freelance clientele and a later full-time job offer.

These cases demonstrate that some returnees bypassed institutional recruitment entirely and transformed Chinese fluency into entrepreneurial linguistic brokerage. Here, linguistic capital was not exchanged through salaried employment alone, but directly monetized as an independent market service.

### **RQ3: What types of industries do alumni returnees work in after returning home?**

The findings reveal that alumni returnees were not dispersed randomly across the general labor market, but were heavily concentrated in a specific cluster of industries structurally linked to Chinese overseas investment, trade expansion, technology transfer, and manufacturing presence. Across all 23 interviews, participants consistently occupied positions in which Chinese language fluency was not an incidental qualification but the central operational skill enabling communication, coordination, and institutional mediation between Chinese actors and local systems. This indicates that the economic value of Chinese proficiency became most visible in sectors where sustained interaction with Chinese enterprises created recurring linguistic bottlenecks. Five major employment sectors emerged from the data.

## **Construction and Infrastructure**

The construction and infrastructure sector emerged as the most prominent employment destination for participants. This was particularly evident in countries hosting Chinese-funded roads, bridges, public facilities, energy installations, and other long-term development projects. Participants working in this sector repeatedly described themselves not as ordinary employees but as indispensable communication coordinators positioned between Chinese engineers, project managers, government officials, suppliers, and local communities.

Participant 2 summarized this role succinctly: “I translate between Chinese managers and officials of my country... without someone like me, the project would stop.” This statement reflects more than translation; it demonstrates that project continuity itself often depended on bilingual mediation. Participant 1 similarly explained that negotiating with Chinese suppliers in Chinese was “the core requirement” of her work, indicating that language proficiency was embedded directly within procurement and logistics operations.

Other participants highlighted that their work extended beyond linguistic transfer into socio-political interpretation. They explained construction impacts to local communities, clarified bureaucratic issues to Chinese engineers, and translated regulatory concerns back to project headquarters. These accounts suggest that construction projects generated particularly high demand for returnees because such projects involve dense interactions among technical, governmental, and community actors where communication failure can disrupt implementation.

## **Trade, Logistics, and Supply Chain Management**

A second major concentration was found in trade, logistics, import-export coordination, and supply chain management. Participants in this sector described their daily work as continuous cross-border transactional communication involving factories in China, shipping agents, customs offices, suppliers, and domestic distributors. Unlike project-based construction roles, these positions were characterized by uninterrupted high-frequency communication where linguistic precision affected the movement of goods, prices, deadlines, and regulatory compliance.

Participant 21 captured this dynamic by stating, “I communicate with factories, shipping companies, and customs... switching languages all day.” Similarly, Participant 23 noted that handling customs paperwork and corresponding with Chinese logistics companies required constant bilingual adjustment across different institutional systems.

The analytical significance here is that Chinese proficiency enabled participants to function as transaction stabilizers in global supply chains. Because delays, misunderstandings, and documentation errors carry immediate financial consequences, employers valued returnees who could communicate directly with Chinese suppliers without relying on third-party interpreters. Thus, linguistic capital in this sector translated into highly specialized positions centered on efficiency, speed, and operational reliability.

## **Technology, Telecommunications, and Technical Service Localization**

A third employment cluster involved technology, telecommunications, renewable energy, e-commerce systems, and technical service support connected to Chinese firms expanding internationally. Participants in these roles consistently emphasized that Chinese language fluency was essential because technical manuals, software instructions, troubleshooting processes, legal documentation, and managerial directives were often generated first in Chinese before being localized for domestic use.

Participant 5 described translating Chinese manuals while simultaneously helping local teams troubleshoot technical problems, whereas Participant 19 explained that representing a Chinese solar company required constant communication “with clients and headquarters.” These examples show that returnees served as technical localizers who made Chinese systems intelligible and usable in local markets.

In this sector, participants were not merely translating language but translating technology itself across linguistic and institutional boundaries. Their Chinese competence therefore operated as a bridge allowing Chinese

technological products, digital services, and industrial systems to function effectively in foreign environments.

### **Translation, Interpretation, and Independent Linguistic Brokerage**

Another important employment field involved participants who worked directly in translation, interpretation, document mediation, and communication brokerage. In this sector, Chinese proficiency itself became the principal commodity sold in the labor market. Participants translated contracts, interpreted negotiations, handled legal documents, facilitated supplier meetings, and advised businesses on culturally appropriate communication with Chinese counterparts.

Participant 17 described translating contracts and interpreting business meetings as her full-time professional role, while Participant 20 emphasized that technical vocabulary in engineering and legal translation significantly increased her market value. Several participants stressed that employers sought not literal word-for-word translation, but nuanced meaning transfer capable of avoiding costly misunderstandings in negotiations and documentation.

This sector demonstrates the most direct form of linguistic capital conversion: Chinese fluency itself constituted the economic product. Unlike other sectors where language was embedded in broader organizational roles, here participants monetized linguistic expertise in its purest professional form.

### **Manufacturing and Industrial Production Networks**

The final major sector identified was Chinese-owned or Chinese-affiliated manufacturing and industrial production. Participants employed in factories, garment production, assembly plants, and industrial processing firms described their roles as maintaining the continuous flow of information between Chinese managerial systems and local labor forces. These positions involved translating production targets, quality control procedures, safety standards, technical manuals, and performance reports.

Participant 15 noted, “I translate between Chinese managers and local workers,” while Participant 12 described translating production reports “between the factory and China.” Such roles reveal that language proficiency was deeply embedded in the governance of transnational production itself.

Unlike temporary project environments, manufacturing provided more stable institutional employment, but the structural logic remained similar: Chinese managers required trusted bilingual personnel capable of ensuring that instructions, standards, and feedback moved accurately across linguistic divides. Returnees therefore occupied key positions in maintaining organizational coherence within globally distributed industrial systems.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined how alumni returnees from universities in mainland China acquire Chinese language proficiency and how this proficiency is subsequently used to gain employment (economic capital) in their home-country. The findings provide empirical support for the argument that language functions as a convertible form of capital. This view is consistent with the theoretical propositions of Pierre Bourdieu (1986). The study showed that Chinese language proficiency is not only acquired through multiple, context-dependent ways but it is also strategically deployed by returnees to access employment opportunities across diverse sectors.

The findings has shown in detailed how Chinese language proficiency is acquired by international students in China. The findings show that acquisition is neither linear nor confined to formal education but is instead a cumulative process. This is in line with existing research that emphasizes the importance of immersion and interaction in second language acquisition (Kinginger, 2013). Formal classroom instruction provided participants with foundational linguistic competence, but it was insufficient on its own to produce fluency. Instead, participants’ narratives highlight the central role of everyday interaction in developing communicative competence and cultural fluency. Importantly, the study extend beyond existing literature by demonstrating the depth and diversity of informal learning mechanisms. For example, participants’ use of digital platforms such as WeChat and Douyin illustrates how language immersion can be sustained beyond physical environments. This

supports the arguments that digital media plays an increasingly important role in language learning (Sockett, 2014). The emergence of intimate and emotionally grounded language use suggests that language acquisition is deeply embedded in social and affective contexts, an area that remains underexplored in studies of international students in China. The study also reveals that self-directed learning is a critical component of language acquisition. Participants actively created immersive environments, avoided reliance on English, and adopted deliberate strategies to expand vocabulary and improve fluency. This supports the notion that learner agency plays a crucial role in language development (Benson, 2011). In this sense, the study contributes to the literature by highlighting how individual motivation and strategic behavior interact with structural opportunities to shape language outcomes.

Moreover, the findings demonstrate that Chinese language proficiency functions as a key mechanism through which alumni returnees access employment opportunities. These findings are consistent with research that conceptualizes language as a form of “career capital” that enhances employability and facilitates labor market integration (Bhar & Chua, 2025). Direct recruitment by Chinese firms emerged as the most prominent pathway. This shows the growing global presence of Chinese enterprises and their demand for bilingual employees who can bridge linguistic and cultural divides. This finding matches with studies showing that Chinese outward foreign direct investment generates demand for local workers with Chinese language skills (Ding et al., 2024). Notably, participants’ experiences suggest that Chinese proficiency often outweighs other qualifications in recruitment decisions. This reinforces the idea that language can serve as a highly valued and scarce resource in specific labor markets.

The role of social and professional networks further highlights the importance of social capital in using linguistic skills to gain employment opportunities. Participants’ reliance on alumni connections, WeChat networks, and referrals reflects broader patterns observed in labor market research, where informal networks play a critical role in job acquisition (Granovetter, 1973). In this context, linguistic capital and social capital are mutually reinforcing, as language proficiency facilitates the formation and maintenance of networks that, in turn, provide access to employment. Also, participants described how their ability to speak Chinese enabled them to stand out among candidates with similar academic qualifications, often leading to job offers even when language skills were not explicitly listed as a requirement. This finding supports empirical evidence that language skills can yield significant economic returns by improving job matching and productivity (Zhang et al., 2023). It also highlights the implicit demand for Chinese language competence in sectors that are increasingly connected to China but may not formally recognize this need in job descriptions. The emergence of entrepreneurial pathways, particularly in translation and intermediary services, further illustrates the versatility of linguistic capital. Participants who pursued freelance or independent work demonstrated how language skills can be directly monetized. This finding is in line with research on language-mediated entrepreneurship, which suggests that multilingual individuals can create niche markets by using their linguistic and cultural competencies (Neeley, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings provide additional insight into how linguistic capital is operationalized in practice. Across these sectors identified, participants consistently occupied intermediary roles that required them to facilitate communication between Chinese and local actors. This reinforces the argument that the economic value of language is context-dependent and shaped by broader structural forces (Bourdieu, 1986). In this case, the expansion of Chinese investment and trade has created specific labor market sectors in which Chinese language proficiency is highly valued. Similar trends have been observed in other regions, where language skills aligned with economic partnerships enhance employability (Zhang et al., 2023). The concentration of returnees in intermediary roles also suggests that their value lies in linguistic translation, and in their ability to navigate cultural differences and institutional complexities.

Generally, the study does not introduce entirely new theoretical concepts but rather provides a varied empirical extension of existing frameworks. It confirms the applicability of Bourdieu’s theory of capital in a transnational context while offering new insights into the specific case of Chinese language proficiency and returnee employment. The findings show the dynamic interplay between linguistic, social, and economic capital and demonstrate how global economic shifts reshape the value of language in contemporary labor markets.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how alumni returnees from Chinese universities acquire Chinese fluency, use it to gain employment, and the sectors in which they work. The findings demonstrate that Chinese language proficiency functions as linguistic capital that converts into economic capital through a three-stage process of accumulation, activation, and deployment. Contrary to the dominant narrative of returnee struggle documented by Banda and Banda (2025) and Kang (2025), participants in this study were actively recruited by Chinese firms operating in their home countries in various fields. Their Chinese fluency was not a supplement to their qualifications but the primary qualification itself. Theoretically, this refines Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory by specifying the field conditions required for linguistic capital to convert to economic capital. A significant Chinese economic presence in the home country, demonstrable fluency certified by HSK, and maintained networks with Chinese individuals and institutions. Practically, the study reveals an informal but functional employment pipeline that operates largely through networks rather than formal labor markets. This suggests that policy interventions should focus on making this pipeline accessible to all returnees rather than creating new employment opportunities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**For home country governments:** Introduce or expand Chinese language programs in secondary and vocational education, as fluency directly correlates with employability by Chinese firms operating locally. This is consistent with Wang and Hu's (2025) finding that Mandarin proficiency significantly improves income outcomes.

**For home country governments:** Establish formal job-matching platforms and returnee databases that connect alumni returnees with Chinese firms in need of bilingual local staff, formalizing the currently informal network-based pipeline.

**For Chinese policymakers:** Recognize returnees as strategic assets for Chinese firm localization abroad and support Chinese language instruction in partner countries through scholarships, teacher training, and Confucius Institute programming.

**For Chinese universities:** Strengthen internship placement services for international students, as workplace exposure during study was the most effective pathway to post-return employment, consistent with the finding that workplace exposure operationalizes classroom fluency.

**For future research:** A study investigating why some alumni returnees fail to achieve fluency or employment, using longitudinal designs to identify barriers and inform targeted interventions for at-risk returnees should be done.

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