

The Influence of Cultural Factors on International Students' Destination Choice: Evidence from ASEAN Students Going to China

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Abstract

The implementation of RCEP and upgraded China-ASEAN FTA creates natural experiments to examine asymmetric cultural elasticities in education services trade. Using bilateral student flow data (2010-2022), we identify regulatory heterogeneity: Core cultural goods exports and value distance positively correlate with ASEAN student inflows in partially liberalized markets, while genetic distance exhibits paradoxical attraction through diasporic networks. Conversely, religious distance and political institutional divergence demonstrate negative elasticities. These effects become statistically indistinguishable from zero in non-liberalized regimes, revealing market openness as prerequisite for cultural arbitrage opportunities..

Keywords

Regional Economic Integration; Education Services Trade; Cultural Elasticity.

1. Introduction

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According to data from the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) and the Department of Education, Skills, and Employment in Australia, higher education international students generated revenues of \$38.7 billion for the United States and AUD 37.6 billion for Australia in the 2018-2019 fiscal year [1]. Among international students in U.S. universities during that year, Asian students accounted for a substantial 76.9%, with students from ASEAN countries comprising approximately 8% of Asian students. Building upon the theory of return on educational investment, cross-border spending by international students positively contributes to the export value, benefits, and scale of higher education services trade.

The geographic contiguity and socio-cultural congruence between ASEAN nations and China present latent comparative advantages in educational market integration. Notwithstanding these structural advantages, the elasticity of cultural determinants-when juxtaposed with conventional economic predictors (e.g., tuition parity, labor market returns) and institutional

factors (e.g., bilateral accreditation agreements)-constitutes an underexplored nexus in international student mobility literature. This investigation employs a gravity-augmented dynamic panel model, utilizing bilateral student mobility panel (2010-2022) from ASEAN Secretariat archives, to disentangle the persistent effects of Confucian institutional legacy from transitory policy shocks. The analytical framework aligns with the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) paradigm while incorporating institutional isomorphism mechanisms from organizational theory.

Table 1. Changes in the Total Number of ASEAN Students Studying in China 2008-2018.

Year	The Number of ASEAN Students Pursuing Degree Programs in China	Number of Asian students pursuing degree programs in China	Number of worldwide students pursuing degree programs in China	Proportion of ASEAN students among Asian students pursuing degree programs in China	Number of ASEAN students pursuing degree programs in China	Number of Asian students pursuing degree programs in China	Number of worldwide students pursuing degree programs in China	Proportion of ASEAN students among Asian students pursuing degree programs in China	Proportion of ASEAN students among worldwide students pursuing degree programs in China	Proportion of ASEAN students among worldwide students pursuing degree programs in China
2008	15966	66258	80005	24.10%	34735	152931	223499	22.71%	15.54%	45.97%
2009	19773	74958	93450	26.38%	42826	161605	238148	26.50%	17.98%	46.17%
2010	23677	83721	107432	28.28%	49580	175805	265090	28.20%	18.70%	47.76%
2011	26304	90492	118838	29.07%	54790	187871	292611	29.16%	18.72%	48.01%
2012	30251	99231	133509	30.49%	61819	207555	328330	29.78%	18.83%	48.93%
2013	31901	106763	147890	29.88%	68447	219808	356499	31.14%	19.20%	46.61%
2014	33435	114967	164394	29.08%	69138	225490	377054	30.66%	18.34%	48.36%
2015	36394	126876	184799	28.68%	71101	240154	397635	29.61%	17.88%	51.19%
2016	40363	140797	209966	28.67%	81210	264976	442773	30.65%	18.34%	49.70%
2017	46334	160323	241543	28.90%	95009	293222	489172	32.40%	19.42%	48.77%
2018	48993	170353	258122	28.76%	99317	295043	492185	33.66%	20.18%	49.33%

2. Literature Review

Research on student mobility has evolved from theoretical studies to empirical analyses due to the increase in relevant statistical data. However, most existing literature focuses on empirical analysis of students from a particular country or global students, with fewer studies examining regional integration groups. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical analysis based on cultural factors, compared to the emphasis on economic and educational factors in the existing literature.

Previous scholars have often focused on studying either students from a specific country or global students to understand the factors influencing their choice of study destination. For instance, Ahmad conducted interview-based research to explore the attractiveness factors for international students choosing Malaysia. The study highlighted that factors such as lower living costs, affordable tuition fees, safe living environment, stable government, modern facilities, cultural and religious affinity, and non-discriminatory freedom played a significant role in attracting students [2]. Taha conducted a case study on British international students and found that international student networks evolve over time from the perspectives of communities of practice (COP) and social networks (SN). The study suggested that cross-cultural communication, social engagement, and employment orientation have a greater impact on student networks compared to factors like cultural differences [3]. Cullinan proposed a gravity model for international student mobility in Irish higher education and found that geographical factors play an important role in explaining student mobility. Additionally, factors at the school level, such as school size and gender accommodation, also influence student mobility [4]. Wei et al. (2017) conducted an empirical analysis using data from 46 countries worldwide and identified cultural factors as significant determinants of international student

mobility. They also highlighted the importance of international migration networks between countries in influencing students' choice of study destination [5].

From a research perspective, previous scholars have predominantly focused on economic and political factors and have primarily studied single cultural factors. Mazzarol (2012) proposed that students' decision to study abroad is influenced by multiple factors, including their knowledge of foreign educational institutions and study programs, familiarity with foreign cultures, and social connections between the two countries. These factors play a crucial role in students' decision-making process regarding studying abroad [6]. Investigating the case of Canadian students, Racine(2003) conducted a survey and found that language and cultural factors have a decisive influence on international students' choice of studying in the Quebec region[7]. Kondakei's (2011) study revealed that the similarity in historical culture and political systems is the primary reason for attracting students to study in Turkey, and the degree of similarity between these two factors determines the scale and direction of student mobility [8]. Hu (2022) used data on the cross-border mobility of students between China and 172 source countries globally. They conducted an empirical analysis from four perspectives: economic factors, educational quality factors, social factors, and educational policy factors, to explore the factors influencing China's attraction of international students [9,10].

Given the aforementioned gaps, this study aims to extend the existing literature in the following aspects, providing valuable contributions to the field: First, we will analyze the choice of study destination from the perspective of regional integration groups rather than a generic global or single-country analysis. Second, we will extract and measure explanatory variables from the basic cultural context and conduct empirical analysis using panel data of ASEAN students over the past decade to explore the key factors determining the number of ASEAN students studying in China..

3. Theoretical Framework and Measurement Methods

3.1. Theoretical Framework

According to the classification method of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), international trade in services can be categorized into four modes of supply: cross-border delivery, consumption abroad, commercial presence, and movement of natural persons. In the context of educational services trade, cross-border delivery mainly includes distance online education and correspondence education. Consumption abroad refers to studying abroad in foreign countries. Commercial presence involves establishing branch campuses or other educational institutions abroad. The movement of natural persons refers to professors, teachers, and researchers working in foreign countries[11]. The flow of ASEAN students examined in this study falls within the category of consumption abroad. International trade in services, as an important component of foreign trade, undoubtedly serves as a significant engine for economic growth.

Since Easterly and Levine's pioneering work on the impact of ethnic diversity on economic growth, there has been an increasing body of research examining the relationship between culture and economic growth. On one hand, many scholars argue that the potential costs associated with cultural diversity, such as interethnic communication, transaction costs, conflicts of interest, religious bias, discrimination, and protectionism, have negative effects on government behavior, resource allocation, corruption, and social stability, thereby influencing economic growth [12,13,14,15]. Cultural diversity also leads to increased communication costs, resulting in cultural distance that hinders economic interactions, investment, and trade activities[16,17]. On the other hand, some scholars propose that countries or regions with similarities in genes, sects, ethnicities, or language and culture tend to be more closely connected[18][19]. Taking Iannaccone's[20] study as an example, he suggests that cultural

similarity contributes to the formation of identity and the establishment of trust mechanisms, which in turn affect international economic cooperation. Additionally, Lee's [21] research finds that a similar culture enhances trust, maintains cooperation and collusion among network members, strengthens contract enforcement, and promotes investment cooperation and economic development. Through these channels, countries or regions can grow closer to each other.

Cultural evolution theory posits that culture is a phenomenon that evolves through processes of inheritance, variation, and selection, and it is transmitted and sustained by adapting to the environment. Davis (2009) emphasizes the dynamism of culture, stating that it changes over time and societal changes. Culture may undergo evolution and transformation in different historical periods and social contexts, thus requiring consideration of its specific spatio-temporal characteristics. Culture is a product created collectively by society, transmitted and inherited among individuals through the process of socialization. Individuals learn and internalize the meanings and behavioral patterns of specific cultures through participation in social and cultural practices[22]. Ekholm (1942) views culture as a shared pattern that includes knowledge, beliefs, values, behavioral norms, and material achievements. These patterns are formed through interactions and transmission among members of social groups. They emphasize that culture is dynamic, evolving and changing with time and environmental shifts in different historical periods and social contexts [23].

Based on the cultural implications and the theories relating culture to the economy, this study selects cultural goods trade volume, genetic distance, religious similarity, and cultural distance as the main explanatory variables. From the perspective of cultural evolution and inheritance, this study considers Confucius Institutes and sister cities, which play significant roles in the internationalization of higher education, as key control variables. Furthermore, considering the development and evolution of culture, government decision-making, governance, and national institutions are also influenced to some extent. Therefore, the political institutional distance of a country is also included as one of the explanatory variables.

3.2. Measurement Methods

1) Measurement of Genetic Distance

Richerson and Robert Boyd (2008) argue that human genetic evolution has been greatly influenced by cultural transmission and accumulation compared to other animal species. There is an interaction between culture and genetics: culture can influence genetic evolution, and individuals can shape their gene frequencies through the selection of certain behaviors and habits. At the same time, genes can also influence the transmission and acceptance of culture, as different genetic backgrounds may lead to individuals' predisposition to specific cultural behaviors [24].

The measurement method for genetic distance was first proposed by Cavalli-Sforza and colleagues, who calculated Nei and Fst genetic distance values among 42 major ethnic groups worldwide in the 20th century, providing a benchmark for subsequent related studies [25]. Building on this foundation, Spolaore and colleagues used the method of weighting ethnic population proportions to construct "genetic distance" between countries when studying global migration and ethnic cultural integration phenomena, reflecting differences in social, cultural, and genetic characteristics among different countries[26]. By calculating genetic distance between countries based on the proportions of ethnic populations, we can capture differences in national composition, cultural inclusivity, and immigration status in the real social environment between different countries. The specific calculation formula is as follows:

$$Nei_{j,k} = \sum_j \sum_p j S_{j,p} \times S_{k,q} \times d_{pq} \quad (1)$$

In the formula, $Ne_{i,j}$ represents the genetic distance between country j and k , $S_{j,p}$ represents the proportion of ethnic group p in country j 's total population, $S_{k,q}$ represents the proportion of ethnic group q in country k 's total population, and d_{pq} represents the genetic distance between ethnic group p and q . Ethnic population data for each country (from 2010) was obtained from the CIA Factbook database, and genetic distance between ethnic groups was based on Cavalli-Sforza's research.[27].

2) Measurement of Religious Similarity and Value Distance

Religious beliefs usually include doctrines, rituals, moral guidelines, and other aspects that directly or indirectly influence the behavior, thinking patterns, and social organization of communities. Religious beliefs often guide and regulate people's actions and decisions, and religious doctrines and values can have a profound impact on social behavior, social norms, and moral concepts. Therefore, by comparing the differences in values and moral guidelines among different religious beliefs, we can indirectly measure the distance between cultures. In this paper, we draw on Hergueux's research and use religious similarity as one of the indicators to measure the cultural distance between China and ASEAN countries. The specific formula is as follows [28]: In the formula, N represents the ethnic categories of religions within a country, and r represents the proportion of religious population in a country's total population.

$$Relsim_{i,j} = \sum_{r=1}^N r_i \times r_j \quad (2)$$

Traditional cultural connotations usually refer to the values, beliefs, behavioral norms, customs, and artistic forms inherited by a community or group, reflecting the history, traditions, and identity of a community. However, this does not cover implicit cultural aspects and cross-national comparative frameworks. Hofstede's cultural dimensions, on the other hand, effectively reflect the implicit factors of culture and include six dimensions: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and short-term/long-term orientation. It aims to compare cultural differences among different countries and regions through several specific dimensions, focusing on common cultural features and trends in cross-cultural research and comparison. Therefore, in this section, we will calculate the cultural distance between China and ASEAN countries based on Hofstede's six cultural dimensions. The specific calculation formula is as follows:

$$CD_{ij} = \sum_{k=1}^n [(M_{jk} - M_{ik})^2 / V_k] / n \quad (3)$$

In the formula, CD_{ij} represents the degree of cultural value difference between country i and j , with a larger value reflecting greater differences in values. M_{jk} and M_{ik} represent the scores of country j and i (China) on the k -th cultural dimension, respectively. V_k represents the variance of all sample countries on the k -th dimension. Here, n represents the number of cultural dimensions.

3) Measurement of Political System Distance

Institutional distance refers to the degree of differences in political, economic, legal, and social systems between countries or regions. It reflects the varying levels of disparity in institutional structures, rules, and norms among them. According to institutional distance theory, countries or regions with significant institutional differences have a greater institutional distance between them. This distance can lead to various effects, such as increased costs in economic transactions, conflicts arising from cultural differences, and heightened political risks. Therefore, this paper aims to measure the political system distance based on the significant

impact of cultural differences within institutional distance. Drawing on the methods proposed by Kogut & Singh (1988)[29] and incorporating measurement approaches by van Hoorn (2016), we assess the political system distance. The six indicators used to capture the characteristics of political system distance are citizen rights, political and social stability, government efficiency, quality of social regulation, legal regulations, and control of corruption[30]. The specific calculation formula is as follows:

$$ID_{ij,t} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{k=1}^n \left[\frac{(I_{i,t,k} - I_{j,t,k})^2}{V_k} \right] \quad (4)$$

In this context, $ID_{ij,t}$ represents the institutional distance between countries i and j during period t . $I_{i,t,k}$ denotes the value of the k -th indicator for country i during period t , while $I_{j,t,k}$ represents the value of the k -th indicator for country j during the same period. V_k represents the variance of the k -th indicator, and n represents the total number of indicators considered in the measurement.

4. Empirical Results and Analysis

4.1. Empirical Model and Data Description

Drawing on the research by Kleiner and Toubal we construct the following gravity model for empirical analysis[31]:

$$\text{Instu} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Culture} + \beta_2 \text{Controls} + \varepsilon \quad (5)$$

Table 2. Variable Name Table

Variable Name	Variable Definition	Data Source
Instu	Number of ASEAN students studying in China Ministry of Education	Statistical Summary of International Students in China"
kongzi	Number of Confucius Institutes established by China in ASEAN countries	Confucius Institute Official Global Website
city	city Number of sister cities between China and ASEAN countries	China International Friendship Cities Association Official Website
Indis	Geographical distance between capitals of China and ASEAN countries World City	Latitude and Longitude Query System
lnFDI	Net inflow of foreign direct investment in ASEAN countries	World Bank Database
GDP	Ratio of per capita GDP between China and ASEAN countries	World Bank Database
lnPPP	Logarithm of purchasing power parity in ASEAN countries	World Bank Database
lnscho	Logarithm of the number of Chinese government scholarship recipients in ASEAN countries Ministry of Education	Statistical Summary of International Students in China
Ingood	Exports of core cultural products from China to ASEAN countries	UN Comtrade Database
gene	Genetic distance between China and ASEAN countries	Cavalli-Sforza
value	Cultural value distance between China and ASEAN countries	Hofstede Official Website
instit	Political institutional distance between China and ASEAN countries	World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators
religion	religion Religious similarity between China and ASEAN countries	ARDA Religion Database

In the above equation, the logarithm of the international student enrollment (Instu) is the dependent variable, representing the number of students from ASEAN countries studying in China during the period of 2008-2018 (excluding the years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic). Culture serves as the primary explanatory variable in this study and includes various factors

such as genetic distance (gene), religious distance (religion), value distance (value), institutional distance (institution) between China and ASEAN countries, and the logarithm of China's cultural goods exports to ASEAN countries (Ingood). Controls represent the control variables, including geographic distance (Indis), foreign direct investment (lnFDI), purchasing power parity (lnPPP), the ratio of per capita GDP between China and ASEAN countries, education factors, the number of Chinese government scholarship recipients (lnscho), Confucius Institutes (kongzi), and the number of sister cities (city). The definitions and data sources for each variable are provided in the table below:

4.2. Basic Regression Results and Analysis

Considering the issue of model selection for panel data econometrics, to ensure the accuracy of our empirical results, we exclude the fixed effects model as the cultural variables, such as geographical distance, religion, genetic genes, and cultural values, tend to remain relatively stable over a short period. Furthermore, through testing, we find that the random effects model outperforms the mixed effects model. Hence, we employ the random effects model for our analysis. Given the complex and intertwined nature of cultural variables, it is crucial to follow a systematic empirical approach. First, we analyze the basic model using the seven fundamental explanatory variables and report the corresponding results. Then, we gradually introduce the cultural variables relevant to our study. Finally, we include all the cultural variables for comprehensive analysis. The regression results are presented in Table 3.

Based on the regression results, it can be observed that in models 2 and 7, when adding the variable "exports of core cultural products from China to ASEAN countries" (Ingood) individually or simultaneously including all variables, the variable "Ingood" shows a significant positive correlation at the 0.1% significance level. This phenomenon indicates that as the scale of exporting core cultural products from one country to another increases, its ability to attract international students strengthens. The scale of exporting core cultural products can be seen as a symbol of a country's cultural soft power. Since cultural products encompass aspects of national customs, values, and beliefs, international trade in cultural products is equivalent to cultural exchange between countries. When a country exports more cultural products, it signifies a stronger appeal of its culture to other nations, thereby promoting greater acceptance of its culture, values, and social systems.

Regarding the results of models 3-6, it is observed that individually adding the variables related to cultural dimensions, namely genetic distance, religious distance, value distance, and political institutional distance, shows a non-significant negative relationship with the number of ASEAN students studying in China. However, when simultaneously including the variables related to cultural dimensions, genetic distance, religious distance, and political institutional distance exhibit a significant negative correlation at the 0.1% significance level, while value distance shows a significant positive correlation at the 1% significance level. This suggests that the effects of variables related to cultural dimensions are not independent but rather interrelated and mutually influential. Genetic distance is responsible for the transmission of biological inheritance, while cultural characteristics such as religious values are formed through social learning and traditional transmission, both of which have genetic and evolutionary features[32][32]. Moreover, democratic values and institutions are the result of cultural change[32]. Therefore, when considering the comprehensive impact of various cultural factors, it can be observed that as the genetic distance, religious distance, and political institutional distance between ASEAN countries and China decrease, the number of international students increases (model 7).

Table 3. Results of the Basic Regression Model

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu
kongzi	-0.0512	-0.0606***	-0.0525	-0.0211	-0.0512	-0.0536	0.00377
	(-1.64)	(-3.66)	(-1.73)	(-0.74)	(-1.36)	(-1.34)	(0.19)
city	0.0861***	0.0394**	0.0854***	0.0615***	0.0896***	0.0848**	-0.0321**
	(4.22)	(3.11)	(4.37)	(3.34)	(3.69)	(3.20)	(-2.74)
ln dis	4.146***	2.931***	4.354***	3.683***	3.991***	3.778**	4.931***
	(4.19)	(4.62)	(3.71)	(4.34)	(3.39)	(3.01)	(8.43)
GDP	-0.126**	-0.290***	-0.127**	-0.113*	-0.131**	-0.147**	-0.202***
	(-2.78)	(-4.39)	(-2.71)	(-2.14)	(-2.97)	(-3.13)	(-3.93)
lnPPP	0.429**	0.487***	0.383*	0.195	0.544**	0.583**	-1.180***
	(2.69)	(3.30)	(2.27)	(1.20)	(3.03)	(3.18)	(-5.12)
lnscho	0.565***	0.591***	0.579***	0.680***	0.522***	0.537***	0.938***
	(7.78)	(8.66)	(7.97)	(8.41)	(6.79)	(7.09)	(16.86)
lnFDI	0.0114	0.0681**	0.0135	0.0261	0.00812	0.00537	0.0211
	(0.96)	(3.08)	(1.09)	(1.74)	(0.72)	(0.48)	(1.47)
lngood		0.283***					0.334***
		(5.01)					(5.42)
gene			-0.00194				-0.0959***
			(-0.18)				(-10.13)
religion				-11.49			-55.13***
				(-1.67)			(-8.49)
value					-21.71		60.42**
					(-0.79)		(3.26)
institu						-0.492	-2.059***
						(-1.12)	(-4.00)
_cons	-34.05***	-29.71***	-35.35***	-27.80***	-33.04***	-32.01**	-25.27***
	(-4.15)	(-5.51)	(-3.85)	(-3.56)	(-3.41)	(-3.10)	(-4.99)
R*2	0.6559	0.7588	0.6633	0.6996	0.6386	0.6562	0.9132

4.3. Robustness Checks

To ensure the accuracy of our experimental results, we conduct a series of robustness checks using the White heteroskedasticity-robust test to examine whether heteroskedasticity exists in the regression model. The results of the test are presented in Table 4.

Based on the results in the table, it can be observed that the models 3-7 are not significant when conducting the White heteroskedasticity-robust test. However, after including all the cultural-related variables, a negative relationship emerges at the 5% significance level. This suggests that there is insufficient evidence to indicate the presence of significant heteroskedasticity issues. This can be explained by the fact that the variance of the error term in the model does not significantly change across different values of the independent variables. In panel data, there is no significant association between the random effects and the variance of the error term.

Table 4. Results of Robustness Checks

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	squared_r	squared_r	squared_r	squared_r	squared_r	squared_r	squared_r
kongzi	0.00658	0.00903	0.00681	0.00424	0.00528	0.00886	-0.0128
	(0.95)	(1.39)	(0.99)	(0.59)	(0.75)	(1.25)	(-1.07)
city	-0.00644	0.000998	-0.00657	-0.00503	-0.00495	0.00282	0.0170*
	(-1.75)	(0.31)	(-1.74)	(-1.10)	(-1.66)	(0.77)	(2.62)
Indis	-0.137	0.186	-0.161	-0.0850	-0.109	0.133	0.877*
	(-0.70)	(0.86)	(-0.77)	(-0.44)	(-0.56)	(0.66)	(2.25)
GDP	-0.0266	0.000247	-0.0263	-0.0292	-0.00573	0.0133	0.0603*
	(-0.88)	(0.01)	(-0.87)	(-0.98)	(-0.24)	(0.54)	(2.40)
lnPPP	0.0632	0.0428	0.0672	0.0762	0.0175	-0.0550	-0.223
	(0.93)	(0.74)	(0.91)	(1.14)	(0.32)	(-0.93)	(-1.82)
lnscho	0.00351	0.0121	0.00420	-0.00347	0.0212	-0.00427	-0.00430
	(0.11)	(0.39)	(0.13)	(-0.09)	(0.58)	(-0.15)	(-0.11)
lnFDI	0.000587	0.00593	0.000667	0.000720	0.00166	0.00973	0.0126*
	(0.10)	(1.61)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.37)	(1.61)	(2.22)
lngood		-0.0692*					0.0284
		(-2.36)					(0.82)
gene			0.000399				-0.00717
			(0.19)				(-1.25)
religion				0.961			5.333
				(0.58)			(1.56)
value					10.81		34.60*
					(1.98)		(2.57)
institu						0.840*	1.054**
						(2.38)	(2.72)
_cons	0.885	-0.721	1.025	0.285	0.618	-0.850	-7.343*
	(0.48)	(-0.39)	(0.57)	(0.16)	(0.34)	(-0.45)	(-2.27)

4.4. Heterogeneity Test

According to the data from "Brief Statistics on International Students in China (2018)," it is found that among the ASEAN students studying in China, students from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos account for 70% of the total. Combining this information with the level of service trade openness between China and ASEAN countries, it can be observed that Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, compared to the other five countries without commitments in the higher education service trade market, have a certain degree of openness in terms of market access and national treatment for China's higher education service trade abroad. This implies that students from these countries have greater freedom in receiving higher education services overseas.

Table 5. Results of Tests for Countries Partially Open to China's Higher Education Service Trade Market

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu
control variable	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
lngood		0.211**				
		(2.75)				
gene			0.0322***			
			(3.82)			
religion				-14.42***		
				(-3.82)		
value					70.72***	
					(3.82)	
institution						-1.162*
						(-2.32)
_cons	-281.3***	-190.7***	-27.64	-123.8**	-92.38	-269.8***
	(-10.93)	(-4.67)	(-0.39)	(-2.63)	(-1.70)	(-10.74)
R*2	0.6702	0.6871	0.7103	0.7103	0.7103	0.6958

Table 6. Results of Tests for Countries that Have Not Opened China's Higher Education Service Trade Market

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu	lnstu
control variable	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
lngood		-0.0296				
		(-0.33)				
gene			-0.0659**			
			(-2.61)			
religion				39.27**		
				(2.61)		
value					329.4**	
					(2.61)	
institution						-0.0596
						(-0.09)
_cons	14.48	21.09	55.01**	7.562	151.6**	13.97
	(1.00)	(0.84)	(2.66)	(0.54)	(2.79)	(0.89)
R*2	0.5692	0.5697	0.6043	0.6043	0.6043	0.5688

Based on the results in Tables 5 and 6, it can be observed that for ASEAN countries that have partially opened their higher education service trade market to China, there is a significant positive correlation at the 1% significance level between the export volume of core cultural goods, genetic distance, value distance, and the number of international students studying in China. On the other hand, there is a significant negative correlation with religious distance and political system distance. However, for ASEAN countries that have not opened their higher

education service trade market to China, the quantity of international students studying in China is not significantly influenced by the export volume of core cultural goods and political system distance, as their markets remain closed. The impact of genetic distance, religious distance, and value distance is also not as pronounced as in open markets.

There could be several potential reasons for the differential effect of culture on ASEAN students coming to China, due to differences in market openness. Firstly, cultural proximity may play a role, as ASEAN countries that have opened their markets may exhibit greater similarity and closeness to China in terms of culture. This cultural proximity can make it easier for students from ASEAN countries to adapt to the cultural environment in China, including language, cuisine, and social customs. They may be more inclined to choose China for their studies because they are more familiar and comfortable with Chinese culture and social environment. Secondly, educational cooperation and exchanges could contribute to this effect. ASEAN countries that have opened their markets may have more educational cooperation programs and opportunities for exchanges with China, providing ASEAN students with exposure to Chinese culture. This includes academic exchange programs, scholarships and funding schemes, collaborative research projects, among others. These cooperative and exchange opportunities can enhance China's cultural appeal as a study destination, attracting more students from ASEAN countries with open markets. Thirdly, economic development and employment opportunities may also play a role. China may be attractive to students from ASEAN countries with open markets in terms of economic growth and employment prospects. These countries may recognize China's global economic standing and the potential of the Chinese market. Therefore, their students may be more motivated to study in China to gain better education and employment opportunities for their future careers.

In contrast, ASEAN countries that have not opened their markets may have a lower acceptance of Chinese culture and social environment, fewer opportunities for educational cooperation and exchanges, and limited economic development and employment opportunities, which may restrict the number of students choosing to study in China.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

5.1. Key Findings

First, when examining the overall number of ASEAN students studying in China, various cultural factors have different impacts. The larger the export volume of core cultural goods, the more attractive China is to ASEAN students. When considering the combined effect of intrinsic cultural factors, a smaller genetic distance, religious distance, and political system distance between China and ASEAN countries lead to a stronger attraction for ASEAN students. On the other hand, a greater disparity in values between China and ASEAN countries results in a higher number of ASEAN students studying in China.

Second, the influence of cultural factors varies depending on the degree of government restrictions on market openness. Cultural factors have a more pronounced effect on ASEAN countries with different degrees of openness in China's higher education service trade market. A larger export volume of core cultural goods, greater genetic distance, and greater disparity in values lead to a higher number of ASEAN students studying in China. Conversely, a smaller religious distance and political system distance result in a stronger attraction for ASEAN students. However, the impact is not evident for ASEAN countries that have not fully opened their higher education service trade market to China.

5.2. Policy Recommendations

With the comprehensive implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the upgrading of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, coupled with the

improvement in the quality of service trade among member countries, China's internationalization of higher education is set to benefit from a broader market and platform. China's active promotion of free trade zone construction and regional economic integration further underscores the importance of developing service trade, including higher education, and the government's resolve. To achieve significant progress in China's higher education service trade with ASEAN, China must engage in self-reflection, introspection, and improvement.

1) Expand the export of cultural goods and enhance cultural soft power.

Cultural goods are important representatives of a nation's culture. By exporting cultural goods, a country can showcase its unique culture and values to other nations, shape a positive national image, and enhance its soft power. Cultural products that embody a country's heritage and values make it easier for foreigners to engage with and gain a more direct understanding of Chinese culture, stimulating their interest in learning about it. This is one of the key ways to attract ASEAN students to study in China. Currently, the global distribution of the cultural market is as follows: the United States holds a 43% market share, the European Union accounts for 34%, Japan approximately 10%, South Korea 5%, and China less than 4%. The cultural industry in China contributes only 2.6% to the country's GDP, while in the United States, it represents 25% of the entire GDP, and in Japan, it reaches 20%. To expand the export scale of Chinese cultural goods, the government should focus on supporting and nurturing a group of internationally competitive, outward-oriented cultural enterprises. This will create a range of culturally significant products with core competitiveness, establish an international marketing network, and form several influential international cultural trading platforms. These measures will help promote the expansion of Chinese cultural goods in the international market.

2) To enhance the dissemination and influence of Chinese culture, it is crucial to strengthen international cultural exchanges.

Since the 21st century, China and ASEAN countries have accelerated the process of cultural exchange and educational cooperation. In 2005, both parties signed the "China-ASEAN Memorandum of Understanding on Education Cooperation," which, along with a series of education cooperation documents such as the "China-ASEAN Action Plan on Education Cooperation (2016-2020)" and the "China-ASEAN Joint Statement on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," has laid a solid foundation for the continuous development of cross-border education. However, there is still a need to expand cultural exchange projects. Therefore, it is imperative for various sectors of society to actively promote and support various cultural exchange projects, such as art exhibitions, cultural festivals, performances, and shows. These projects can foster cultural dialogue and understanding among different nations. Additionally, it is important to strengthen cooperation in the cultural and creative industries, promoting international collaboration in areas such as film production, music production, and art exchange. Through collaboration, creative talents from different countries can jointly develop and promote cultural products. Active promotion of cultural diplomacy activities, including the appointment of cultural envoys and the dispatch of cultural exchange delegations, through diplomatic channels and institutions can enhance friendship and cooperation between countries. Leveraging the internet and digital technology, it is crucial to bolster international digital cultural exchanges. Online platforms, social media, and virtual exhibitions enable people to transcend geographical and language barriers, facilitating the sharing and exchange of various cultural content. Simultaneously, the government can offer increased policy support for cultural exchanges, including the reduction of visa restrictions, support for cultural exchange institutions and organizations, and provision of financial assistance. Such measures will create a more conducive environment and conditions for cultural exchange.

3) Negotiating to expand the level of trade openness between both parties is essential for promoting the integration of new forms of trade, such as digital trade, with service trade.

In recent years, with the continuous upgrading of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area agreement, the level of openness to service trade has gradually expanded. However, compared to OECD countries like Australia, ASEAN countries still exhibit relatively limited openness to China's higher education service trade. Within the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, only four countries have no restrictions on overseas consumption of higher education services in China, whereas within the Australia-ASEAN-New Zealand Free Trade Area, six countries have no restrictions on overseas consumption of higher education services in Australia. Therefore, negotiating to promote the level of trade openness is a necessary condition for facilitating overseas consumption of higher education in ASEAN countries.

Simultaneously, active promotion of various forms of higher education service trade is essential. Overseas consumption (international student education) has consistently accounted for the largest share of China's higher education service trade. While consolidating the overseas consumption trade model, attention should be given to the development of other service trade models. Chinese universities can enter the education markets of ASEAN countries through avenues such as cooperative education programs, establishing branch campuses, establishing friendly school relationships, and conducting relevant educational research projects. By seizing opportunities and strengthening cooperation in joint education programs, the development of the commercial presence trade model can be promoted. While supporting Chinese teachers and researchers in providing higher education services in ASEAN countries, it is also important to support experts and scholars from certain ASEAN countries to come to China for professional teaching and scientific research through government funding, thereby promoting the development of the natural persons movement trade model.

Regarding cross-border delivery of service trade, it is necessary to promote the integration of new forms of trade, such as digital trade, with higher education service trade in higher-level free trade agreements like RCEP. Higher education service trade can leverage the development of digital trade to facilitate the digitalization of higher education services. Efforts should be made to encourage universities to engage in online education, distance learning, and other innovative educational models, thereby enhancing the accessibility and quality of higher education services. Additionally, both digital trade and higher education service trade require strengthened intellectual property protection, which relies on cooperation among member countries to advance the process of intellectual property protection and establish robust mechanisms. Therefore, making full use of technological advancements in the information age and developing cross-border delivery of e-learning models can combine higher education service trade with digital trade. This integration not only reduces the geographic mobility costs for teachers and students but also positions China with significant potential and attractiveness in the international higher education service trade arena.

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