

Stigmatized at Home: Uncovering Degree-Origin Discrimination Against Chinese Scholars with Korean Doctorates

Hang Chen ^{1,*}

¹ School of General Education, Xi'an Eurasia University, Xi'an, China; chenhang@eurasia.edu

* Correspondence

<https://doi.org/10.5392/IJoC.2026.22.3.029>

Manuscript Received 21 August 2025; Received 1 July 2026; Accepted 12 August 2026

Abstract: *This study investigates how Chinese scholars with Korean doctoral degrees discuss issues related to credential recognition, career barriers, and emotional uncertainty in online platforms. We analyze 1,842 narrative units collected from Xiaohongshu, employing computational semantic network analysis alongside contextual thematic interpretation to explore the relationships among academic identity, employment, supervisory support, and socio-cultural adaptation. The findings indicate that Korean doctoral credentials are often perceived as disadvantaged due to institutional rankings, limited recognition of KCI-indexed publications, and restricted access to academic networks. Negative expressions frequently coincide with perceived reputational stigma, challenges in leveraging overseas academic capital, and concerns regarding professional identity. Instead of quantifying discrimination within China's academic labor market, this study highlights how stigma related to degree origin is constructed and shared within platform-specific discourse. By connecting semantic patterns with contextual insights, the research enhances understanding of transnational doctoral mobility, symbolic capital, doctoral well-being, and credential hierarchies in academic employment.*

Keywords: Korean Doctoral Graduates; Degree-origin Discrimination; Chinese Higher Education; Symbolic Capital; Academic Labor Market

1. Introduction

“South Korean doctoral degrees not considered.” This line, taken from a Chinese university recruitment posting, illustrates one form of degree-origin exclusion discussed by Korean-trained Chinese PhD graduates. For scholars who have invested years in Korean universities, such statements may function as more than administrative criteria; they can be perceived as barriers that restrict access to academic employment. Although a single posting cannot establish the prevalence of such practices, it points to broader concerns about how Korean doctoral credentials are evaluated in China's academic labor market.

In recent years, the global expansion of doctoral education has far outpaced the growth of stable academic positions, creating a highly competitive job market for PhD graduates [1]. Across Asian higher education systems, including Korea and China, doctoral degree holders face limited employment opportunities, rising hiring standards, and a growing prevalence of temporary or non-tenure-track positions [2, 3]. Studies have documented escalating performance requirements, prolonged recruitment processes, and heightened uncertainty in early academic careers [4, 5]. Although doctoral degrees retain signaling value, that value varies across institutional and national contexts [2].

For Chinese scholars with Korean doctoral degrees, these global pressures intersect with localized recruitment practices. Degree origin, institutional rankings, academic networks, and symbolic capital may shape employment opportunities [6, 7]. Returning PhDs may encounter credential-recognition difficulties, rigid performance benchmarks, and unequal access to academic resources [8, 9]. Within China's academic hiring environment, Korean PhDs have also reported reputational stigma in recruitment advertisements, interviews,

and informal evaluations [3], [7]. The increasing emphasis on rankings and institutional prestige may further disadvantage graduates from less internationally recognized universities or programs [2], [6].

Comparable degree-origin hierarchies have been observed internationally. In Taiwan and Canada, the awarding institution may operate as symbolic capital and influence access to competitive academic positions [2], [5]. For returnee PhDs, failure to secure anticipated employment has been associated with career anxiety, ambiguous loss, and emotional exhaustion [7, 8]. Prolonged job-search uncertainty and increasing performance expectations may also undermine well-being and contribute to departure from academic careers [1], [3].

Advisor relationships and academic networks may buffer or intensify these pressures. The connectedness and prestige of supervisors can influence employment outcomes [10], while limited post-graduation support may heighten professional isolation [7]. Career adaptation may also involve socio-cultural readjustment, exclusion from peer networks, and limited alumni connections [8]. In online narratives, labels such as “diploma mill” and expressions of degree devaluation may further challenge professional identity and perceived career prospects [7].

Similar reputational and structural barriers have been reported in other contexts. Research on Japan’s “employment ice-age” cohort [11] and racially minoritized PhDs in the United States [12] indicates that unequal access to academic employment is not limited to a single national or cultural setting.

Despite these insights, several gaps remain. First, research on Korean-trained Chinese PhDs has relied mainly on surveys and interviews, with limited use of large-scale, naturally occurring online discourse. Second, doctoral well-being has often been examined through psychological scales, leaving the contextual relationships between affective expressions and employment, academic, and socio-cultural concerns underexplored. Third, few studies have combined computational semantic mapping with contextual thematic interpretation to examine both broad discourse patterns and the meanings expressed within individual narratives.

To address these gaps, this study asks:

RQ1: What are the dominant semantic structures in Korean PhD-related Xiaohongshu discourse, and how are they interconnected?

RQ2: How are negative and evaluative expressions represented in this discourse, and with which contextual factors do they co-occur?

RQ3: How can computational and thematic analyses be integrated to construct a framework encompassing academic, career, socio-cultural, and emotional dimensions of Korean PhD-related discourse?

This study makes four contributions. First, it applies computational text analysis to a large corpus of naturally occurring Xiaohongshu narratives to map recurring lexical and semantic patterns. Second, it situates affective and evaluative expressions within their co-occurring contexts, offering a more contextualized account of doctoral well-being. Third, it develops an integrated framework connecting academic identity, career mobility, socio-cultural adaptation, and emotional uncertainty. Fourth, it demonstrates the value of social media discourse for examining how degree-origin stigma is expressed and socially constructed, while recognizing that such discourse cannot represent all Korean-trained Chinese PhD graduates or measure the prevalence of discrimination in the wider labor market.

2. Theoretical background

The challenges faced by Chinese doctoral graduates returning from Korean universities cannot be understood solely in terms of individual ability or labour market fluctuations. Rather, they must be situated within the broader socio-institutional structures that shape how academic qualifications are valued, recognized, and converted into career opportunities. Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of cultural capital offers a powerful lens for examining these processes.

Cultural capital refers to the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that confer social advantage within specific social fields [13]. It exists in three interrelated forms: embodied (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, such as fluency in academic discourse, mastery of research norms, and professional demeanour), objectified (materialised cultural goods such as publications, scholarly outputs, and research tools), and institutionalised (formally recognized credentials such as academic degrees). These forms reinforce one another, collectively shaping the perceived and actual value of an individual’s expertise in a given field [14].

Critically, the utility of cultural capital is field-dependent: its recognition and value are mediated by the norms, hierarchies, and power relations of the social field in which it is deployed [15]. In China's higher education sector, doctoral qualifications from globally prestigious or domestically elite institutions—such as “Double First-Class” universities—often carry substantial symbolic value. By contrast, degrees from less familiar or lower-ranked systems, including many Korean institutions, may be devalued regardless of the graduate's actual scholarly competence. This reflects Bourdieu's assertion that fields operate according to internal logics that privilege certain forms of capital over others [16].

For Korean PhD returnees, the institutionalised cultural capital represented by their degrees may be less readily convertible into career opportunities within China's academic field, particularly when credential prestige functions as an initial screening criterion. However, Korean doctoral credentials are internally differentiated by institutional ranking, discipline, program type, language of instruction, publication profile, and network resources; their symbolic value should therefore not be treated as uniform. Even strong embodied cultural capital, such as research expertise and international experience, may not translate into professional mobility when it does not align with the evaluative criteria of the receiving academic field.

Differences in academic communication styles, research traditions, and networking practices between Korean and Chinese systems further complicate this conversion process. Such misalignments can limit the effective transfer of embodied cultural capital. Additionally, the absence of robust alumni networks or established institutional affiliations within China reduces access to informal recruitment channels—an important component of social capital—further constraining career prospects [17, 18].

From this perspective, the employment difficulties of Korean PhD returnees are not simply the product of personal shortcomings or market saturation. They are embedded in broader structural processes of capital recognition, conversion, and exclusion within the academic field. Bourdieu's framework thus provides a critical theoretical foundation for analysing not only disparities in labour market outcomes, but also the emotional and identity-related consequences of working in an environment where certain forms of capital are systematically privileged and others persistently devalued.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a computational text analysis design to systematically examine the online discourse of Chinese doctoral graduates from Korean universities. The analytical framework integrates three complementary procedures: (1) frequency-based lexical profiling, (2) visual word cloud analysis, and (3) semantic network mapping through co-occurrence analysis. This design enables both the identification of salient lexical items and the mapping of structural relationships among concepts, offering a comprehensive understanding of thematic patterns and emotional expressions. All qualitative insights are derived exclusively from Xiaohongshu text data, without the inclusion of interview materials.

3.2 Data Sources and Collection

The dataset consisted exclusively of publicly available user-generated content retrieved from Xiaohongshu, a widely used Chinese social media platform. The materials included posts and associated comments concerning the academic, employment, and career experiences of Chinese individuals who had obtained or were pursuing doctoral degrees at Korean universities. Data were collected between 1 January 2022 and 31 December 2024. The retrieval process targeted posts containing at least one of the Chinese-language equivalents of the following search terms: “Korean PhD,” “Korean doctoral degree,” “Korean PhD employment,” and “Korean PhD job market.”

The initial retrieval yielded 1,268 posts and 4,975 associated comments, comprising a total of 412,563 Chinese characters. During data screening, duplicated content, advertisements, irrelevant study-abroad promotional materials, and texts that were too brief or contextually insufficient for meaningful semantic interpretation were excluded. Posts and directly related comments addressing the same experience or issue were subsequently consolidated into coherent narrative units. A narrative unit was defined as either a self-contained post or a post together with its contextually relevant comments. Following screening, cleaning, and consolidation, the final analytical corpus comprised 1,842 narrative units.

All retrieved texts were stored in UTF-8-encoded plain-text format. Original wording, punctuation, and paragraph structure were preserved wherever possible to maintain contextual and linguistic integrity. Personally

identifiable information, including usernames, geographic locations, profile information, and other potentially identifying details, was removed during data preparation.

Because Xiaohongshu users voluntarily decide whether and how to disclose their experiences, the dataset may disproportionately reflect experiences that users considered salient, difficult, or worthy of public discussion. The corpus is therefore treated as a platform-specific representation of how Korean doctoral credentials and related career experiences are discussed and socially constructed online, rather than as a statistically representative account of all Chinese graduates of Korean doctoral programs.

3.3 Data Preprocessing

The textual data were preprocessed using a standardized pipeline to ensure accuracy and analytical validity:

- 1) Noise Removal – Removed hyperlinks, emojis, advertisements, hashtags, and repeated punctuation marks.
- 2) Tokenization – Applied the Jieba segmentation tool (version 0.42) with an augmented domain-specific dictionary containing 326 academic and career-related terms to improve segmentation accuracy.
- 3) Stopword Filtering – Removed high-frequency grammatical particles and non-content words using the Harbin Institute of Technology stopwords list (2,041 items) merged with 112 custom stopwords identified during manual inspection.
- 4) Lowercasing and Normalization – Standardized English tokens to lowercase and unified synonymous variants.
- 5) Frequency Thresholding – Retained tokens with a minimum occurrence of two across the corpus to reduce analytical noise.

3.4 Analytical Procedures

The analysis comprised three connected stages: word-frequency analysis, word-cloud visualization, and co-occurrence-based semantic network analysis. These procedures were used to identify prominent lexical patterns and map relationships among terms. The computational results were treated as exploratory representations of Xiaohongshu discourse and subsequently informed the contextual thematic analysis described in Section 3.8.

3.4.1 Word Frequency Analysis

Term frequencies were calculated for all tokens retained after preprocessing and reported as raw counts and percentages of the total number of retained tokens. The 30 most frequent terms were presented in Table 1 to provide an initial overview of the main lexical domains. Frequency was used as a descriptive indicator and was not independently interpreted as evidence of thematic significance or emotional valence.

3.4.2 Word Cloud Visualization

Word clouds were generated as supplementary visualizations, with font size proportional to term frequency. A randomized spiral layout was used to reduce overlap. Because word position and color do not represent statistical relationships, interpretations were cross-checked against the frequency tables and original textual contexts.

3.4.3 Co-occurrence and Semantic Network Analysis

A weighted, undirected semantic network was constructed from the preprocessed corpus. Two terms were defined as co-occurring when they appeared within a five-token sliding window in the same narrative unit. A symmetric matrix was generated, with each cell recording the frequency with which a term pair co-occurred within the specified window.

The 200 most frequent eligible terms were initially retained. Terms occurring fewer than 10 times and edges with a co-occurrence weight below five were excluded to reduce weak and incidental associations. After thresholding, the final network contained 191 nodes and 2,714 weighted edges, yielding a network density of 0.150 and an average degree of 28.42. The matrix was imported into VOSviewer version 1.6.20 and normalized using the association-strength method.

Nodes represented terms, node size reflected frequency, edge thickness indicated co-occurrence strength, and spatial proximity represented relative semantic association. Total link strength was used as the principal weighted centrality indicator. The most central terms were “PhD,” “Korea,” “job,” “university,” and “research,” with total link strength values of 836, 779, 742, 691, and 668, respectively.

Clusters were generated using the modularity-based clustering procedure in VOSviewer. The clustering resolution was set to 1.00, and the minimum cluster size was set to 10 terms. The number of clusters was not specified in advance. The final solution produced four clusters containing 61, 52, 45, and 33 terms, respectively, with a modularity score of 0.397. The clusters were interpreted by examining high-frequency terms, total link strength, neighboring relationships, and the original narrative contexts. Algorithmically generated clusters were therefore treated as semantic groupings rather than automatically equated with qualitative themes.

Three sub-networks—career path, supervisor relationship, and socio-cultural adaptation—were subsequently derived from the overall matrix. The same five-token window, minimum edge-weight threshold, and normalization procedure were applied to each sub-network. Sensitivity analyses were conducted using sliding-window sizes of three and seven tokens, networks containing 150 and 250 terms, and minimum edge weights of three and eight. The three principal domains—academic identity, employment and career transition, and procedural requirements—remained stable across specifications. The smaller peripheral cluster merged partly with the employment cluster under the seven-token and 250-term settings, while seven of the ten highest-ranked terms remained among the top ten. These variations suggest that the core network structure was robust, although the boundaries of the peripheral cluster were sensitive to parameter settings. No causal inference was made from network position or co-occurrence patterns.

3.5 Emotional Lexicon Analysis

To examine affective and evaluative language, a Chinese polarity lexicon was compiled from the National Taiwan University Sentiment Dictionary (NTUSD) [19] and the HowNet Vocabulary for Sentiment Analysis (HowNet-VSA) [20, 21]. The entries were converted into simplified Chinese, deduplicated, and normalized by merging synonymous variants. Neutral academic and institutional terms were removed from the polarity categories, while unambiguous domain-specific expressions identified during corpus inspection were added. The resulting domain-adapted lexicon contained 3,462 positive and 4,128 negative entries.

The lexicon was used to identify candidate polarity-bearing expressions rather than to classify users' emotional states directly. For contextual validation, up to 20 occurrences of each of the 50 most frequent positive and negative terms were reviewed at the sentence and narrative levels. Terms for which at least 80% of the sampled occurrences conveyed the assigned polarity were treated as polarity-consistent. Context-dependent terms such as “no,” “low,” “leave,” “hard,” and “cry” were retained in the descriptive visualizations, but their contextual functions were distinguished as affective expressions, evaluations, negations, or descriptions of structural conditions. Neutral terms such as “KCI” and “graduation” were not assigned negative valence solely because they occurred near negative expressions.

The 50 most frequent context-reviewed polarity-matched terms in each category were displayed in separate word clouds, and polarity-specific semantic networks were generated using the co-occurrence procedure described in Section 3.4. These outputs were interpreted as patterns of affective and evaluative language in Xiaohongshu discourse rather than as direct measures of individual psychological states or causal effects.

3.6 Software and Tools

All preprocessing and frequency analysis were conducted in Python 3.10 using the jieba (v0.42), pandas (v2.1.4), and wordcloud (v1.9.3) libraries. Semantic networks were constructed and visualized using VOSviewer version 1.6.20. Data cleaning and validation steps were performed in Microsoft Excel 2021.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

Reproducibility – All code scripts, stopword lists, and preprocessing rules were version-controlled and archived.

Parameter Consistency – Identical tokenization settings, co-occurrence window sizes, and clustering algorithms were applied throughout the analysis.

Interpretive Cross-Validation – Frequency and network outputs were cross-checked against original corpus segments to ensure thematic coherence.

Bias Consideration – The demographic and topical characteristics of Xiaohongshu users, as well as the 2022–2024 time frame, are acknowledged as potential constraints on generalizability.

3.8 Integrated Thematic Analysis

To contextualize the computational results, thematic analysis was conducted on narrative units associated with salient affective expressions and major semantic clusters. The computational analysis was used only to identify and organize relevant texts, rather than to generate qualitative themes automatically.

Following Braun and Clarke's [22] six-phase procedure, recurring patterns were identified inductively and then interpreted through Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, symbolic, and social capital. All qualitative interpretations were derived exclusively from Xiaohongshu narratives; no interview data were included.

4. Results

4.1 Initial Thematic Overview via High-Frequency Term Analysis

To obtain an initial overview of the thematic composition of the corpus, a high-frequency term analysis was conducted. This step provides a quantitative entry point into the data by identifying the most salient lexical items and their relative prominence. Table 1 lists the top 30 high-frequency terms extracted from the Korean PhD-related Xiaohongshu discourse. Frequently occurring terms such as *korea*, *phd*, *university*, and *research* reflect the prominence of academic identity and institutional context. Career-related terms, including *job*, *apply*, and *work*, also appear prominently, indicating the salience of employment and career development in the corpus. Terms such as *visa*, *international*, and *english* further point to cross-border mobility and linguistic adaptation.

Table 1. Top 30 High-Frequency Terms in the Korean PhD Corpus

Rank	Term	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	korea	276	2.1
2	phd	263	2.0
3	university	217	1.6
4	research	211	1.6
5	job	205	1.5
6	work	184	1.4
7	students	179	1.3
8	academic	176	1.3
9	apply	164	1.2
10	position	151	1.1
11	international	148	1.1
12	study	142	1.1
13	experience	139	1.0
14	english	133	1.0
15	visa	131	1.0
16	professor	129	1.0
17	postdoctoral	126	0.9
18	science	122	0.9
19	program	118	0.9
20	chinese	116	0.9
21	graduates	113	0.8
22	better	111	0.8
23	system	109	0.8
24	south	106	0.8
25	opportunity	104	0.8
26	country	102	0.8
27	field	100	0.7
28	requirement	97	0.7
29	world	95	0.7
30	people	93	0.7

Note. Percentages are calculated relative to the total number of tokens in the corpus.

As shown in Table 1, the lexical profile of the corpus is dominated by terms related to academic identity and professional trajectories. The prominence of *korea* situates the discourse within a specific geographic and educational context, while *phd*, *university*, and *research* highlight academic affiliation and scholarly activity.

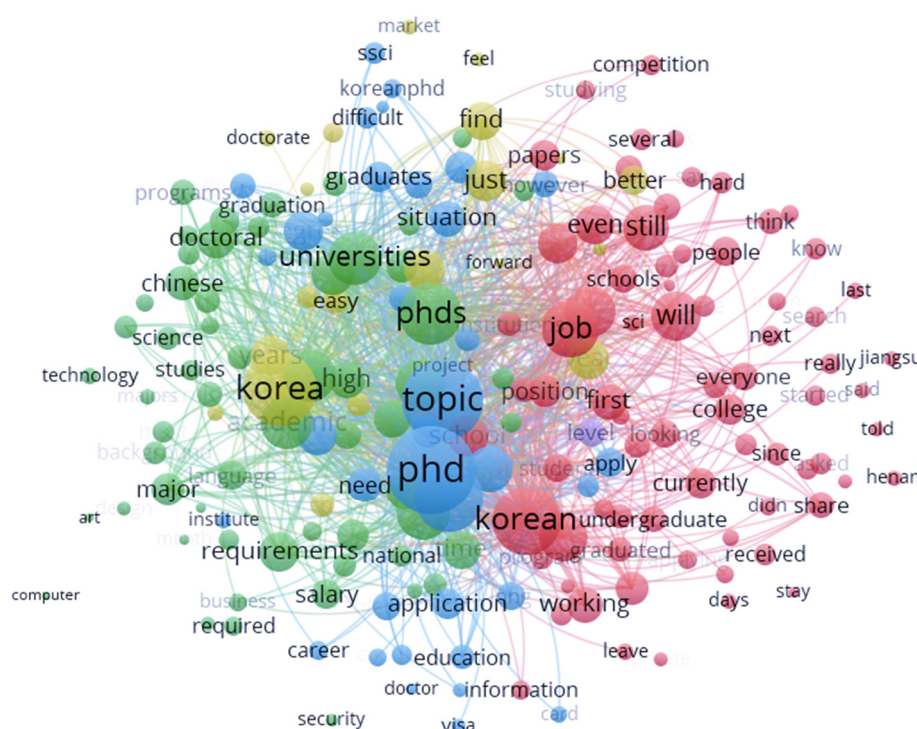


Figure 2. Co-occurrence network of the top 200 high-frequency terms from the same dataset.

Figure 2 presents the co-occurrence network, with node size indicating frequency, edge thickness representing co-occurrence strength, and color denoting clusters identified by VOSviewer. After thresholding, the network contained 191 nodes and 2,714 weighted edges, yielding a density of 0.150 and an average degree of 28.42. Four clusters emerged, containing 61, 52, 45, and 33 terms, respectively, with a modularity score of 0.397: (1) academic structure and doctoral identity; (2) employment and career transition; (3) procedural and structural requirements; and (4) peripheral evaluative elements.

Based on total link strength, the most central terms were “PhD” (836), “Korea” (779), “job” (742), “university” (691), and “research” (668), indicating that academic identity, national context, and employment formed the semantic core of the network. Sensitivity analyses produced stable structures for the first three domains, although the smaller peripheral cluster partially merged with the employment cluster under broader parameter settings. Seven of the ten highest-ranked terms remained among the top ten across the alternative specifications.

Together with the word cloud in Figure 1, the network highlights recurring domains of academic identity, career mobility, and procedural or contextual constraints, providing a descriptive foundation for the subsequent thematic and polarity analyses. Negative or evaluative expressions occurred across several clusters, suggesting that concerns and difficulties were distributed across multiple domains rather than confined to a single topic.

4.3 Word Cloud Visualization of Thematic Clusters

To further examine the thematic composition of the Korean PhD discourse, the overall co-occurrence network was divided into four clusters using modularity-based community detection. Each cluster was interpreted as a distinct semantic grouping rather than as an independently generated qualitative theme. The word cloud for the first cluster—Academic Structure and Doctoral Identity—shows terms such as PhD, universities, Korea, academic, research, study, and publication, reflecting the prominence of institutional affiliation, national context, and scholarly output. References to department, faculty, laboratory, conference, and journal further indicate the presence of disciplinary settings and professional activities in the discourse.



Figure 3. Word cloud for Cluster 1 – Academic Structure and Doctoral Identity.

The second cluster—Employment and Career Transition—focuses on job seeking and professional mobility. Prominent terms such as job, position, working, and application indicate the salience of employment outcomes in the corpus (Figure 4). Terms including recruitment, interview, and contract refer to procedural stages, while postdoctoral and research position represent academic pathways and company, industry, and sector indicate non-academic options.



Figure 4. Word cloud for Cluster 2 – Employment and Career Transition.

The third cluster—Procedural and Structural Requirements—reflects formal criteria, institutional procedures, and perceived constraints associated with career access. Terms such as graduates, requirements, salary, degree recognition, and system refer to credential evaluation and qualification thresholds, while policy, criteria, assessment, funding, grant, and budget point to regulatory and resource-related conditions.



Figure 5. Word cloud for Cluster 3 – Procedural and Structural Requirements.

The fourth cluster—Peripheral Thematic Elements—contains less densely connected terms such as topic, competition, challenge, and difficulty, reflecting comparative evaluations and situational concerns. Terms such as success, failure, and effort add a personal and evaluative dimension associated with perceived outcomes.



Figure 6. Word cloud for Cluster 4 – Peripheral Thematic Elements.

Taken together, the four clusters provide a descriptive map of the main semantic groupings in the corpus and form the basis for the subsequent analysis of domains related to career paths, supervisory relationships, and socio-cultural adaptation.

4.4 Thematic Semantic Networks of Career Path, Supervisor Relationship, and Socio-cultural Adaptation

To explore finer-grained domains within the discourse, the overall co-occurrence network was filtered into three sub-networks: (1) Career Path, (2) Supervisor Relationship, and (3) Socio-cultural Adaptation. Each sub-network was generated by selecting domain-relevant terms from the original co-occurrence matrix and recalculating their interconnections. This approach provides a more detailed view of the challenges discussed in Xiaohongshu narratives. In the visualizations, node size represents term frequency, edge thickness indicates co-occurrence strength, and color denotes clusters identified through modularity-based clustering.

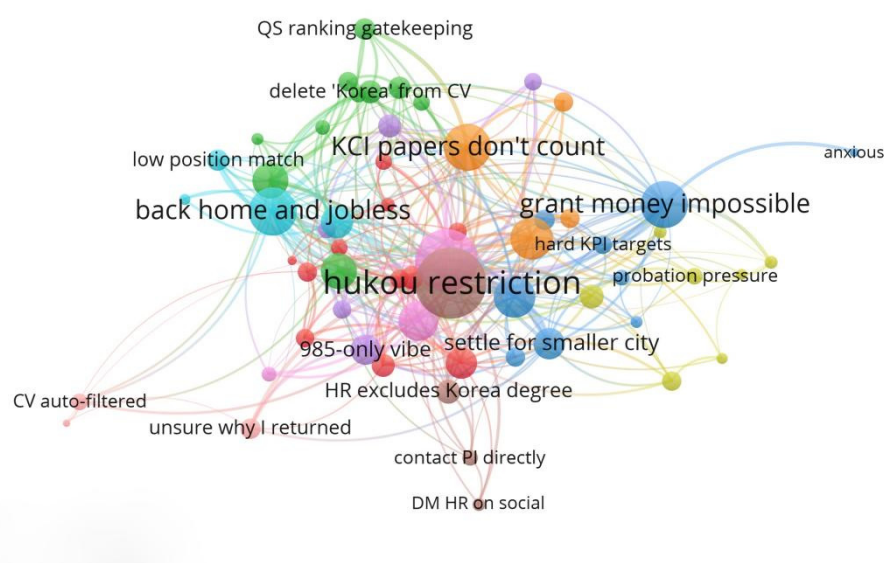


Figure 7. Career Path Semantic Network of Chinese PhD Returnees from Korea

The Career Path network contains a dense grouping of institutional and credential-related concerns, with QS ranking gatekeeping, KCI papers don't count, and not enough SCI papers appearing as prominent nodes. These terms are linked to procedural expressions such as no reply after interview and contract never arrived, suggesting that prestige-based evaluation and recruitment uncertainty frequently co-occur in the discourse. Another cluster includes adaptive strategies such as cold-email to explain research, career fair grind, and DM HR on social, alongside expressions of occasional success or continued rejection. Terms such as overqualified anxiety and career plateau further indicate that stalled career progression is discussed together with professional uncertainty.

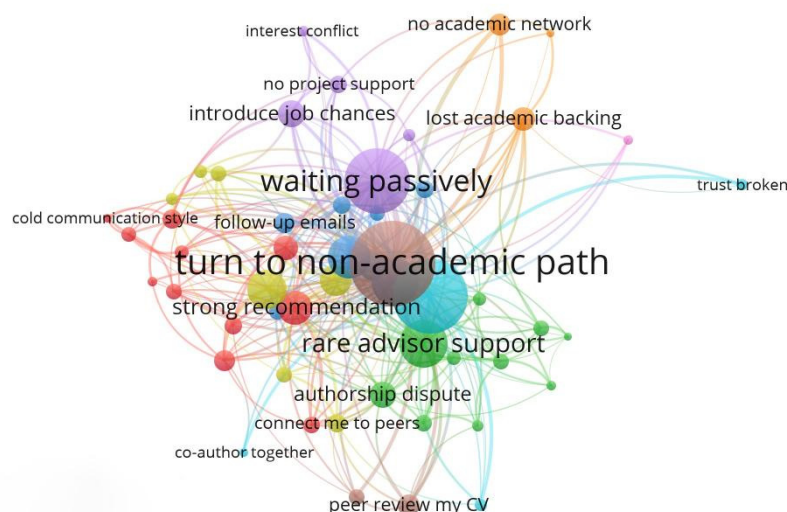


Figure 8. Supervisor Relationship Semantic Network of Chinese PhD Returnees from Korea

The Supervisor Relationship network centers on expressions such as advisor ghosted me, refusal to write letter, and no SSCI record. These nodes are connected to institutional terms including college KPI pressure and PI grant is small, as well as expressions concerning limited post-graduation support, such as no academic network and few nomination slots. Positive expressions, including strong recommendation and rare advisor support, appear as smaller nodes in the network. Terms such as build my own network and publish on my own indicate self-directed responses to perceived limitations in supervisory and academic support.

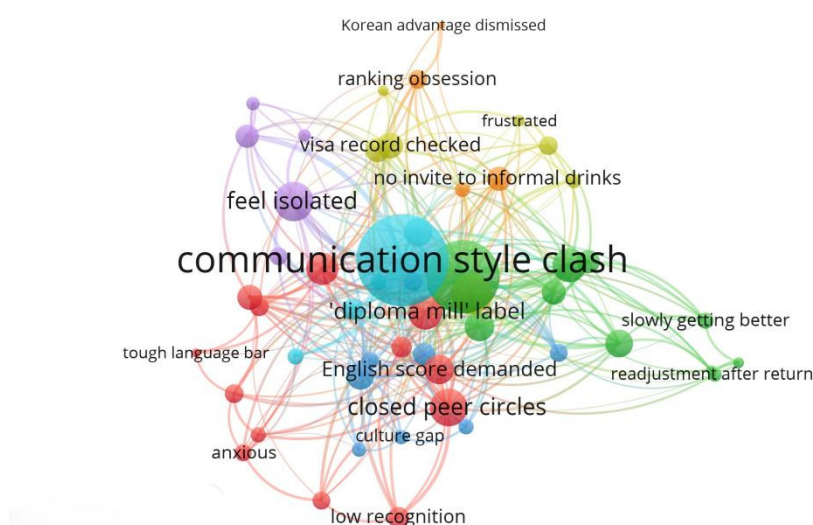


Figure 9. Socio-cultural Adaptation Semantic Network of Chinese PhD Returnees from Korea

The Socio-cultural Adaptation network foregrounds expressions of reputational stigma, including degree discrimination, “diploma mill” label, and Korea PhD devalued. These terms are connected to procedural concerns such as English score demanded and license exam limits. A related cluster includes expressions of social and cultural distance, such as left out of gatherings, culture gap, and small alumni circle. Coping-oriented expressions—including explain my story upfront, join local communities, and build local collabs—appear in more peripheral positions, indicating that adaptation strategies are present but less prominent than narratives of exclusion and adjustment difficulties.

4.5 Comparative Analysis of Positive and Negative Expressions

To examine the linguistic salience of affective and evaluative expressions among returnee PhDs, word clouds were constructed separately for positive and negative polarity terms. Word clouds provide an intuitive representation of term frequency and salience [23]. The 50 most frequent context-reviewed polarity-matched terms in each category were displayed, with font size proportional to normalized term frequency.



Figure 10. Positive (left) and negative (right) polarity word clouds from returnee PhD narratives.

The positive word cloud includes expressions such as “mentorship program,” “smooth visa process,” “peer recognition,” and “career clarity,” pointing to institutional assistance, professional affirmation, and supportive experiences. Mid-frequency terms such as “stable funding” and “cultural exchange” further indicate contexts associated with positive evaluations.

The negative word cloud highlights expressions such as “no,” “low,” “leave,” “hard,” and “cry.” As explained in Section 3.5, these terms do not all represent discrete emotions; depending on context, they function as negative affect, evaluation, negation, or descriptions of adverse conditions. Terms such as “pressure,” “reject,” and “struggle” indicate discussions of performance demands, procedural obstacles, and uncertain prospects, while “anxiety,” “worry,” and “unemployment” reflect more explicit emotional and employment-related concerns. Because word clouds do not reveal relationships among expressions, semantic networks were constructed for the positive and negative term sets. Node size represents frequency, edge thickness indicates co-occurrence strength, and colors denote clusters identified using VOSviewer.

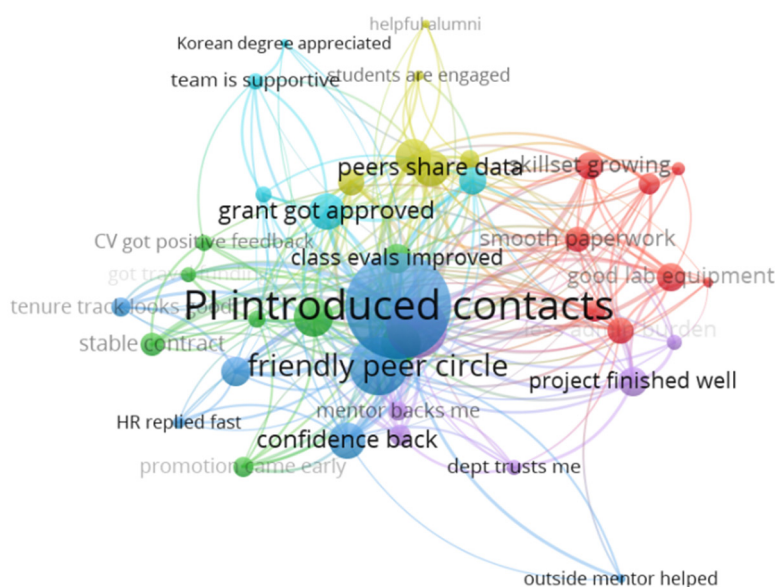


Figure 11. Semantic network of positive polarity terms.

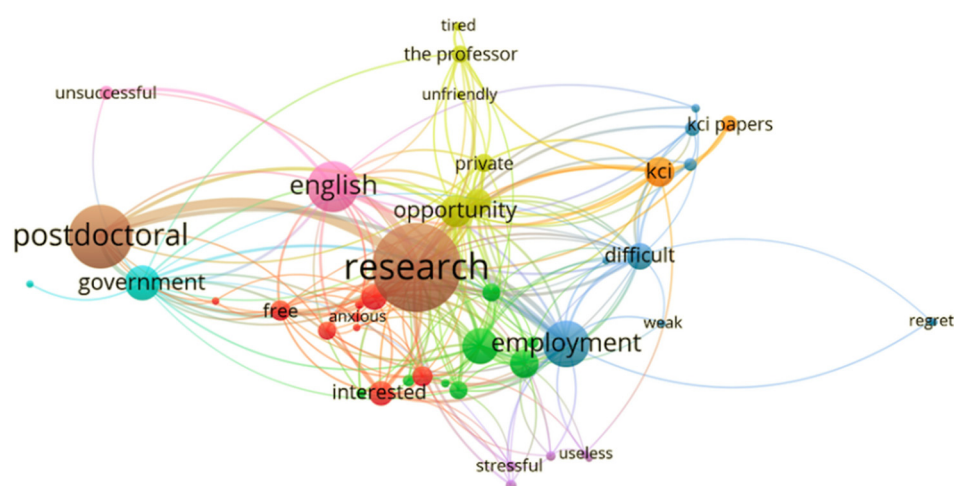


Figure 12. Semantic network of negative polarity terms.

The negative network contains several dense clusters. One links “hukou restriction,” “back home and jobless,” “grant money impossible,” and “probation pressure,” indicating that negative evaluations frequently co-occur with employment and institutional concerns. Another connects “turn to non-academic path,” “rare advisor support,” and “waiting passively,” reflecting perceived limitations in mentorship and career mobility. Additional clusters concern reputational stigma and social or communicative difficulties.

By contrast, the positive network shows clusters centered on “solid research team,” “career clarity,” “peer recognition,” and “grant success.” Another links “mentorship program,” “cultural exchange,” and “early tenure offer,” pointing to professional support and opportunity. Overall, positive expressions tended to cluster around support and opportunity, whereas negative expressions were distributed across multiple domains of difficulty and constraint. These patterns informed the subsequent thematic analysis of workplace dynamics, supervisory relationships, and degree-origin discrimination.

4.6 Integrated Thematic Analysis of Korean PhD-Related Narratives

While high-frequency analysis, word clouds, and semantic networks provide a macro-level mapping of Korean PhD-related discourse, they cannot fully capture the contextual meanings behind salient evaluative expressions or variations within semantic clusters. To address this limitation, a qualitative reading of context-rich narrative segments was conducted, focusing on credential recognition, supervisor relationships, and socio-cultural integration.

The analysis aimed to identify the perceived conditions underlying the computational patterns and to develop an integrated framework linking structural, relational, and emotional dimensions. Drawing on Xiaohongshu narratives containing frequently occurring positive or negative expressions, the analysis identified perceived barriers, emotional responses, and adaptive strategies, organized into three overarching themes.

Theme One: Structural Constraints and Institutional Barriers

The narratives frequently described credential-related anxiety, demanding institutional expectations, and perceived degree-origin discrimination in China’s academic labor market. These concerns were linked not only to employment opportunities but also to perceptions of professional recognition. This theme comprises three sub-themes: (1) Credential Anxiety and Recognition Struggles, (2) Academic Expectations and Institutional Pressure, and (3) Structural Discrimination and Marginalization Experiences.

Credential Anxiety and Recognition Struggles

The online discourse repeatedly represented Korean doctoral credentials as being undervalued or insufficiently recognized in the Chinese academic labor market. Narrators often attributed this perceived devaluation to institutional prestige and ranking criteria rather than solely to individual academic performance.

“My school isn’t on the QS list—it feels like I was disqualified before even applying.”

“I published several KCI papers, but they always say those don’t count.”

“If you’re not from a 985 school, no one cares about your actual work.”

From the perspective of Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory, these accounts illustrate the limited transferability of institutionalized cultural capital acquired abroad. Although a Korean doctoral degree constitutes a formal qualification, its symbolic value appears to be mediated by domestic prestige hierarchies. The reported rejection of KCI publications similarly suggests that scholarly outputs outside dominant publication systems may receive limited recognition. These narratives therefore point to perceived difficulties in converting overseas credentials and publications into locally recognized professional advantages.

Academic Expectations and Institutional Pressure

Alongside concerns about degree recognition, the corpus contained frequent references to institutional performance requirements affecting recruitment and career continuity. Publication and funding benchmarks were often portrayed less as developmental expectations than as thresholds determining access to academic positions.

“The contract is clear—if I don’t meet the targets in six years, I’m out.”

“Without enough SCI-indexed papers, I can’t even get an interview.”

“Provincial projects are even harder to get than national ones—I can’t even find a way in.”

Through Bourdieu’s framework, these accounts illustrate perceived difficulties in converting embodied cultural capital, such as knowledge and research skills, into institutionally valued outputs. SCI-indexed publications and prestigious grants were represented as important forms of recognized capital, but access to them was often described as dependent on integration into domestic scholarly networks. The discourse therefore suggests that performance metrics may reproduce existing academic hierarchies by favoring applicants already familiar with local evaluation systems and research communities.

Structural Discrimination and Marginalization Experiences

The narratives also contained recurring accounts of explicit or implicit exclusion associated with Korean doctoral degrees. Such experiences were described through recruitment advertisements, interview interactions, and informal evaluations.

“Some job postings explicitly state ‘Korean degrees not considered.’”

“As soon as they heard ‘South-Korean PhD,’ their faces changed—‘We don’t take diploma mills here.’”

“They won’t say it outright, but you can hear from their tone—you’ve already been ruled out.”

Through Bourdieu’s theory, these narratives illustrate how the symbolic value of formally recognized qualifications may be weakened by reputational hierarchies. The “diploma mill” label can be interpreted as a form of symbolic devaluation that delegitimizes credentials despite their formal status. In the discourse, such stigma was associated with perceived difficulties in converting overseas qualifications into professional recognition and employment opportunities.

Overall, this theme indicates that Korean doctoral degrees were frequently represented as possessing limited conversion value within the Chinese academic field. This perceived devaluation was linked to emotional strain and to strategies such as modifying application materials or considering alternative career pathways. However, these findings reflect platform-specific narratives rather than an objective assessment of all Korean doctoral credentials.

Theme Two: Personal and Relational Experiences of Vulnerability

The online narratives included personal accounts of job searching under conditions of emotional uncertainty, family expectations, and changing support relationships. These experiences were closely connected to how narrators interpreted their career situations and described their strategies for persistence. This theme includes Emotional Regulation and Psychological Experiences, Family Culture and Social Support Systems, and Supervisor Relationships.

Emotional Regulation and Psychological Experiences

The narratives portrayed prolonged job searching as emotionally demanding, involving repeated cycles of anticipation, silence, and rejection. These experiences were commonly associated with disappointment, self-questioning, and uncertainty about professional identity.

“Every morning I wake up and check my inbox—afraid there’s still no reply.”

“One application after another, and in the end, they all vanish into silence.”

“I started wondering if I should’ve done a PhD at all... Even if no one acknowledges it, I know I worked hard all these years.”

In Bourdieu’s terms, these accounts reflect tension between embodied cultural capital—the discipline, knowledge, and scholarly identity developed during doctoral education—and the absence of corresponding symbolic recognition. When such recognition was perceived as limited, narrators described efforts to preserve their sense of purpose and professional worth. These emotional responses were therefore closely associated with difficulties in obtaining external validation of their academic capital.

Family Culture and Social Support Systems

The narratives indicated that career uncertainty was sometimes intensified by family expectations and social perceptions. Family members were frequently described as valuing stability and occupational prestige, while Korean doctoral degrees were occasionally interpreted through stereotypes about degree quality.

“My parents keep asking when I’ll get a government-funded position.”

“Relatives heard I got my PhD in Korea and assumed it was just a diploma mill.”

“I talk about projects and publications, and all they ask is how much I earn and if it’s a secure job.”

From a cultural capital perspective, these accounts reveal differences between academic and family understandings of credential value. Although the doctoral degree represented institutionalized cultural capital, family and community networks did not always facilitate its conversion into occupational advantage. Instead, they sometimes reinforced conventional definitions of success, such as secure government employment, creating additional pressure and identity tension.

Supervisor Relationships

The post-graduation narratives frequently described a decline in contact and support from former supervisors. Guidance, recommendations, and access to academic networks were portrayed as becoming less available during the transition to employment.

“I used to go to my advisor for everything—now, I don’t even get replies.”

“My advisor has never published in SSCI—how could he possibly help me apply for anything in China?”

“Right after graduation, things went cold—he used to check in, now he doesn’t even ask... He told me writing a recommendation was too much trouble and said I should figure it out myself.”

Through Bourdieu’s lens, reduced supervisor support can be interpreted as a perceived loss of social capital, including access to networks, recommendations, and professional advocacy. The absence of such

support was associated in the narratives with greater difficulty navigating domestic recruitment and evaluation systems. These accounts emphasize the importance of sustained mentorship in supporting the conversion of overseas academic experience into locally recognized professional standing.

Taken together, these relational and emotional accounts suggest that limited social capital and weakened symbolic recognition were associated with greater professional uncertainty. Narrators frequently described relying on individual coping and networking strategies, although these strategies were not always portrayed as sufficient to overcome perceived institutional barriers.

Theme Three: Navigating Uncertainty and Career Strategies

The transition back to China was frequently represented as a period of prolonged uncertainty involving rejection, changing opportunities, and institutional constraints. In response, narrators described both planned and improvised strategies for managing these conditions. This theme includes Job-Seeking Pathways and Strategic Choices and Stay-or-Return Decisions and Future Orientation.

Job-Seeking Pathways and Strategic Choices

The narratives described strategies involving changes to career plans and application materials in response to perceived credential bias. These adjustments ranged from considering non-academic employment to changing how academic qualifications and publications were presented.

“I could have stayed in Korea, but felt I should come home—now I’m no longer sure.”

“After sending dozens of resumes, I started preparing for the civil service exam—at least it feels more secure.”

“Later I deleted the word ‘Korea’ from my CV and moved my first-author paper to the top... I emailed them in advance to explain my research—once they saw the work, their tone changed.”

These strategies reflect attempts to reposition institutionalized cultural capital in ways that might increase its perceived value. Such efforts were constrained by existing prestige hierarchies and required narrators to emphasize particular publications, research achievements, or career alternatives. Although these adaptations may help individuals respond to perceived disadvantage, they may also leave broader credential hierarchies unchallenged.

Stay-or-Return Decisions and Future Orientation

Some narrators reconsidered whether remaining in China was professionally and personally sustainable, weighing the possibility of returning to Korea or pursuing opportunities elsewhere. These decisions were described in relation to both employment prospects and feelings of belonging.

“If I still can’t find a job, I might really have to go back to South Korea.”

“I stayed hoping to build a life here—but now I’m not sure how long I can hold on.”

“Every morning I wake up wondering—what else can I even do?”

From a cultural capital perspective, these reflections represent a possible reorientation toward fields in which Korean qualifications and academic experience might receive greater recognition. The perceived weakening of social and symbolic capital in the domestic academic field was associated with reconsideration of career location and long-term plans. Migration was therefore portrayed not only as an employment decision but also as an attempt to identify a context in which accumulated academic capital could be more effectively converted into professional security and recognition.

Overall, the narratives suggest that uncertainty encouraged graduates to reconsider both their career strategies and geographic orientation. Rather than demonstrating a direct causal relationship, the findings show how perceived credential devaluation, emotional uncertainty, and mobility decisions were interconnected within Xiaohongshu discourse.

5. Discussion

The findings align with and extend the literature on the disadvantages reported by returnee doctoral graduates in competitive academic labor markets. Consistent with research on degree-origin hierarchies [2, 3], [7], the Xiaohongshu discourse frequently represented Korean doctoral credentials as subject to explicit or implicit reputational bias in China’s academic sphere. Similar to patterns observed in Taiwan and Canada [5, 6], institutional prestige appeared in these narratives as a form of symbolic capital associated with access to employment. The discourse also linked prolonged job-search uncertainty, performance demands, and limited professional networks with emotional strain, broadly reflecting earlier findings on international PhDs’ well-being [8, 9].

The study also extends previous research by showing how such concerns are articulated and negotiated in naturally occurring online discourse. Negative and evaluative expressions frequently co-occurred with the perceived devaluation of Korean degrees, limited recognition of KCI-indexed publications, and concerns about professional identity. These patterns suggest that emotional distress was discussed in relation to institutional evaluation systems, supervisory networks, and broader narratives of academic legitimacy. However, the cross-sectional co-occurrence data cannot establish causal direction. Perceived structural barriers may weaken professional identity, while pre-existing career uncertainty or weakened identity may also influence how individuals interpret and communicate recruitment experiences.

Methodologically, the study integrates computational text analysis with qualitative thematic interpretation of Xiaohongshu narratives. The semantic networks provided a macro-level map of recurring associations, while contextual reading clarified how these associations were expressed within individual narratives. No interview data were included, and the study should not be understood as a sequential mixed-methods design. Moreover, Xiaohongshu is not a neutral window onto the labor market. Its users self-select what to disclose, and platform conventions may favor emotionally salient, problematic, or discussion-worthy experiences. Consequently, the study cannot estimate the prevalence of degree-origin discrimination in the Chinese academic labor market. Instead, the findings illuminate how perceived degree-origin stigma is constructed and circulated within platform-specific online discourse.

The findings also refine the application of Bourdieu's framework to transnational doctoral mobility. They suggest that the recognition and convertibility of institutionalized cultural capital depend on the evaluative logic of the receiving academic field. Nevertheless, "Korean doctorates" should not be treated as a homogeneous category. Their symbolic value may vary according to university ranking, discipline, program type, language of instruction, publication profile, and the strength of academic networks. Because the available narratives did not permit systematic comparison across these internal differences, the study identifies a broader discourse of perceived devaluation rather than demonstrating that all Korean doctoral degrees possess the same conversion value.

Overall, the study offers an integrated account of how credential recognition, professional relationships, and emotional uncertainty are connected in Korean PhD-related online discourse. It corroborates patterns identified in prior research while showing how informal reputational judgments are expressed in everyday digital narratives. The findings imply that responses to degree-origin inequality should consider both formal recruitment criteria and informal evaluative cultures. At the same time, these implications should be interpreted cautiously, because the study captures platform-specific perceptions and associations rather than objective hiring outcomes or causal effects.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how Chinese scholars with Korean doctoral degrees discuss credential recognition, career barriers, and emotional uncertainty on Xiaohongshu. The findings show that Korean doctoral credentials were frequently represented as being disadvantaged by degree-origin reputations, institutional rankings, publication hierarchies, and limited academic networks. These patterns should be understood as platform-specific perceptions and constructions of degree-origin stigma rather than as evidence that all Korean-trained scholars experience the same level or form of discrimination. Nevertheless, the recurring association between perceived credential devaluation, career uncertainty, and weakened professional identity indicates that degree origin can carry important symbolic consequences within academic employment discourse.

The findings suggest that academic hiring institutions should reduce excessive dependence on simplified prestige indicators and evaluate applicants through a broader consideration of research quality, disciplinary contribution, teaching capacity, and professional experience. Transparent recruitment criteria may also help reduce the influence of informal stereotypes associated with particular countries, universities, or publication systems. Rather than automatically dismissing KCI-indexed outputs, evaluators should assess their disciplinary relevance, research quality, and contribution within the context in which they were produced.

The significance of these findings extends beyond the employment experiences discussed in the corpus. Rigid credential hierarchies may restrict intellectual diversity and weaken the potential value of transnational doctoral mobility. At the same time, the conclusions must remain bounded by the study's reliance on self-selected Xiaohongshu narratives and its inability to distinguish systematically among universities, disciplines, and program types. Future research combining online discourse with recruitment data, surveys, and interviews could determine more precisely how degree-origin evaluations operate across different segments of the Chinese academic labor market.

Acknowledgments: This work was supported by the Shaanxi Provincial Education Science “14th Five-Year Plan” Project (SGH25Y3385): “Difficulties and Optimization Paths of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education Programs in Private Universities in Shaanxi under the Background of Double First-Class Initiative.”

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The dataset consists of publicly available user-generated content retrieved from Xiaohongshu, a Chinese online knowledge-sharing platform. Due to platform policy and user privacy considerations, the raw data cannot be made publicly available.

References

- [1] K. Siler, “Gerontocracy, labor market bottlenecks, and generational crises in modern science,” *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 179–191, 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scad064>.
- [2] L. C. Chiang, “Doctoral qualifications matter in the competitive faculty job market: The perspectives of university senior administrators and their implications,” *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 50, no. 10, pp. 2120–2134, 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2522740>.
- [3] H. Li and H. Horta, “Perceived academic working conditions and career choices of Chinese PhD students,” *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 49, no. 8, pp. 1329–1345, 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2264890>.
- [4] G. C. Hsu, W. J. Lin, and S. J. Sun, “Temporal trends in academic performance and career duration of principal investigators in ecology and evolutionary biology in Taiwan,” *Scientometrics*, vol. 128, no. 6, pp. 3437–3451, 2023, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-023-04710-9>.
- [5] S. G. Craig, M. E. Ames, L. Y. Tackaberry-Giddens, and N. Racine, “From ‘it’s hell out there’ to being one of the ‘lucky ones’: The trends and tales of the Canadian psychology academic job market from 2012 to 2022,” *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie canadienne*, vol. 67, no. 3, pp. 214–227, 2026, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000426>.
- [6] R. Cowan and N. Jonard, “Rankings and job market dynamics: A model of academic science,” *Economics of Innovation and New Technology*, pp. 1–23, 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10438599.2025.2535417>.
- [7] B. Yuan, “Navigating vulnerabilities: An autoethnography of a female Chinese PhD returnee’s job-seeking journey in an age of uncertainty,” *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 253–268, 2026, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2487812>.
- [8] Q. Bai, B. H. Nam, A. S. English, R. C. Marshall, and X. Tian, “Mental health and early career adaptation challenges of Chinese returnees and Korean ambitionists among the STEAM doctoral cohorts in the post-pandemic academic job market,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, vol. 55, no. 6, pp. 1030–1050, 2025, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2024.2352831>.
- [9] C. Lawson and C. Lopes-Bento, “Miss or match? The impact of PhD training on job market satisfaction,” *Research Policy*, vol. 53, no. 3, art. no. 104945, 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2023.104945>.
- [10] M. E. Rose and S. Shekhar, “Adviser connectedness and placement outcomes in the economics job market,” *Labour Economics*, vol. 84, art. no. 102397, 2023, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2023.102397>.
- [11] A. Kondo, “Scars of the job market ‘ice-age’,” *Social Science Japan Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 133–148, 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ssjj/jyae008>.
- [12] R. Liera and A. J. Rodgers, “Reclaiming agency, navigating constraint: Experiences of PhD students of color on the academic job market at the height of COVID-19,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 309–320, 2026, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000655>.
- [13] P. Bourdieu, “The forms of capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J. G. Richardson, Ed. New York, NY, USA: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–258, 1986.
- [14] P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, R. Nice, Trans., Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990.
- [15] M. Grenfell, Ed., *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge, 2014.
- [16] P. Bourdieu and L. J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- [17] D. Reay, “‘It’s all becoming a habitus’: Beyond the habitual use of habitus in educational research,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 431–444, 2004, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569042000236934>.
- [18] A. Lareau and E. B. Weininger, “Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 32, nos. 5–6, pp. 567–606, 2003, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:RYSO.0000004951.04408.b0>.
- [19] L. W. Ku, Y. T. Liang, and H. H. Chen, “Opinion extraction, summarization and tracking in news and blog corpora,” in *Computational Approaches to Analyzing Weblogs: Papers from the 2006 AAAI Spring Symposium*, AAAI Tech. Rep. SS-06-03, pp. 100–107, 2006.

- [20] Z. Dong and Q. Dong, *HowNet and the Computation of Meaning*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2006, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1142/5935>.
- [21] H. H. Wu, A. C. R. Tsai, R. T. H. Tsai, and J. Y. J. Hsu, "Sentiment value propagation for an integral sentiment dictionary based on commonsense knowledge," in *2011 International Conference on Technologies and Applications of Artificial Intelligence*, pp. 75–81, 2011, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1109/TAAL.2011.21>.
- [22] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77–101, 2006, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- [23] F. Heimerl, S. Lohmann, S. Lange, and T. Ertl, "Word Cloud Explorer: Text analytics based on word clouds," in *2014 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, pp. 1833–1842, 2014, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2014.231>.



© 2026 The Author(s). Copyright remains with the author(s). This article is published by The Korea Contents Association under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>