

# Factors Influencing Chinese Postgraduates' Movement Intention for Employment Opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area, China

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## ABSTRACT

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Graduate students' mobility and options for careers, which are an important aspect of developing young knowledge skills, have an impact on the region's economic structure and innovation ecology. The purpose of this study is to investigate on the factors that influence Chinese postgraduates' intentions of relocating and seeking employment in the Yangtze River Delta region of China. This study takes a quantitative method, collecting data from a 446 graduates who have intention to move for employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area with a purposive sampling method. The findings show that attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy all have a significant beneficial impact on graduate students intends to pursue employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta region.

**Keywords:** Chinese postgraduate, employment opportunities, Yangtze River Delta Area

## INTRODUCTION

The employment of university graduates is a critical issue with far-reaching implications for individual development, societal progress, and economic growth. Employment offers graduates numerous benefits, including the opportunity to apply their academic knowledge in practical contexts, develop essential professional skills, and achieve financial independence (Jackson et al., 2023). Beyond individual advantages, the integration of highly educated talent into the workforce drives innovation, productivity, and broader societal development (Cook & Rani, 2024). In the context of the digital era, these benefits are further amplified, as technological advancements reshape the employment landscape and offer new opportunities for growth and innovation.

An employment destination refers to the geographic location where university graduates choose to pursue professional opportunities (Kitagawa et al., 2022). This decision is influenced by multiple factors, including economic prospects, job availability, living conditions, and personal aspirations (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021). In China, employment destinations are often concentrated in large metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, which are recognized as "first-tier cities (Yangtianzheng & Ying, 2024)." These cities are characterized by their robust economies, advanced infrastructure, and a concentration of high-demand industries such as technology, finance, and professional services (Xie et al., 2024). Alongside these traditional hubs, "new

first-tier cities" such as Chengdu, Hangzhou, Xi'an, Wuhan, and Chongqing have emerged as competitive alternatives. These cities offer a balance between professional opportunities and affordability, attracting an increasing number of graduates (Gu & Jie, 2024).

The phenomenon of domestic migrant employment is particularly significant in the context of graduate employment in China. This term refers to the relocation of individuals within national borders to seek better job opportunities (Chu & Chen, 2024). For university graduates, this often involves moving from rural or less-developed regions to urban centers with diverse job markets, advanced resources, and enhanced career prospects (Cheng et al., 2024). This trend reflects the broader socio-economic disparities between regions, where urban areas act as magnets for talent due to their concentration of resources and opportunities (Zhong & Zong, 2024).

The digital era has further transformed the dynamics of employment destination decisions. Digital platforms and remote work technologies have enabled graduates to access job markets beyond their immediate geographic locations, reducing traditional barriers (Trevisan et al., 2023). This increased flexibility allows individuals to align their career goals with a broader range of employment opportunities. However, these opportunities are accompanied by challenges, including high living costs in metropolitan areas, intense competition for desirable positions, and the urban stress associated with rapid-paced lifestyles (Tang et al., 2024). The digital divide also poses a challenge, as unequal access to digital tools can hinder some graduates' ability to take full advantage of these emerging opportunities (Bampasidou et al., 2024).

As an increasing number of graduates gravitate towards metropolitan areas, understanding the factors influencing employment destination decisions becomes essential. These decisions not only shape individual career trajectories but also have implications for regional development and workforce distribution.

In recent years, the economy of the Yangtze River Delta region has developed rapidly (Yang et al., 2024). The GDP of the Yangtze River Delta region will exceed 30 trillion RMB in 2023, reaching 30,504.5 billion RMB, accounting for 24.4% of China's GDP. In addition, the Yangtze River Delta region has 9 "cities with a GDP of trillions", accounting for more than one-third of the country's total (Zhu et al., 2023). As the global economy continues to deepen, cities' growth and economic vitality are increasingly dependent on the promotion of the new knowledge economy, which heavily depends on the introduction of knowledge-based talents. These talents mainly rely on mental labor—creating knowledge, providing innovative thinking, and utilizing information for work—and have become an important force in promoting local innovation and economic development. Studies indicate a positive correlation between the proportion of knowledge-based talents and local development, prompting governments at all levels to prioritize the attraction and retention of these high-end talents (Li et al., 2024). Lin et al. (2024) explored how population agglomeration in the Yangtze River Delta region affects economic performance. The aggregation of urban populations improves the economic efficiency of cities by better allocating talent resources. The subsequent development of the Yangtze River Delta region largely relies on these high-quality talents.

These talents possess advanced knowledge systems and innovative abilities and can provide key support for the technology, finance, high-tech industries, and other fields in the region, promoting the sustainable development of the regional economy. Furthermore, the mobility and employment choices of graduate students, an important component of young knowledge talents, directly influence the reshaping of the economic structure and innovation ecology within the region (Marchesani et al., 2022).

Therefore, various regions in the Yangtze River Delta not only need to continuously improve talent introduction policies but also optimize living and working environments to provide more attractive development platforms for high-quality talents in order to ensure the long-term competitiveness of the regional economy. To a certain extent, talent is an important support for the integration strategy of the Yangtze River Delta. Graduate

students have innovative abilities and professional skills, which can promote technological progress, industrial upgrading, and the development of high-end industries in the region. As high-quality talents, this group plays an important role in regional development. Based on the previously mentioned information, we aimed to identify the causal factors that influence Chinese postgraduates' intention to seek employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area, China, and to investigate the causal relationship model. Executives and entrepreneurs can use the results as a guide to make organizational decisions that align with the current economic and social conditions, thereby enhancing business capacity at both national and regional levels in the future.

Hence, this research aims to understand how the self-efficacy, subjective norm, perceived behavior control and attitude affect the intention for employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area.

Next, the second part is the literature review, and the third part expounds the research methods. After that, we analyzed the data. Finally, the study results are discussed and compared with previous studies, generating new knowledge and contributions, and providing strategies for different stakeholders. Finally, the research limitations and future research directions are also summarized.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposes that individual behavior is directly influenced by behavioral intention, which in turn is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (see Figure 1) (Ajzen, 1991). Intention refers to the tendency or specific degree of an individual to perform a certain behavior (Cao et al., 2021), such as "I plan to work in the YRD after graduation". Attitude is the overall positive or negative evaluation of an individual towards performing a specific behavior, reflecting their level of preference for that behavior, including psychological attribute dimensions such as liking and disliking, pleasure and unpleasantness, wisdom and foolishness, suitability and unsuitability (Dewaele et al., 2022). For example, "I think working in the Yangtze River Delta region after graduation is beneficial". Subjective norms refer to the social pressure perceived by individuals when considering whether to perform a certain behavior based on the opinions or viewpoints of people who have a significant impact on them (Van Tonder et al., 2023), such as "people who are very important to me think I should work in the Yangtze River Delta region". Perceived behavioral control is an individual's perception of the difficulty and ability to control the execution of a certain behavior (Hagger et al., 2022), for example: "For me, it's easy to work in the Yangtze River Delta region after graduation".

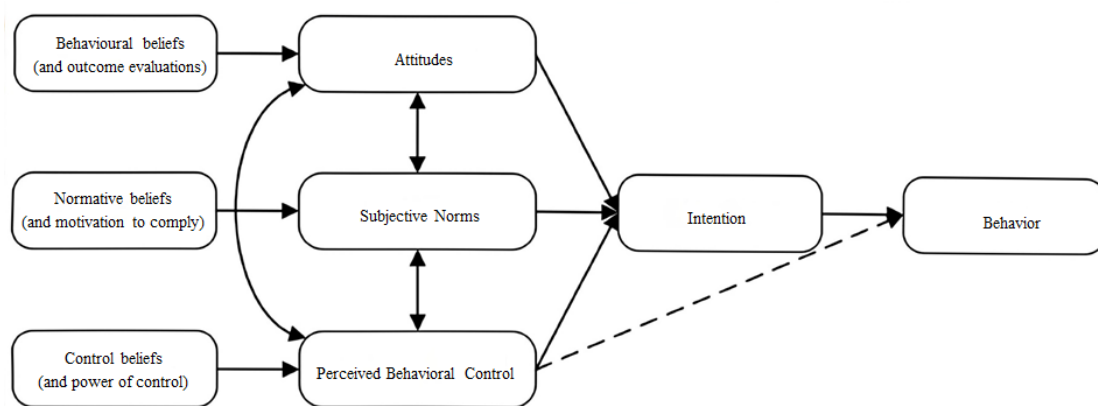


Figure 1 Theory of planned behavior Model

Source: Ajzen (1991)

According to TPB, the more positive an individual's attitude towards performing a certain behavior, the more they agree with subjective norms, and the stronger their perceived behavioral control, the stronger their behavioral intention, and thus the more likely they are to perform that specific behavior (Beck & Ajzen, 1991).

The selection of employment zones aims to achieve employment, which is a planned action and a decision made based on employment opportunities. Therefore, this article uses the theory of planned behavior to study the factors that affect graduate students' employment intentions in the Yangtze River Delta region. This not only helps predict their future career choices, but also contributes to talent aggregation in the Yangtze River Delta region.

The TPB theory suggests that the more positive an individual's attitude towards a certain behavior, the stronger their willingness to perform that behavior. In the relevant research on college students' job-seeking intentions, scholars have found that attitude has a significant positive impact on job-seeking intentions (Jadil et al., 2022; Wang & Zhao, 2023). Qian et al. (2024) analyzed the imbalance between the rapid growth of the number of Chinese graduates and the limited demand for high-quality employment positions. More than half of the graduates tend to work in the Yangtze River Delta region, and they are full of interest and expectations for employment in the region. Blanco-Moreno (2024) conducted a survey on the employment migration intention of Colombian college students, and the results showed that attitude has a positive impact on the cross-regional employment migration intention of college students. Lv et al. (2024) conducted a survey on 1151 college graduates in China using the theory of planned behavior to start businesses in their hometowns. The study found that respondents' attitudes towards entrepreneurship in their hometowns had a positive impact on their intention to start businesses in their hometowns.

The Research Growth Triangle Region experiences the influence of subjective norms on employment intentions. With the application of planned behavior theory in empirical research, scholars have found that subjective norms have a significant impact on employment intentions. Subjective norms refer to the influence of opinions or social pressures from close or important others (such as parents, friends, mentors, etc.) on individuals when making decisions. In the process of employment decision-making, the social environment and cultural background of graduate students have a significant impact on their employment intentions. Sampene et al. (2023) used the theory of planned behavior to look into college students' plans to become entrepreneurs. The results showed that perceived social norms (i.e., what other people expect from them when they act like entrepreneurs) had a big effect on students' plans to become entrepreneurs. This shows how important subjective norms are in shaping plans to work or start a business. Additionally, Jin et al. (2022) found that subjective norms significantly influence college students' job-seeking intentions, particularly in situations where social expectations are high and the influence of subjective norms on employment decisions is more pronounced. Similarly, Wei et al. (2022) conducted a sample survey of 254 college students from impoverished families in China, and the results showed that the subjective norms of Chinese college students have a positive impact on their job-seeking behavior, supporting the predictive effect of subjective norms on employment intention under the framework of TPB.

Perceived behavioral control influences the employment intention of the growth triangle region. TPB holds that the stronger an individual's perceived behavioral control over the execution of a certain behavior, the stronger their intention to execute that specific behavior. The impact of perceived behavioral control is particularly important when it comes to graduate students' employment intentions in the Yangtze River Delta region. Perceived behavioral control refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to overcome potential obstacles and successfully complete a certain behavior. Lu et al. (2021) used 13,954 fresh college graduates from Chinese higher education institutions as a sample, and the results showed that perceived behavioral control is a key factor affecting students' entrepreneurial intentions, which helps to demonstrate the importance of perceived behavioral control in employment and entrepreneurship intentions. In addition, Zaremohzzabieh et al. (2022) applied the theory of planned behavior to analyze the factors influencing whether 488 Malaysian graduates pursue agricultural careers. The results showed that perceived behavioral control factors predicted students' willingness to join agricultural-related professions.

Self-efficacy plays an important predictive role in the employment intentions of graduate students in the Yangtze River Delta region. A higher sense of self-efficacy often gives individuals more confidence in their professional abilities and future development, thereby forming a positive attitude toward employment. According to the attitude-behavior model, self-efficacy indirectly affects an individual's employment intention by influencing their attitude toward employment. Specifically, graduate students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to hold an optimistic attitude toward their employment prospects, believing that they are capable of pursuing their desired careers and thus generating positive employment intentions. Petruzzello et al. (2021) conducted a survey on graduates from an Italian university and found that job-seeking self-efficacy can significantly affect the intensity and type of job-seeking behavior. Graduates with higher self-efficacy are more likely to enhance their confidence and success rate in the job-seeking process. Higher self-efficacy has a positive impact on graduates' employment intentions through behavioral attitudes (Jin et al., 2022).

hence, we posit

H1: Self-efficacy has a positive influence on attitude.

The results indicate that self-efficacy significantly impacts attitude, with a standardized path coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of 0.502, an unstandardized coefficient of 0.909, and a critical ratio (C.R.) of 8.309 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This supports the hypothesis that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to form positive attitudes.

H2: Attitude has a positive influence on behavioral intention.

Attitude positively affects behavioral intention, as demonstrated by a standardized path coefficient of 0.425, an unstandardized coefficient of 0.533, and a critical ratio of 7.592 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that favorable attitudes towards a behavior significantly enhance the intention to perform it.

H3: Subjective norm has a positive influence on behavioral intention.

The findings show that subjective norm contributes positively to behavioral intention, with a standardized path coefficient of 0.286, an unstandardized coefficient of 0.402, and a critical ratio of 5.164 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This highlights the role of social expectations in shaping an individual's intentions.

H4: Perceived behavioral control has a positive influence on behavioral intention.

Perceived behavioral control significantly influences behavioral intention, as evidenced by a standardized path coefficient of 0.271, an unstandardized coefficient of 0.379, and a critical ratio of 5.034 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This indicates that greater perceived control over behavior enhances the likelihood of intention formation.

H5: Self-efficacy has a positive influence on behavioral intention.

Although the effect is relatively weaker, self-efficacy positively affects behavioral intention, with a standardized path coefficient of 0.142, an unstandardized coefficient of 0.323, and a critical ratio of 2.783 ( $p = 0.005$ ). This supports the hypothesis that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more inclined to form behavioral intentions.

These hypotheses collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors influencing behavioral intention, emphasizing the significant roles of self-efficacy, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a survey-based approach, gathering data through questionnaires and applying structural equation modeling to construct the proposed model.

**Questionnaire Design:** This study adopts Ajzen's "Constructing a Questionnaire for Planned Behavior Theory" to better understand important beliefs and identify specific problems using other variables (Ajzen, 2006). Based on the interviews, we created a preliminary survey questionnaire for this study. The first portion of the form asks about age, gender, education, and whether they are only children. Part 2 surveys students' employment intentions, including attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, etc. Use a 7-point Likert scale. Employment migration intention is measured in the third segment using a 7-point Likert scale for four variables include attitude

and migration intention.

The fourth element of self-efficacy testing uses a mature 10-question scale with a 4-point Likert scale and no neutral options to improve accuracy. The target population of this study is Chinese graduate students, including master's and doctoral students. The determination of sample size is based on suggestions from scholars, and the ratio of questionnaire items to sample size is 1:10. We set the sample size at 480 because the questionnaire contains 48 questions. This study employed quota sampling to distribute samples based on statistical proportions, taking into account the regional distribution of Chinese graduate students across the eastern, central, western, and northeastern regions. The final sample allocation for each region is 240 in the eastern region, 85 in the central region, 101 in the western region, and 54 in the northeast. An online questionnaire platform will collect data during the one-month formal investigation. After collecting 480 questionnaires and removing invalid ones, we obtained 446 valid samples, yielding an effective rate of 92.9%. This sample has excellent representativeness and covers multidimensional features such as gender, education, major, etc. According to the Cronbach's alpha coefficient test, the questions' reliability values were more significant than 0.7, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability. All CITC values exceed 0.5, indicating compliance with the research requirements of the measurement project. Table 1 provides the detailed information.

Table 1. Reliability analysis

| Variable             | Item | Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----------------------|------|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Behavioral Beliefs   | BB1  | 0.914                            | 0.929            |
|                      | BB2  | 0.905                            |                  |
|                      | BB3  | 0.905                            |                  |
|                      | BB4  | 0.918                            |                  |
|                      | BB5  | 0.924                            |                  |
| Outcome Evaluations  | OE1  | 0.896                            | 0.913            |
|                      | OE2  | 0.89                             |                  |
|                      | OE3  | 0.892                            |                  |
|                      | OE4  | 0.904                            |                  |
|                      | OE5  | 0.885                            |                  |
| Normative Beliefs    | NB1  | 0.861                            | 0.889            |
|                      | NB2  | 0.85                             |                  |
|                      | NB3  | 0.841                            |                  |
|                      | NB4  | 0.878                            |                  |
| Motivation to Comply | MTC1 | 0.868                            | 0.894            |
|                      | MTC2 | 0.87                             |                  |
|                      | MTC3 | 0.846                            |                  |
|                      | MTC4 | 0.868                            |                  |
| Control Beliefs      | CB1  | 0.806                            | 0.866            |
|                      | CB2  | 0.836                            |                  |
|                      | CB3  | 0.821                            |                  |
|                      | CB4  | 0.851                            |                  |
| Power of Control     | PC1  | 0.773                            | 0.858            |
|                      | PC2  | 0.814                            |                  |
|                      | PC3  | 0.843                            |                  |
|                      | PC4  | 0.842                            |                  |

|               |      |       |       |
|---------------|------|-------|-------|
| Self-efficacy | SE1  | 0.926 | 0.931 |
|               | SE2  | 0.919 |       |
|               | SE3  | 0.925 |       |
|               | SE4  | 0.924 |       |
|               | SE5  | 0.923 |       |
|               | SE6  | 0.926 |       |
|               | SE7  | 0.924 |       |
|               | SE8  | 0.925 |       |
|               | SE9  | 0.925 |       |
|               | SE10 | 0.924 |       |
| Intention     | INT1 | 0.872 | 0.921 |
|               | INT2 | 0.901 |       |
|               | INT3 | 0.885 |       |

The theoretical framework highlights the multidimensional composition of constructs influencing behavioral intention, particularly regarding university graduates' employment decisions in the Yangtze River Delta (YRD). Perceived Behavioral Control consists of two critical dimensions: Control Beliefs and Power of Control (Hagger et al., 2022). Control beliefs represent individuals' perceptions of the availability of resources or barriers that may facilitate or impede their ability to perform a given behavior (Yadav et al., 2022). This dimension, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.866, demonstrates strong internal consistency. Similarly, power of control reflects individuals' perceived ease or difficulty in executing the behavior under various conditions, with high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.858). Together, these dimensions emphasize the role of perceived agency in shaping behavioral intention.

Subjective Norm is a construct that captures the influence of social expectations and consists of Normative Beliefs and Motivation to Comply (Obrenovic et al., 2022). Normative beliefs assess the extent to which significant others, such as peers or family, influence individuals' decision-making processes (Yu et al., 2021), with a reliability score of 0.889. Motivation to comply measures the degree to which individuals are willing to align their behavior with these perceived social expectations, exhibiting strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.894). These two dimensions underscore the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping employment-related decisions.

Attitude toward employment opportunities is determined by Behavioral Beliefs and Outcome Evaluations. Behavioral beliefs reflect individuals' perceptions of the potential outcomes of a behavior, while outcome evaluations assess the value assigned to these outcomes (Moon, 2021). Behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations demonstrate high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.929 and 0.913, respectively. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of how positive or negative evaluations of employment opportunities influence intention.

Self-Efficacy represents individuals' confidence in their ability to execute specific actions successfully (Capron Puozzo & Audrin, 2021). Measured with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.931, self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in shaping other constructs, such as attitude and perceived behavioral control, further influencing behavioral intention.

Finally, Behavioral Intention reflects the strength of individuals' motivation to engage in specific behaviors, such as seeking employment opportunities in the YRD (Nghah et al., 2024). This construct, measured through three items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.921, integrates the influences of perceived behavioral control, subjective norm, attitude, and self-efficacy, serving as the ultimate outcome variable in the model.

This framework illustrates the interdependence of these constructs, where each higher-order variable is composed of robust dimensions that collectively shape behavioral intention. The multidimensional perspective emphasizes the interplay between individual perceptions, social influences, and contextual factors, providing a



holistic understanding of employment decision-making among university graduates.

## RESULTS

Table 2 reveals a highly educated cohort, with the majority of respondents holding master's degrees (86.5%) and a smaller proportion possessing doctoral degrees (13.5%). This reflects a sample primarily comprising individuals with advanced academic qualifications. Gender distribution shows a higher representation of females (67.5%) compared to males (32.5%), which may influence interpretations of gender-specific trends in employment decisions. In terms of age, respondents are predominantly aged 25–29 years (60.1%), followed by 30–34 years (21.1%), while older age groups account for smaller proportions. This age distribution suggests a younger demographic, likely at the early stages of their professional careers.

Geographic and institutional characteristics further illustrate the respondents' profiles. Nearly half of the participants graduated from institutions in the Eastern Region (49.6%), with smaller representations from the Central (17.5%), Western (21.5%), and Northeast Regions (11.4%). This concentration in the Eastern Region may reflect its economic and educational advantages. Regarding the type of specialty, arts and humanities dominate (42.2%), followed by life sciences and medicine (22.2%), with lower representation from engineering and technology (13.5%), natural sciences (10.5%), and social sciences and management (11.7%). School-level data shows a diverse distribution, with graduates from regular universities (33.2%) forming the largest group, followed by 211 institutions (30.9%), 985 colleges and universities (24.4%), and a smaller proportion from “double first-class” institutions (8.5%). This diversity highlights varying educational backgrounds and potential disparities in employment opportunities.

The respondents' home locations are relatively balanced, with significant proportions from prefecture-level cities (30.9%), provincial capitals/municipalities (26.3%), county-level cities (24.2%), and towns or villages (18.6%). This distribution underscores the representation of individuals from both urban and rural settings, which may shape their employment preferences and mobility. Additionally, the majority of respondents are not only children (57.6%), with 42.4% reporting being the sole child in their families, a factor potentially influencing family-related considerations in career decisions. These findings collectively provide a comprehensive overview of the demographic and educational characteristics that may impact the respondents' employment trajectories.

Table 2. Description and Analysis of Basic Information

|                                  | Category            | n   | %    |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-----|------|
| Education                        | Master's degree     | 386 | 86.5 |
|                                  | Doctoral degree     | 60  | 13.5 |
| Gender                           | Male                | 145 | 32.5 |
|                                  | Female              | 301 | 67.5 |
| Age                              | 25-29 years old     | 268 | 60.1 |
|                                  | Ages 30-34          | 94  | 21.1 |
|                                  | Ages 35-39          | 37  | 8.3  |
|                                  | Age 40-44           | 28  | 6.2  |
|                                  | ≥45 years old       | 19  | 4.3  |
| Where you graduated from College | Eastern Region      | 221 | 49.6 |
|                                  | Central Region      | 78  | 17.5 |
|                                  | Western Region      | 96  | 21.5 |
|                                  | Northeast Region    | 51  | 11.4 |
| Type of Specialty                | Arts and humanities | 188 | 42.2 |



|                     | Category                             | n   | %    |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|-----|------|
| School level        | Engineering and Technology           | 60  | 13.5 |
|                     | Life Sciences and Medicine           | 99  | 22.2 |
|                     | Natural Sciences                     | 47  | 10.5 |
|                     | Social Science and Management        | 52  | 11.7 |
|                     | 985 colleges and universities        | 109 | 24.4 |
|                     | 211 Institutions                     | 138 | 30.9 |
|                     | "Double first-class" institutions    | 38  | 8.5  |
|                     | Regular colleges and universities    | 148 | 33.2 |
|                     | Other                                | 13  | 2.9  |
|                     |                                      |     |      |
| Home location       | Provincial capital city/municipality | 117 | 26.3 |
|                     | Prefecture-level cities              | 138 | 30.9 |
|                     | County-level city                    | 108 | 24.2 |
|                     | Towns and Villages                   | 83  | 18.6 |
| Being an only child | Yes                                  | 189 | 42.4 |
|                     | No                                   | 257 | 57.6 |

The analysis of the causal relationship model of the factors influencing Chinese postgraduates' movement intention for employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area, China, showed strong alignment with the empirical data of overall model fit and component fit (see Figure 2). The author evaluated the developed structural equation model analysis (SEM) model and investigated assumptions to ensure its accuracy. The model's fit was indicated as follows:  $\chi^2 = 280.705$ ,  $df = 144$ ,  $P < 0.05$ , CFI = 0.972, GFI = 0.938, AGFI = 0.918, TLI = 0.967, RMR = 0.055, and RMSEA = 0.046.

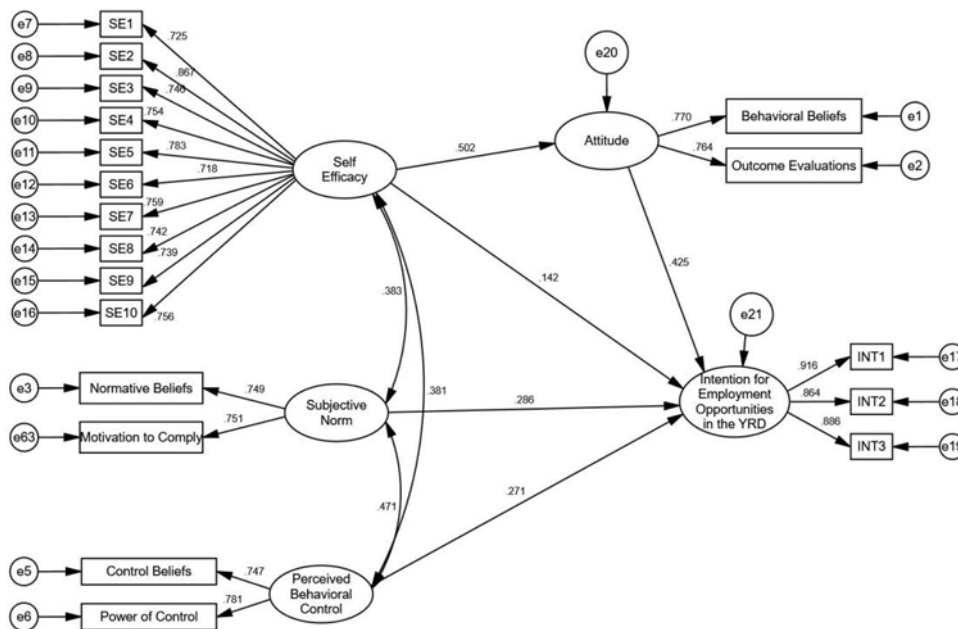


Figure 2 The causal relationship model of the factors influencing Chinese postgraduates' movement intention for employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta Area, China

In structural equation modeling, the path coefficient measures the strength of relationships between variables. It reflects the degree of direct influence that an independent variable has on a dependent variable, illustrating both the size and direction of their linear association. The value of the path coefficient—whether positive or negative—can reveal if there is a positive or negative correlation between the variables and indicate how strong that relationship is. Typically, we estimate this coefficient by fitting a structural equation model. Table 3 presents the standardized path coefficients and significance levels for these coefficients.

Table 3 Path coefficient

| Hypothesis | Path                                     | $\beta$ | Unstandardized Coefficient | S.E.  | C.R.  | P     | result    |
|------------|--|---------|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|
| H1         | Attitude → Self-Efficacy                 | 0.502   | 0.909                      | 0.109 | 8.309 | ***   | Supported |
| H2         | Intention → Attitude                     | 0.425   | 0.533                      | 0.072 | 7.592 | ***   | Supported |
| H3         | Intention → Subjective Norm              | 0.286   | 0.402                      | 0.078 | 5.164 | ***   | Supported |
| H4         | Intention → Perceived Behavioral Control | 0.271   | 0.379                      | 0.075 | 5.034 | ***   | Supported |
| H5         | Intention → Self-Efficacy                | 0.142   | 0.323                      | 0.116 | 2.783 | 0.005 | Supported |

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We analyze the path of self-efficacy, subjective norm, perceived behavior control and attitude towards the intention for employment. The analysis indicates that attitude exerts the strongest influence on behavioral intention, with a path coefficient of 0.425. This is followed by subjective norm, which demonstrates a moderate impact on behavioral intention with a coefficient of 0.286. Perceived behavioral control also contributes significantly to behavioral intention, with a coefficient of 0.271. Self-efficacy, while still positively associated with behavioral intention, exhibits the weakest effect among these predictors, with a path coefficient of 0.142. These findings highlight the varying degrees of influence that psychological and social factors exert on the formation of behavioral intention. The results indicate that attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy have a significant positive impact on the employment opportunity movement intentions of graduate students in the Yangtze River Delta region. The order of influence from high to low is attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy. This indicates that graduate students attach significant importance to immigration attitudes when deciding whether to immigrate to work in the Yangtze River Delta region.

Yue et al. (2024) found that the younger generation in China is more concerned about their personal happiness and career opportunities, and Chinese graduate students value their attitudes more in career decision-making and immigration. During the process of employment migration, graduate students also attach considerable importance to the opinions and suggestions of others. Furthermore, analyzing from the perspective of subjective norms, we find that students are more likely to adopt the opinions and suggestions of their friends, teachers, parents, and classmates.

The findings of this study provide meaningful extensions to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by offering insights into the roles of attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy in shaping graduate students' employment migration intentions in the Yangtze River Delta. The results confirm that attitude exerts the most significant influence on behavioral intention ( $\beta = 0.425$ ), emphasizing the importance of individual

evaluations of employment opportunities. This aligns with prior research by Yue et al. (2024), which indicated that Chinese graduate students prioritize personal happiness and career opportunities in their decision-making. However, this study advances the understanding of TPB by demonstrating that attitude holds a dominant position among the constructs, underscoring its critical role in the context of employment migration.

The study also highlights the notable role of subjective norms ( $\beta = 0.286$ ), revealing that the opinions and suggestions of peers, teachers, parents, and classmates significantly shape graduate students' decisions. This finding supports earlier qualitative observations by Yue et al. (2024) but adds a quantitative dimension by measuring the degree of influence that subjective norms exert. In doing so, the study enriches the TPB framework by emphasizing the stronger impact of social influences in collectivist societies like China, where conformity to societal expectations often plays a significant role in shaping behaviors.

Perceived behavioral control, though less influential than attitude and subjective norms ( $\beta = 0.271$ ), remains a critical determinant of behavioral intention. By emphasizing the dual dimensions of control beliefs and power of control, the findings provide a deeper understanding of how internal perceptions of ability and external availability of resources combine to influence intentions. This nuanced perspective extends the TPB by highlighting the interplay between internal and external factors in employment decision-making.

Finally, while self-efficacy has the weakest direct effect on behavioral intention ( $\beta = 0.142$ ), its role cannot be overlooked. It indirectly reinforces attitude and perceived behavioral control, suggesting that confidence in one's ability is a foundational element of decision-making processes. This insight offers an important contribution to the TPB by integrating self-efficacy as a complementary factor that interacts with other constructs to shape intentions.

Overall, this study enhances the TPB by contextualizing its application to the employment migration decisions of Chinese graduate students. The findings underscore the dominant role of attitude while highlighting the culturally specific importance of subjective norms in a collectivist society. Additionally, the multidimensional approach to perceived behavioral control and the inclusion of self-efficacy provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms driving behavioral intention. These contributions offer valuable implications for refining the TPB and applying it to diverse cultural and behavioral contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the factors influencing Chinese postgraduate students' intentions to pursue employment opportunities in the Yangtze River Delta (YRD), applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as its theoretical foundation. The findings revealed that attitude exerts the strongest influence on employment intentions, followed by subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and self-efficacy. These results underscore the importance of personal evaluations, social influences, perceived control, and confidence in shaping employment migration decisions. By contextualizing the TPB in the specific cultural and economic environment of China, this study provides valuable insights into the psychological and social mechanisms driving graduate students' employment intentions.

This research makes several contributions to the literature. First, it extends the TPB by emphasizing the dominant role of attitude in the employment migration context, providing empirical evidence for its pivotal influence. Second, it highlights the cultural significance of subjective norms, showcasing the heightened role of social expectations in collectivist societies such as China. Third, the study incorporates self-efficacy into the framework, demonstrating its indirect but critical impact on shaping other TPB constructs, including attitude and perceived behavioral control. These contributions refine the TPB and offer practical implications for policymakers and employers seeking to attract and retain talent in economically dynamic regions like the YRD.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The use of purposive sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design precludes the

exploration of changes in employment intentions over time. The study's exclusive focus on Chinese graduate students limits the applicability of its conclusions to other cultural or regional contexts. Additionally, while the TPB serves as a robust framework, the inclusion of additional variables, such as institutional or environmental factors, could enhance the explanatory power of the model.

Future studies should address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs to examine how employment intentions evolve over time. Expanding the scope to include graduate students from other regions or countries would facilitate cross-cultural comparisons and provide broader insights into employment migration. Furthermore, integrating variables such as economic conditions, organizational incentives, and regional policies into the TPB framework could offer a more comprehensive understanding of employment decision-making. Finally, qualitative approaches, including interviews or focus groups, could complement quantitative methods, providing deeper insights into the lived experiences and motivations of graduate students in their employment choices.

These future research directions aim to build upon the findings of this study, advancing theoretical and practical knowledge of employment migration and decision-making in the context of regional economic development and talent mobility.

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