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Grassroots Employment Intentions Among Foreign Language Graduates in the AI Era: An Empirical Study of 110 Employment-Bound Students at a Local Chinese University

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ABSTRACT: *Generative AI tools have added to the employment pressure facing foreign language (FL) graduates in China, and government-run grassroots employment programs are increasingly presented to students as an alternative career path. This paper reports findings from a survey of 110 final-year FL students at a local university in western China who were actively seeking employment rather than planning further study. A 28-item Job-Seeking Confusion Scale covering six difficulty dimensions was used. Only 10.9% of respondents said they intended to take part in grassroots programs. The highest-rated difficulties were job-seeking skill deficits ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.71$), lack of external support ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.63$), and employment-related psychological pressure ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.83$). Independent-samples t-tests showed no significant differences on any difficulty dimension between students who held grassroots intentions and those who did not (all $p > .24$). Chi-square tests likewise found no association between grassroots intentions and gender, major, class cohort, or internship experience. Binary logistic regression produced no significant predictors; with an events-per-variable ratio of 2.0, results are treated as exploratory, and a robustness check using an alternative outcome variable pointed in the same direction. Open-ended responses pointed to low awareness of relevant policies and poor access to program information as the main obstacles. Taken together, the data do not support the idea that grassroots employment functions mainly as a refuge for students who find job-hunting stressful. Among this sample, choosing grassroots work looks more like a proactive choice shaped by factors not captured here, such as service orientation and policy knowledge. The paper ends with suggestions for how local universities might target their career guidance accordingly.*
KEY WORDS: *grassroots employment; foreign language graduates; AI era; job-seeking difficulties; local university; career intentions*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Large language models and machine translation systems have visibly changed the market for language work in China (Jiang & Li, 2026). After two decades of rapid expansion, foreign language (FL) programs now graduate many more students than the traditional translation, interpreting, and foreign-trade sectors can absorb. Ministry of Education figures put the 2023 employment rate for FL majors at 76.8%, 5.6 percentage points below the all-major average, placing FL graduates among the most exposed groups in the current graduate labor market (Wang, 2026).

Against this background, national grassroots employment schemes—the Western Development Program, Three Supports and One Assistance, and the Special Post Teacher Scheme, among others—have been promoted as a way both to ease urban graduate unemployment and to staff schools, clinics, and village administrations in poorer regions. Participants are offered concrete incentives: bonus points on civil-service and graduate-school entrance exams, partial tuition reimbursement, and a salaried placement during the service period. These programs have existed since the early 2000s, yet FL majors participate at markedly lower rates than students in education, agriculture, or medicine. Why this is so remains poorly understood.

Two bodies of literature are relevant here. One strand documents the psychological effects of AI-related labor-market disruption on FL students, notably employment anxiety and difficulties settling on a career direction (Wang, 2026). The other examines who chooses grassroots work in the general graduate population; male students, those from rural households, and those with weaker academic credentials are consistently over-represented (Jiang & Li, 2026). What is missing is work that focuses specifically on employment-bound FL

students at non-elite local universities—a group that faces both AI-driven displacement of entry-level language jobs and the structural disadvantages of attending a less prestigious institution. In particular, it is still an open question whether grassroots programs are perceived primarily as a fallback for students who struggle to find urban jobs, or as a positive career choice in their own right.

This paper takes up that question using data from 110 final-year FL students at a local university in Panzhihua, Sichuan. Four questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How widely are grassroots employment intentions held among employment-bound FL graduates?

RQ2: Which job-seeking difficulties do these students report most strongly?

RQ3: Do students who report grassroots intentions differ from those who do not in terms of perceived job-seeking difficulties?

RQ4: Do perceived difficulties or demographic characteristics predict grassroots intentions?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Grassroots Employment in China: Push-Pull Dynamics

China's grassroots employment programs, launched in the early 2000s, direct university graduates toward rural and community-level positions. Two decades of research on who takes up these posts have produced a fairly consistent profile. Meta-analytic work indicates that students willing to work at the grassroots tend to come from lower-income families, hold weaker academic credentials, and feel more pressure in the urban labor market (Jiang & Li, 2026). Men, students with rural hukou, and those in education, agriculture, or medicine participate at higher rates.

The push-pull framework, originally developed to account for migration decisions, is the lens most often applied to these choices. “Push” factors are features of urban employment that drive graduates away: competition, living costs, the erosion of entry-level language jobs by AI, and limited social mobility for graduates of non-elite institutions. “Pull” factors are features of grassroots posts that attract applicants: preferential policy treatment, the chance to contribute to one's hometown, a stable income in a tight labor market, and alignment with prosocial values. Most of the existing literature implicitly treats grassroots employment as a push phenomenon—that is, as something students fall back on when urban job prospects look poor. That assumption has not, to our knowledge, been tested directly among FL majors.

2.2 FL Graduates' Employment Challenges in the AI Era

FL graduates face a structural problem that recent AI advances have sharpened. Unlike engineering or medicine, language study has long been criticized for lacking a clear professional jurisdiction, and neural machine translation has cut into demand for entry-level translation and interpreting work (Wang, 2026). In a survey by Jiang and Li (2026), 68% of English majors said they saw AI tools as threatening their employment prospects.

Students at local universities carry additional disadvantages relative to peers at elite institutions: thinner access to high-quality internships, weaker alumni networks in desirable industries, and a sense of lower competitiveness in the urban job market. In light of these two pressures—technological displacement and institutional position—one might expect grassroots programs to appeal particularly strongly to this group. Yet FL majors also face a specific barrier to grassroots participation: most grassroots positions are in rural education, agricultural extension, and community governance, fields where foreign-language skills can seem irrelevant. That perceived skill mismatch may itself deter applications.

2.3 Stress, Coping, and Career Decision-Making

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping offers a way to think about how job-seeking difficulties might relate to grassroots intentions. The theory distinguishes two broad modes of coping. Problem-focused coping addresses the source of stress directly—for example, by improving job-search skills or seeking out alternative paths. Emotion-focused coping regulates the feeling without altering the problem—through avoidance, denial, or distraction.

Seen through this lens, choosing grassroots employment could be read either way. It could reflect problem-focused coping: a deliberate decision to pursue a viable alternative when urban job prospects are uncertain. Or it could reflect emotion-focused coping: an effort to escape the stress of urban job-seeking rather than engage with it. These two readings produce opposite predictions. The avoidance reading predicts that students reporting greater job-seeking difficulties and higher employment anxiety will also report stronger grassroots intentions. The proactive-choice reading predicts no such relationship, because grassroots participation would be driven by other forces—prosocial motivation, family ties to rural areas, or specific knowledge of program benefits. The present study is designed to test these competing accounts.

III. METHOD

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants were 110 final-year FL students (English, Translation, and Business English majors) at a local public university in Panzhihua, Sichuan. Data were collected in October 2024, roughly eight months before graduation. The questionnaire was distributed online through class advisors, and informed consent was obtained before students began the survey. Students who intended to pursue postgraduate study or sit for the civil-service exam were excluded, as they were not actively seeking immediate employment on graduation. The final sample comprised 12 students (10.9%) who reported explicit intentions to take part in grassroots programs and 98 students (89.1%) who did not. Demographic breakdowns are given in Table 1.

3.2 Measures

Job-seeking difficulties. We developed a 28-item Job-Seeking Confusion Scale for this study, organized into six theoretically grounded dimensions: (1) career decision confusion (5 items; e.g., "I am not sure what kind of job is suitable for me"); (2) job-seeking skill difficulties (5 items; e.g., "I lack interview skills"); (3) information acquisition difficulties (4 items; e.g., "I cannot get sufficient recruitment information"); (4) employment psychological pressure (6 items; e.g., "I feel anxious about job hunting"); (5) AI-era professional anxiety (4 items; e.g., "AI translation tools threaten my employment prospects"); and (6) lack of external support (4 items; e.g., "My school provides insufficient employment guidance"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The full scale reached Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$, and every dimension cleared .78. A principal-axis exploratory factor analysis with promax rotation produced a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic of .895, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 2057.9$, $df = 378$, $p < .001$), indicating adequate sampling and construct structure.

Grassroots employment intention. Following previous work, we constructed a binary indicator coded 1 if participants either (a) selected "preparing for grassroots employment programs" as their graduation destination, or (b) chose any of the three major programs (Western Development, Three Supports and One Assistance, Special Post Teacher) as a preferred employment direction in a multiple-response item. Those meeting neither criterion were coded 0.

Demographic and control variables. Participants reported gender, major, class cohort, internship experience (yes/no), expected starting salary, stage of job-search preparation (from "not started" to "already signed"), and daily time spent on job-search activities.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Analyses were carried out in SPSS 26.0. Harman's single-factor test was run first to check for common method bias; the first unrotated factor accounted for 24.3% of total variance, below the 40% threshold typically treated as a warning sign. Descriptive statistics were then computed for all variables. Independent-samples t-tests compared the six difficulty dimensions between the grassroots-intention and no-intention groups, with Cohen's d used to index effect size. Chi-square tests examined associations between grassroots intentions and categorical demographic variables, with Cramér's V reported as effect size. Binary logistic regression was planned to identify predictors of grassroots intentions, but univariate screening showed no variable meeting the prespecified entry threshold of $p < .20$, and the events-per-variable (EPV) ratio was extremely low (EPV = 2.0, with 12 events and 6 candidate predictors), well short of the minimum EPV of 10 recommended for stable logistic estimates. Regression results are therefore reported as exploratory and not interpreted substantively. A robustness check using "expressed need for grassroots program information sessions" as an alternative dependent variable (n = 31 events, EPV = 5.2) was conducted to increase event count and check whether the pattern held under a different operationalization. Open-ended responses were coded thematically to supplement the quantitative findings.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Distribution of Grassroots Employment Intentions

As Table 1 shows, only 12 of 110 participants (10.9%) reported explicit grassroots employment intentions, compared with 98 (89.1%) who did not. This figure is substantially below the 20–30% participation rates typically reported for education, agriculture, and medicine majors in earlier studies.

Table I. **Distribution of Grassroots Employment Intentions (N = 110)**

Category	N	%
With explicit grassroots intention	12	10.9
Without grassroots intention	98	89.1
Total	110	100.0

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Job-Seeking Difficulties

Means, standard deviations, and ranks for the six difficulty dimensions are reported in Table 2. The highest-rated difficulties were job-seeking skill deficits (M = 3.50), lack of external support (M = 3.48), and employment psychological pressure (M = 3.37). Career decision confusion scored lowest (M = 2.83). With the exception of career decision confusion, all dimensions exceeded the scale midpoint of 3.0, indicating that job-seeking FL students in this sample generally felt their difficulties to be non-trivial.

Table II. **Descriptive Statistics of Job-Seeking Difficulty Dimensions**

Dimension	M	SD	Rank
Job-seeking skill difficulties	3.50	0.71	1
Lack of external support	3.48	0.63	2
Employment psychological pressure	3.37	0.83	3
AI-era professional anxiety	3.35	0.76	4
Information acquisition difficulties	3.32	0.69	5
Career decision confusion	2.83	0.73	6

4.3 Group Differences in Job-Seeking Difficulties

Independent-samples t-tests compared the two groups on each difficulty dimension. As Table 3 indicates, no dimension showed a statistically significant difference (all $p > .24$). The largest gap appeared on lack of external support, where the grassroots-intention group scored slightly higher (M = 3.67 vs. M = 3.46), but this did not reach significance ($t = 1.22$, $p = .241$, Cohen's $d = 0.32$, a small effect by conventional standards). Effect sizes for the other five dimensions were negligible (Cohen's $d < 0.20$). The data thus provide no support for the hypothesis that students who report stronger job-seeking difficulties are more likely to express grassroots intentions.

Table III. **Independent Samples t-Tests Comparing Difficulty Dimensions by Grassroots Intention**

Dimension	Intention (n=12) M ± SD	No Intention (n=98) M ± SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Career decision confusion	2.85 ± 0.76	2.83 ± 0.73	0.09	.928	0.03
Job-seeking skill difficulties	3.47 ± 0.62	3.50 ± 0.72	-0.16	.873	0.04
Information acquisition difficulties	3.31 ± 0.63	3.32 ± 0.70	-0.02	.985	0.01
Employment psychological pressure	3.38 ± 0.60	3.37 ± 0.86	0.03	.976	0.01
AI-era professional anxiety	3.46 ± 0.64	3.34 ± 0.77	0.60	.561	0.16
Lack of external support	3.67 ± 0.54	3.46 ± 0.64	1.22	.241	0.32

Note. All t-tests used Welch's degrees-of-freedom adjustment where Levene's test indicated unequal variances.

4.4 Chi-Square Tests for Demographic Associations

Chi-square tests examined whether grassroots intentions were associated with gender, major, class cohort, or internship experience. As Table 4 shows, none of these associations reached significance: gender ($\chi^2 = 0.20$, $df = 1$, $p = .658$, Cramér's V = 0.04), major ($\chi^2 = 1.91$, $df = 2$, $p = .385$, Cramér's V = 0.13), class cohort ($\chi^2 = 2.64$, $df = 3$, $p = .450$, Cramér's V = 0.16), or internship experience ($\chi^2 = 0.01$, $df = 1$, $p = 1.000$, Cramér's V = 0.00). Effect sizes were uniformly negligible to small, suggesting that demographic characteristics bore little relation to grassroots intentions in this sample.

Table IV. **Chi-Square Tests for Associations Between Grassroots Intentions and Demographic Variables**

Variable Pair	χ^2	df	p	Cramér's V
Intention × Gender	0.20	1	.658	0.04
Intention × Major	1.91	2	.385	0.13
Intention × Class cohort	2.64	3	.450	0.16
Intention × Internship experience	0.01	1	1.000	0.00

4.5 Exploratory Binary Logistic Regression

Univariate logistic regressions were run to screen predictors for entry into a multivariate model. None of the six difficulty dimensions or demographic variables met the prespecified $p < .20$ threshold, so no multivariate model was fitted. The EPV of 2.0 lies far below the recommended floor of 10, meaning that any

multivariate estimates would be statistically unstable. Results are shown in Table 5 for transparency but are not interpreted further.

Table V. **Exploratory Binary Logistic Regression Results**

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	p	OR	95% CI
Career decision confusion	—	—	—	> .20	—	—
Job-seeking skill difficulties	—	—	—	> .20	—	—
Information acquisition difficulties	—	—	—	> .20	—	—
Employment psychological pressure	—	—	—	> .20	—	—
AI-era professional anxiety	—	—	—	> .20	—	—
Lack of external support	—	—	—	> .20	—	—

Note. No variable met the prespecified p < .20 entry criterion. EPV = 2.0 (12 events / 6 predictors), well below the recommended threshold of 10. Results are presented for transparency and should not be read as evidence of no effect.

4.6 Robustness Check

To address the low event count for the primary dependent variable, we reran the analysis using "expressed need for grassroots program information sessions" as an alternative binary outcome (n = 31 participants, EPV = 5.2). Logistic regression on this alternative outcome also produced no significant predictors (all p > .10), consistent with the primary analysis. The null finding regarding job-seeking difficulties as predictors of grassroots interest does not appear to be an artifact of how the outcome was coded.

4.7 Qualitative Findings

Thematic coding of open-ended responses identified three main barriers. The most frequently mentioned was lack of policy awareness, cited by 23 participants (20.9%). Representative comments included "I don't understand the relevant policies at all" (Participant 047) and "I don't know what positions are available or what the application process involves" (Participant 089). The second barrier was concern about career development after the service period, mentioned by 18 participants (16.4%); for example, "I worry that working in a grassroots position will leave me disconnected from the urban job market, with limited development opportunities after service ends" (Participant 023). The third was perceived skill mismatch, raised by 11 participants (10.0%); as one put it, "What use is my foreign language ability in rural areas? I don't see how my skills can contribute" (Participant 105). These qualitative results line up with the quantitative pattern: information deficits and doubts about skill relevance, rather than general job-search stress, appear to be the obstacles shaping students' decisions.

Figure 1. Theoretical research framework integrating push-pull theory and transactional stress and coping theory.

Figure 2. Distribution of grassroots employment intentions among employment-bound foreign language graduates.

Figure 3. Comparison of job-seeking difficulty dimension mean scores between students with and without grassroots employment intentions.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

Three findings stand out. First, grassroots employment intentions are strikingly low in this sample: 10.9% of employment-bound FL seniors said they intended to participate. That figure is well below the 20–30% commonly reported for education, agriculture, and medicine majors, which is consistent with the perceived mismatch between FL training and what grassroots positions are thought to require.

Second, job-seeking difficulties are widespread: five of the six dimensions scored above the scale midpoint. The problems students described most strongly were practical ones—skill deficits and a lack of external support—rather than generalized confusion about career direction. This matters for intervention design, because practical deficits can be addressed directly in ways that identity-level confusion cannot.

Third, and most central to the paper's argument, students who reported grassroots intentions did not differ significantly from other students on any of the six difficulty dimensions. This null result carries theoretical weight. If grassroots employment functioned mainly as a refuge from job-search stress, one would expect students with higher employment pressure, stronger AI-related anxiety, and larger skill gaps to show stronger intentions. No such pattern appeared. Across every dimension, the two groups looked essentially the same. The simpler reading is that, for the small number of FL students who choose grassroots work, the choice is an active

one—driven by variables not measured here, such as a service orientation, ties to a hometown, or direct knowledge of what a grassroots post actually offers—rather than a reaction to job-seeking difficulties.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

These results add nuance to the push-pull account of grassroots employment. In the general graduate population, push factors—urban labor-market pressure, AI anxiety, weak job-search skills—are often assumed to carry the most explanatory weight. Among FL majors, at least in this sample, those factors do not appear to differentiate students who choose grassroots work from those who do not. Pull factors may dominate for students who perceive a skill mismatch between their training and the available grassroots posts. That disciplinary variation is worth taking seriously; a model that fits education or agriculture majors well may not transfer to FL majors without modification.

The null results also speak to the coping literature. They do not support the view of grassroots employment as an emotion-focused, avoidant response to stress. For the students in this study who selected it, grassroots work appears closer to a problem-focused choice: a deliberate option taken on its own merits. This runs against deficit narratives that portray grassroots participants as students who could not compete in the urban labor market.

5.3 Practical Implications

For local universities trying to increase FL-major participation in grassroots programs, these results suggest several adjustments to current practice. Rather than presenting grassroots employment primarily as a safety net for students under stress, career services should address the specific obstacles this study identified: lack of information, perceived skill mismatch, and worry about post-service career development. Departments could organize targeted information sessions that spell out how FL skills are actually used in grassroots settings—for instance, in bilingual rural schooling, cross-border e-commerce at the county level, or cultural tourism in ethnic-minority areas. Alumni who have completed grassroots service could be invited back to discuss their post-service career paths, since concern about what happens after the program was a recurring theme. Information about the programs themselves should also be consolidated in a single, easily located resource, because students repeatedly described the existing information landscape as fragmented and hard to navigate.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several caveats should be kept in mind. The number of students with explicit grassroots intentions was small (n = 12), which limits statistical power for between-group comparisons and ruled out a meaningful multivariate logistic regression. Future work should oversample students with grassroots intentions to reach adequate power. The sample comes from a single local university in western China; multi-site studies across institutions and regions are needed before these findings can be generalized. We did not measure several constructs that could plausibly predict grassroots intentions—prosocial value orientation, hometown attachment, specific policy knowledge, or family socioeconomic status—and their absence may account for the largely null regression results. Those variables should be included in future instruments. The cross-sectional design also prevents causal inference; longitudinal work tracking how intentions evolve during the job-search process would be more informative. Finally, we measured intentions rather than actual applications; the gap between stated intention and observed behavior in this domain is itself worth studying.

VI. CONCLUSION

For FL graduates in China, AI-driven changes in the labor market have coincided with a long-standing structural oversupply, and grassroots employment programs are now routinely presented as one response. The data reported here show that grassroots intentions among FL seniors at one local university are low, and—contrary to a common assumption—students who experience greater job-seeking difficulties are no more likely to express those intentions. The simplest reading is that grassroots participation is not primarily a fallback for struggling job seekers; for the small minority who choose it, the choice appears to rest on considerations—prosocial orientation, local ties, policy awareness—that standard measures of job-search difficulty do not capture. For universities, the practical message is that outreach needs to be discipline-specific: it should show students how their language skills can actually be used in grassroots roles, consolidate scattered policy information in one place, and address concerns about what happens after the service period ends.

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