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Wai Ching Choy, Pui Yan Flora Lau,

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Cross-border to Taiwan but not China

Higher
education in
Taiwan

The decision-making mechanism of Hong Kong students pursuing higher education in Taiwan

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Wai Ching Choy and Pui Yan Flora Lau

*Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Hong Kong,
Hong Kong*

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to find out why some students from Hong Kong (HK) consider higher education in Taiwan, rather than in China or elsewhere. It also attempts to build a decision-making model to advance the conventional push-pull logic associated with this particular issue.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors interviewed 11 undergraduate students from HK via an in-depth interview. Interviewees were recruited by snowball sampling. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, all names of the informants in this paper are *pseudonyms*.

Findings – A dynamic decision-making mechanism, which includes three major layers, namely, the macro, *meso* and micro levels, has been developed to demonstrate that HK students made their decision based on a recursive fashion with bounded rationality, rather than on a linear fashion with complete rationality.

Research limitations/implications – Although the relatively small number of interviewees has limited the representativeness of the research, the authors suggest that rather than claiming representativeness, the study attempts to tease out the diversity of the decision-making process and mechanisms.

Originality/value – The drastic increase in the number of HK students in Taiwan proves the current research study, which is the first qualitative research on the phenomenon, as a timely one. In addition, the present study is one of the few examples of studying students' international mobility from a more economically advanced region (HK) to a less economically advanced one (Taiwan).

Keywords Hong Kong, Taiwan, Bounded rationality, Cross-border higher education, Decision-making mechanism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Cross-border higher education is not a new phenomenon and the number of students who pursue higher education outside their place of origin is increasing. In 1990, there were only 1.3 million students enrolling in higher education institutions (HEIs) outside their country of origin, but the numbers increased to approximately 5 million in 2014 (OECD, 2013; International Consultant for Education and Fairs, 2014). One of the major reasons for this phenomenon is that they want to accumulate various cultural capital by gaining overseas study experiences (Lee, 2013).

In HK, there is no exception. Due to the limited university places for high school graduates, many students consider studying overseas. Developed countries, such as the USA and the UK, are the most popular destinations for higher education among HK students. Studying in developing regions, for example, China and Taiwan, was generally not a preferred choice. However, since 2012, more students have considered studying in these



countries and/or regions. For example, the population of HK students who do their undergraduate degree in Taiwan increased from 2,577 in the 2012-2013 to 7,640 in the 2016-2017 academic years (Ministry of Education, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017). Comments suggested that the major reason is the abolishment of the Joint Recruitment, Testing and Assignment of Overseas Compatriot Students for HK students in 2012 (UECOCS, 2012). Students can then enroll in universities in Taiwan without taking any additional examination. This move is aligning with Taiwan's policies on compatriot education, in which compatriot students overseas can effectively fill the empty university places (Chen and Lo, 2013).

However, the changes in policies are not enough to clarify why HK students pursue their undergraduate degree in Taiwan. It is because of the problems of excessive admissions and the relatively low-quality teaching in Taiwan is notorious because of the wide expansion of universities in the late 1980s (Kuo, 2016). So then, why do students still apply to study in Taiwan? Why is higher education in Taiwan attractive when the reputation of universities is not admirable? The authors conducted this research study to explore students' motivations and the decision-making mechanism in this regard.

Conceptual framework: the push-pull model and an advanced framework

The push-pull model, which conceptualizes a migration decision as a result of rational choice, is widely used by scholars who have studied cross-border higher education (Lee, 1966; Ma, 2014). In the typical push-pull model, push factors emerge from the country of origin, which drives the local students to pursue cross-border education (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Pull factors, on the other hand, emerge out of the destination country to attract non-local students (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002).

The typical push-pull model, however, was criticized by other scholars for being too simplistic (Li and Bray, 2007; Chen, 2017). Various modified push-pull models were thus proposed. For example, Li and Bray (2007) used a two-way push-pull model to examine students' international mobility. It takes reversed push-pull factors into account, in which this model is developed on the typical push-pull model that includes both the positive factors in the home country and negative forces overseas (Li and Bray, 2007). By examining reversed push-pull factors, this model is more capable to illuminate why some students consider to study at home rather than studying overseas, as it included both the push factors that lead students to leave and pull forces that encourage students to stay at their country of origin (Li and Bray, 2007). In addition, Chen (2017) proposed a hybrid of three levels of push-pull dynamics in his research on Chinese students pursuing a university education in Canada, which contains individual decision-making, academic marketing and national marketing. While the three levels model proposed by Chen comprehensively involves the macro, *meso* and micro level analysis, it is still following the push-pull logic. The reason why it is problematic to follow the push-pull logic is that push-pull models are largely analogous to the neo-classical economics paradigm, based on the principles of utility maximization and rational-choice (de Haas, 2008; King, 2012). However, migrants usually do not have complete and equal access to information and various resources (de Haas, 2008). In other words, migrants can hardly make their decision based on complete rationality. Furthermore, the neo-classical economics paradigm fails to illuminate why there is only a handful of people actually migrate in spite of apparent incentives of migration (Arango, 2004). Another problem is that push and pull factors are mirrored to each other, which create a subjective judgment to determine whether push or pull factors are dominant (de Haas, 2008). Therefore, the push-pull factor should not be the only explanatory logic to explain the international mobility of students.

As mentioned by [Ma \(2014\)](#), push-pull models can by no means provide adequate conceptual power to explain students' decision to pursue cross-border education because the decision process is often coordinated in a recursive fashion rather than a vertical and linear relation. For example, the three stages of students' decision-making process, i.e. the decision of studying abroad, the selection of a host country and the selection of a particular higher education institution, proposed by [Mazzarol and Soutar \(2002\)](#) may not reflect their real preference when students are making their decision ([Chen, 2017](#)). In turn, students may make their decision with a very different order ([Chen, 2017](#)). Moreover, other studies have revealed that foreign students often choose the most satisfying choice based on bounded rationality rather than the pursuit of maximum utility suggested by the push-pull model ([Lee, 2013](#); [Ma, 2014](#)). Both the original and modified push-pull models are relatively unsuitable to be used for further analysis.

Considering all the criticisms, it is better to develop an alternative and advanced model to explain students' decision-making process. The authors make a reference to the conceptual framework proposed by [Ma \(2014\)](#), which is modified from the framework proposed by [Knight and de Wit \(1995\)](#) and [Chen \(2017\)](#), to understand the motives of HK students' decision to study in Taiwan. In this advanced model, cultural, social, economic and political dimensions are taken into account ([Knight and de Wit, 1995](#); [Ma, 2014](#); [Chen, 2017](#)). Not only do these dimensions emphasized by the above scholars, but they are also widely studied in articles related to students' decision-making process, such as [Mazzarol and Soutar \(2002\)](#), [Li and Bray \(2007\)](#), [Yang \(2007\)](#), [Bodycott \(2009\)](#) and [Perkins and Neumayer \(2014\)](#).

Toward an advanced model

The aforementioned advanced model combines four different dimensions, i.e. cultural, social, economic and political. Alongside this, the authors propose that a three-level decision-making mechanism can be developed to understand students' motivations to study in Taiwan.

Regarding the cultural dimension, scholars examined the possibility of enrolling in preferred programs and the quality of education in both the destination country and country of the origin. For example, [Mazzarol and Soutar \(2002\)](#) argued that students would choose to pursue cross-border education if they cannot gain entry to their preferred degree programs in their own country. In addition, [Chau \(1998\)](#) claimed that one of the major reasons why HK students pursued higher education in Taiwan from the 1950s to 1980s was that there were merely limited places provided by universities in HK. [Gong and Huybers \(2015\)](#) also found that when Chinese students consider cross-border higher education, they take the university ranking and the quality of education of the destination country into account. [Mazzarol and Soutar \(2002\)](#) also identified that the quality of education provided by the destination country is another factor influencing students to study overseas.

In relation to the social dimension, existing research studies mainly focused on parental support, the role of friends and the opportunity of migration. Parents always play a key role in students' decision-making process of overseas study ([Chau, 1998](#); [Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002](#); [Lee, 2013](#); [Chen, 2017](#)). For example, before the 1990s, HK parents were more likely to send their children to pursue higher education in Taiwan rather than in China because many of their generations fled to HK after the establishment of the socialist regime in China in 1949, and so for this reason, parents refused to send their children to China ([Chau, 1998](#)). [Lee \(2013\)](#), in his study of Chinese students in South Korea, suggested that one of the reasons why Chinese parents want their children to study in South Korea is that they wish their children to remain physically close to them. Moreover, students who study in a foreign country can provide valuable information for students to their friends who potentially wish

to study or live elsewhere (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). In relation to the opportunity for migration, Chen (2017) argues that the possibility of getting an immigration status is a highly attractive reason for Chinese students to study in Canada.

For the economic dimension, different research studies point out that economic costs and career prospects may also play a key role in students' decision-making process on overseas study. Economic cost can be measured in terms of tuition fee, the cost of living and the opportunity cost of studying in different places (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). For example, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) argue that the reduction of international tuition fees in the UK can help to attract more international students. Rafi and Lewis (2013) claim that the attractiveness of the Australian higher education sector for Indian students is reduced due to the recent increase in the strength of the Australian dollar. In addition, as in 1997, the tuition rate of Taiwan's HEIs is much lower than local universities (Chau, 1998) and thus attracts HK students to Taiwan. In terms of career prospects, Chen (2017) suggested that the discourse of *The Canadian Dream* and the opportunity to work there are some of the key reasons why Chinese students are attracted to study in Canada.

Regarding the political dimension, national safety is the main factor in influencing the decision-making process. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identified that students from Asia considered national security to be a vital factor to determine where to study. Shanka *et al.* (2005) also found that students from Malaysia pursue higher education in Australia are more likely because of national safety. Aligned with other studies, Gong and Huybers (2015) argued that Chinese students are more likely to choose a country in which the security level is top-ranked on the international scene.

Some factors, which are not studied in similar studies, such as the role of secondary schools and students' political notions, are also examined to capture the empirical situation of HK. In addition, the concept of bounded rationality, i.e. the situation where the major goal of a decision maker is to achieve a satisfying outcome rather than strict and rigid rules of optimization is also included in the model (Simon, 1955, 1957, 1961, 1987; Dunn, 1999; Katsikopoulos, 2014). Students used bounded rationality are basically due to the complication of the situation and their incapability to process the expected utility (Lee, 2013). This concept is also used to explain the decision-making process of interviewees.

Another significant issue which deserves attention is that the majority of the existing studies of cross-border higher education have focused on the east to west migration and, specifically, on movement from Asian countries to Anglophone destinations, such as the USA, the UK and Australia (Brooks and Water, 2010). There are, however, some exceptions, such as a study on mainland Chinese students in HK and Macau (Li and Bray, 2007), as well as HK students in Taiwan and China (Chau, 1998). In spite of scholars endeavors, there are only a handful of studies on students migrating from more economically advanced countries to pursue their undergraduate study in a country with less advanced economy[1]. This may be due to the fact that most of the previous studies followed push-pull models, a neo-classical economics paradigm, which assumes that migrants normally move from a less advanced economy to a more economically advanced one (Massey *et al.*, 1998; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Li and Bray, 2007; Chen, 2017).

Objectives

The above reviews have inspired the authors to explore why HK students pursue higher education in Taiwan, a phenomenon that is understudied. It is also the aims of

the authors to create a decision-making model in this particular issue. The major research questions are:

RQ1. What are the motives and factors for HK students to study in Taiwan?

RQ2. Why is there a drastic increase in the number of HK students to pursue higher education in Taiwan?

RQ3. What is the mechanism through which the decision on the cross-border study was made?

The development of the higher education system and compatriot education in Taiwan

The higher education system in Taiwan has undergone massification and internalization. The expansion and internationalization of higher education in Taiwan are not an occasional phenomenon, but a means for the Taiwanese Government to improve its economic competitiveness in the global market and retain the survival of some HEIs as a result of the overexpansion of the higher education system since the 1990s (Mok *et al.*, 2013; Chen and Lo, 2013).

With three phases of expansion in the 1960s (Lo, 2014), the late 1980s (Wang, 1999; Mok, 2006), and the 2000s (Mok *et al.*, 2013), the university vacancies outweighed the population of high school graduates, with 59,000 empty places on undergraduate programs in 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2016). Under such circumstance, internationalization is the way out for the survival of HEIs in Taiwan (Chen and Lo, 2013). By 2002, the Ministry of Education had recognized the importance of internationalization to the development of the higher education system in Taiwan (Chen and Lo, 2013). A blueprint document entitled “The Initiative for the Enhancement of University’s Competitiveness” was published in the same year to promote the use of English in teaching and intensify the collaboration with foreign universities (Chen and Lo, 2013). The Executive Yuan of Taiwan then has recognized higher education as one of the top ten service industries since 2010. Southeast Asian countries and China are the major target export markets of Taiwan’s higher education. In the name of internationalization, foreign countries can provide sizable numbers of students and funding to ensure the survival of less prestigious universities in Taiwan (Chen and Lo, 2013).

Internationalization also implies another rationale, which serves as the compatriot education for the Taiwanese Government to instill anti-communist values and to cultivate compatriot talents (Chau, 1998; Ma, 2010; Overseas Community Affairs Council, 2016). The development of compatriot education for HK students can be traced back to the late 1940s, when the guiding policy for overseas compatriot student recruitment and governance, i.e. the Measures Governing the Application and Enrolment of Overseas Chinese Students in Taiwan, was promulgated in 1951 (Ministry of Education, 1982). According to Ma (2010), compatriot education aims to prevent further expansion of the Communist Regime in the Pacific Region.

Since 2012, there have been dramatic policy changes in the recruitment of HK students. The University Entrance Committee for Overseas Chinese Students has revoked the Joint Recruitment, Testing and Assignment of Overseas Compatriot Students for HK students since 2012 (UECOCS, 2012). Students can enroll in universities in Taiwan without taking any extra entrance examination. There are two major channels for HK students to complete the application process, namely, the individual application system and the united

distribution system. Students are distributed via the governmental allocation system, and the independent admission system, in which 70 universities are qualified to enroll students independently in the academic year 2018-2019 (UECOCS, 2017, 2018).

Methodology

Given the nature of this research, i.e. to explore the decision-making mechanisms in a holistic manner, qualitative in-depth interviews were used for the study as it is more effective to capture interviewees’ experiences and gain the in-depth understanding of the situation (Patton, 2002; Paillé and Mucchielli, 2008; Yilmaz, 2013). This method assists the authors to understand the interviewee’s motives and rationales for studying in Taiwan rather than elsewhere.

The objective of this study is to comprehend HK students’ motivations and the decision-making process to study in Taiwan at the undergraduate level. For this purpose, data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 11 undergraduate students from HK, including 4 female and 7 male, between 18 and 22 years of age. These interviewees are all studying at Tier 2 universities, which are domestically prestigious but not research-oriented, funded by the program for promoting teaching excellence in universities (Lo, 2009). Interviewees come from four different universities in Taiwan, i.e. one public and three private universities. The scope of their studies covers three major fields, including art and social sciences (Chinese literature and journalism), finance and business management, in addition to science and technology (aerospace and systems engineering and computer science). Taking the best five subjects into consideration, the mean score of their HK Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) is 15.5[2]. Table I summarizes the background of interviewees.

All interviews were conducted individually in Taiwan in December 2017 and most of the interviewees were recruited by snowball sampling. Some of the key questions included: “Could you tell me your reasons to study in Taiwan?”, “What are the options other than studying in Taiwan?”, “Why do you think that studying in Taiwan is your best option?” All interviews were conducted in Cantonese (which is interviewees’ mother-tongue), typed-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted for around 45 minutes to 2 hours and was conducted in a cafeteria or common areas at the universities in which interviewees are

Name	Nature of institution	Major of study	Year of study	Years of studying in Taiwan	HKDSE result (best 5 subjects)	Age	Sex
Peter	National A	Finance	2 years	1.5 years	17	21	Male
John	National A	Chinese literature	2 years	1.5 years	23	22	Male
Gina	National A	Chinese literature	3 years	2.5 years	20	20	Female
Ava	National A	Business and management	2 years	2.5 years	18	19	Female
Andrew	Private A	Journalism	3 years	1.5 years	13	21	Male
George	Private B	Bioresources	4 years	3.5 years	15	21	Male
Jason	Private B	Product design	4 years	3.5 years	9	21	Male
Sissy	Private B	Baking and beverage management	1 years	3.5 years	14	18	Female
Vincent	Private C	Aerospace and systems engineering	4 years	3.5 years	12	21	Male
Vicky	Private C	Accounting	4 years	3.5 years	16	21	Female
Stephen	Private C	Computer science	4 years	0.5 year	14	21	Male

Table I.
Background of interviewees

studying. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, their names are *pseudonyms* in this article.

Research findings

By examining the four dimensions, namely, cultural, social, economic and political, the present study attempts to understand the decision-making process of HK students who are studying in Taiwan. In relation to the cultural dimension, the failure in the HKDSE and the lack of attractiveness of sub-degree programs in HK, including both self-financed and sub-vented higher diploma and associate degree programs, are the major factors that motivate interviewees to study in Taiwan. For the social dimension, secondary schools and parents are the key determinants in the decision-making process. The role of friends is also found, but it is an insignificant influence. In regard to the economic dimension, the relatively low financial cost and the significance of an undergraduate degree are also major considerations for the interviewees. Finally, for the political dimension, we find that the political factor of HK and Taiwan is not the subject matter. However, the poor political environment in mainland China discouraged interviewees to study there and indirectly drove them to Taiwan.

Cultural dimension: public examination and quality of sub-degree programs

Cultural dimension is an influential factor in this study. There are two subsections making up the cultural dimension as follows: the failure in HKDSE and the lack of attractiveness of sub-degree programs in HK. The failure in HKDSE refers to the situation where students fail to accomplish satisfactorily in public examination, in which most of the interviewees could not fulfill the “3322” minimum entrance requirements in core subjects. They also failed to score sufficiently to secure a place in both publicly funded and self-financed undergraduate programs (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017). The authors argue that the poor academic results trigger HK students to study in Taiwan.

With poor public examination results, interviewees could only apply for universities elsewhere. Following the guidelines provided by school teachers, some of them obtained an offer before the release of HKDSE results because they were not confident that they could receive an offer as they wanted:

I knew that I won't get a good result in the HKDSE. Also, I didn't want to work right after my graduation from secondary school. I then considered studying design in Taiwan since I can expose myself to a different culture which is very important for designers to bring up new ideas. Therefore, I decided to study in Taiwan (Jason, 21, Year 4).

While Jason received an offer prior to the public examination, many of them applied and decided to study in Taiwan in haste. It demonstrated that studying in Taiwan was always the backup plan, seeming like the best option at that time:

I only got level 2 in Chinese and the total score in the HKDSE wasn't good enough to get an offer from universities in HK. Then, my teacher told me that I could still apply for universities in Taiwan. Therefore, I got into this university (Peter, 21, Year 2).

Peter's experience suggested that the failure in HKDSE is an initial trigger for students to consider and decide studying in Taiwan.

In the second subsection, interviewees believed that a higher education qualification is a “job entry ticket”. From time to time, their aim was to acquire an undergraduate degree. The unsatisfying results in HKDSE could only leave them to pursue sub-degree programs in community colleges, and yet, due to the low transfer rates to publicly funded universities

and the low quality of sub-degree programs in HK[3], they pursued the most suitable option, i.e. an undergraduate degree in Taiwan as a mean to fulfill their aspirations.

The low transfer rates imply that it is difficult for sub-degree students to transfer onto a publicly funded top-up degree program after graduation. Interviewees found it was not a possible option, and so they applied for universities in Taiwan:

Most of my friends who studied a higher diploma started to work after their graduation since programs of higher diploma are designed as career-oriented. But, I think it will lead to lower competitiveness in the job market because most of your competitors are undergraduates and postgraduates. For example, if you want to work in the business sector, an undergraduate degree is a must. Without a degree, it is very hard to get a business-related job. Therefore, I want to give Taiwan a try (Vicky, 21, Year 4).

In terms of the low-quality education, most interviewees believed that sub-degree programs cannot provide a good learning environment. Therefore, pursuing an undergraduate degree in Taiwan should be a better option:

It is a very stupid idea to study an associate degree [and/or higher diploma] due to the low quality of education and costly tuition fee. At community colleges, the quality of lecturers is very poor. Their English is bad. If I studied in these institutions, I could learn nothing. In Taiwan, I study at a university. As a result of the fundamental difference of the teaching philosophy between universities and community colleges, universities can help students to have a holistic development. I can take different courses. However, community colleges are like secondary schools. I don't want to repeat the secondary school life again. Even though I am not studying at a prestigious university, I can definitely learn more from sub-degree programs. Could there be any lecturer who own a PhD in Medical Science? Don't you know? In Taiwan, I can reach out another world (George, 21, Year 4).

All interviewees are realists who made their own choice based on the constraints they encountered: we called it bounded rationality. Their poor academic results and the lack of good alternatives in HK are fundamental reasons for their decision.

Social dimension: schools, family and friends

The role of secondary schools and family are vital for interviewees. On the one hand, secondary school teachers provided interviewees with necessary information by organizing talks and providing supporting services during the application procedures. The support provided by secondary schools helped to remove potential hurdles for students to enroll in Taiwan's universities. On the other hand, the support from family is also crucial as the family is the source of finance. Without their support, interviewees cannot afford to continue their education outside HK. However, in contrast to previous studies on the role of friends (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Brooks and Water, 2010), it is found that peer influence is an insignificant factor in this study.

In terms of the role of secondary schools, according to the interviewees, most of them received information and admission support from their secondary schools. For example, their secondary schools organized information sessions. They invited admission staff of Taiwan's universities to hold talks and organized introductory sessions to enhance students' knowledge of Taiwanese education:

My secondary school basically promoted three destinations, namely, HK, China and Taiwan. Based on the information received, my teachers told me that if I cannot study in HK, just go to China or Taiwan. My school also organized various talks. Most of them are about studying in Taiwan. The guest speakers of Taiwan's universities introduced the advantages of studying over there. Although it is very easy to enroll in universities in Taiwan, it is very hard to graduate. If

my secondary school did not provide me with detailed information, it would have been very difficult to find such organized information on the internet (Vincent, 21, Year 4).

Apart from organizing information sessions, some secondary schools also organized study tours to deepen students' understanding of the learning environment in Taiwan:

My school promoted studying in Taiwan a lot. It also organized study tours for students to get more understanding of the universities in Taiwan. These tours provided useful information on the universities (Andrew, 21, Year 3).

Last but not least, during the admission process, interviewees received a wide range of support from school teachers, including submission of application forms, help with writing the personal statement, and providing reference letters. The wide range of services, provided by secondary schools enhanced the success of students to receive an offer:

My school teachers taught me to fill in the application form because each school and department have different requirements. For example, if I want to apply for design-related programs, they will help me to prepare the necessary application documentation. They also wrote a reference letter for me (Jason, 21, Year 4).

In summary, the role of secondary schools is significant as they provided the necessary information and guidance on the application procedures. Without the support of schools, students would find it difficult to receive systematically processed information and apply for the universities in Taiwan easily.

Parents are the source of finance of interviewees. While most of the interviewees' parents consistently supported them during the decision-making process, some parents did not support the decision of studying in Taiwan at the beginning. They reckoned that studying in Taiwan may not be the best option due to the relatively low academic recognition of Taiwanese Universities. However, parents of all interviewees support the decision of their children after the continuous persuasion:

From the beginning, my mother did not want me to study in Taiwan since she thought that HK society does not recognize the qualification. However, after the explanation from school teachers, they understood the advantages to study in Taiwan. Therefore, my mother decided to let me go (Vicky, 21, Year 4).

Moreover, the role of friends is not important since studying in Taiwan is not as popular as in other destinations, such as Canada and the UK. Interviewees rarely seek advice from friends and peer influence is hardly found in the decision-making process.

Economic dimension: the cost and values of a degree

The relatively low financial cost and the significance of an undergraduate degree are crucial reasons for HK students to study in Taiwan. The relatively low tuition fees and living costs allow students to achieve their aspirations of studying overseas. In addition, the major value of an undergraduate degree is to help students to commence a career as they reckoned that a degree is a "job entry ticket".

Most of the interviewees claimed that their longstanding aspiration is to study overseas. While studying in the most popular countries, such as the USA are costly, Taiwan with relatively low tuition rate and living cost is the best option to achieve their dream.

The low tuition rate is one of the major concerns of most of the interviewees because many of them claimed that if the tuition rate in Taiwan was as high as the Western countries, interviewees would not study in Taiwan. Therefore, the low tuition rate of universities in Taiwan is definitely one of the selling points for them:

I only considered one factor before my decision to study in Taiwan, which is the economic factor. I wasn't good at studying. My parents asked do you want to study overseas? But I was not sure that I could get a good result. I don't want to study at a university with low teaching quality and reputation in the West. It means wasting my parent's money. However, in Taiwan, I don't have to worry about money. That's why I come to Taiwan (George, 21, Year 4).

Moreover, the low living cost is obviously a pulling force. However, most of the interviewees do not recognize this factor before their first-hand experience in Taiwan. Therefore, the authors argue that this factor is not crucial.

The rapid expansion of the sub-degree programs since the early 2000s have offered more higher education opportunities for HK students (Tung, 2001; Yung, 2002). Nevertheless, interviewees believed that these programs are incomparable to undergraduate degree programs in Taiwan. Most of them declined sub-degree offers and considered an undergraduate degree in Taiwan:

Although an undergraduate degree means nothing in relation to your personal capability, it is still an entry ticket to the job market. Recently, I went to an interview for an internship position. I felt like interviewers will look for the ranking of your university and academic department (Stephen, 21, Year 4).

Overall, interviewees suggested that the relatively low financial cost and the importance of an undergraduate degree as a "job entry market" are also significant factors on interviewees' decision to study in Taiwan. Such a decision is largely based on bounded rationality as the low financial cost provides a second chance for them to achieve their aspirations.

Political dimension: national security and political notions

Alone, the political situation in both Taiwan and HK is insignificant to explain the decision of pursuing higher education in Taiwan. This dimension, therefore, attempts to understand why HK students consider to study in Taiwan rather than in mainland China[4]. Despite the fact that interviewees do not regard the political environment and structure in Taiwan as the driving forces, they generally believed and acknowledged that Taiwan is a place with liberty and democracy, with which HK and China barely enjoy:

Compared to HK and China, I think Taiwan is a place with democracy. At least, everyone has the right to elect the president. In HK, however, there are pre-screening of the election of the chief executive. Also, the elected chief executive is not the one that most HK people preferred (Gina, 20, Year 3).

Although most of the interviewees have received information of higher education in China during their secondary school education, no one considered to study there because they did not reckon China as a secure place for studying. They have a stereotype that China is a totalitarian state with no freedom of speech. These restrictions will then pose a threat to their personal freedom as a result of the political incorrectness on speeches:

I don't like China and its rules. I will feel unsafe when I travel there. It seems like my human rights are not protected. I am also afraid of their conservative learning atmosphere since there are different limitations on knowledge sharing and research. Firstly, I am not familiar with the environment. Next, there are so many horrible news stories. For example, they wiped out the poor people in Beijing recently. You wouldn't know their next moves. Also, I am from Hong Kong. I will publish some articles and creative pieces. If I study in China, my works can never be published due to political reasons. For example, I participated in a Poetry Festival in Taiwan. My work is about the Umbrella Revolution and the destiny of HK people. You can imagine what the consequences would be if it was published in China. China will deny your achievements in art due to your political notions. Will it pose a threat to my personal safety? I have no idea. But I would feel unsafe. Therefore, China will never be a good place for me to continue my education (John, 22, Year2).

In addition, they believed the standard of living in China to be poor, such as the relatively high crime rate and food with poor hygienic conditions, and that this would have a negative impact on their safety and health.

In terms of political notions toward China, it is clear that interviewees identified weakly with their Chinese identity as most of the interviewees refused to admit themselves as Chinese. Instead, they preferred to claim themselves as Hongkonger or Chinese from HK:

I would say that I am a Hongkonger since it seems like superior to Chinese. And there is some anti-Chinese mentality currently (Ava, 19, Year 2).

In conclusion, with the positive images of Taiwan and the negative stereotypes toward China, the political dimension can help us understand interviewee's decision to study in Taiwan.

Discussion and conclusion

In the previous section, the authors denote the students' motives to study in Taiwan. The decision-making process is more complicated than the linear relations of the four dimensions as described previously, and in fact, a various-layer mechanism is involved. Such mechanism contains three major layers, i.e. the macro, *meso* and micro levels, on which the dynamics between the three layers illuminate the decision-making process of interviewees.

On the macro level, the abolishment of the Joint Recruitment, Testing and Assignment of Overseas Compatriot Students for HK student in 2012 marked a phenomenon. National security is a vital reason to consider Taiwan rather than China as students do not believe China is a safe place for studying.

On the *meso* level, community colleges and secondary schools, as well as family are found vital. All interviewees believed that sub-degree programs can hardly help them to transfer to publicly funded degree programs due to the very low transfer rates to universities. Moreover, without the information support provided by the secondary school, interviewees could hardly receive systematically processed information to apply for universities in Taiwan easily. The family also provided enormous support on interviewees' decision.

Finally, the micro level indicates the personal preference and ability, including academic results, financial expenses of study and students' political orientation. In considering their academic capability, they started to prefer Taiwan as a possible option, where they can get a place at universities easily. Financial expenses of study are also important as the very low cost to study in Taiwan is a lucrative option to achieve their dream of studying aboard. Finally, interviewees held negative notions and refused to admit themselves as purely Chinese. This indirectly pushed them to Taiwan for undergraduate study. Figure 1 summarizes the research findings:

The dynamic mechanism illuminates that interviewees made their decision based on a recursive fashion (Ma, 2014; Chen, 2017) with bounded rationality as proposed by Lee (2013) and Ma (2014), rather than an optimal option and a linear fashion (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002), while they considered to pursue higher education in Taiwan. In other words, interviewees applied bounded rationality in the condition of imperfect information (i.e. secondary school as the core and only channel of information provider) and resources, such as the failure in the HKDSE and the limited financial resources. Under such circumstances, pursuing an undergraduate study in Taiwan is the alternative and most satisfactory option.

The present study argues that the push-pull models are inadequate to explain the phenomenon of cross-border higher education as they cannot articulate the dynamics of different dimensions. Although Chen (2017) attempted to reveal the dynamics of the

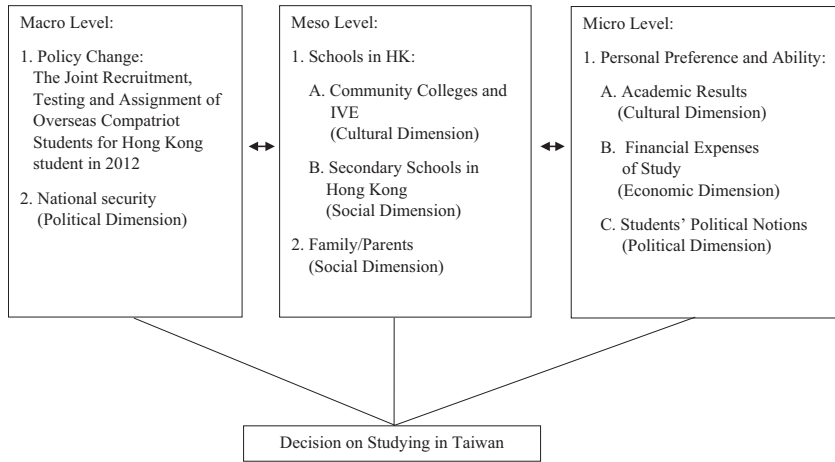


Figure 1.
HK students'
decision-making
mechanism

macro, *meso* and micro levels, he still followed the push-pull logic, which assumes students' decision-making as a rational choice. With hesitation, the authors studied four major dimensions and summarized these dimensions to build up a decision-making mechanism with three levels. This mechanism can help to comprehend the motivations and process of students' decision-making. It is also found that interviewees made their decision to study in Taiwan based on bounded rationality.

Taiwan is continuously expected to be one of the popular destinations for HK students to pursue higher education in the foreseeable future. Although the sampling size in this study is minimal, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of HK students enrolling in undergraduate study in Taiwan, a longstanding and under-researched phenomenon. With all these factors taken into consideration, especially the education policy of Taiwan toward overseas students, we believe that the phenomenon will continue in the short run.

Notes

1. HK is economically more advanced than Taiwan. While HK's GDP per capita was US\$42,963, Taiwan's GDP per capita was US\$22,044 in 2016 ([International Monetary Fund, 2016](#)).
2. The Government of the HK Special Administrative Region has implemented a brand-new public examination system, the HKDSE, in 2012 ([Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017](#)). Level 3 for Chinese Language and English Language, and Level 2 for Mathematics and Liberal Studies, known as "3322", are the minimum entrance requirements for undergraduate programs offered by publicly funded or self-financing institutions ([Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017](#)). According to the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2016) and the [University Grants Committee \(2017\)](#), it is necessary for students to score at least 19 grade points in their best five subjects with core subjects at "3322" or better to secure a seat at publicly funded universities.
3. The total number of student intakes of full-time-sub-degree programs, including both publicly funded and self-financed programs, was 31,700 in 2016 ([Concourse, 2017](#)). However, the number of available publicly-funded top-up degree quotas was only 5000 in 2016 ([Concourse, 2017](#)). It means that only 6.34 per cent of sub-degree students can enroll in publicly-funded top-up degree programs.

4. The Government of China has initiated the “Scheme for Admission of HK Students to Mainland Higher Education Institutions”, which allow universities in China to enroll students from HK without extra-examinations, since 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2011). In addition, in Taiwan, the University Entrance Committee for Overseas Chinese Students has abrogated the Joint Recruitment, Testing and Assignment of Overseas Compatriot Students for HK students since 2012 (UECOCS, 2012). It demonstrated that both China and Taiwan have created a friendly environment to enroll students from HK.

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About the authors

Wai Ching Choy received BSocSc (Hons) in Sociology from Hong Kong Shue Yan University and will be an upcoming master's student at School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol. Wai Ching Choy is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ryanc0901@hotmail.com

Pui Yan Flora Lau, BSocSc, MPhil (HKU), MSc and DPhil (Oxford), is an Assistant Professor at Hong Kong Shue Yan University. Her research expertise lies on migration, forced migration, social capital, poverty and sociology of work and education.

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