

# Migration intentions of mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study is dedicated to investigate why Mainland Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong are more likely to return to first-tier cities in Mainland China rather than stay in Hong Kong after graduation, despite Hong Kong's increasing efforts to retain them as talent. By identifying the rationale that leads them to make such a choice, a critical gap in talent retention strategies for emerging education hubs can thus be addressed.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Through semi-structured interviews among 20 Mainland Chinese students have recently graduated from Hong Kong institutions, this study analyzes the two-way push and pull factors between Hong Kong and first-tier cities in China, elucidating how international students are influenced by various factors and make the common decisions to go to first-tier cities rather than Hong Kong after graduation.

**Findings** – The study reveals that while Hong Kong's favorable visa policies and sector-specific employment opportunities serve as significant pull factors, they are outweighed by the comparative advantages of first-tier cities in mainland China. The comparative advantages of first-tier cities in China, including stronger economic incentives, better social integration prospects and more attractive talent recruitment policies, ultimately determine students' destination choices.

**Research limitations/implications** – One major limitation lies in the relatively small and specific sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among the targeted population. Moreover, the potential destinations of graduates are not limited to Hong Kong or the first-tier cities in China.

**Originality/value** – This research extends the traditional two-way push-pull theory by integrating comparative advantage analysis, offering a nuanced framework to evaluate international student mobility and talent retention dynamics. The research simultaneously provide insights for policymakers and higher education institutions to refine talent retention strategies, enhance the appeal of emerging education hubs and better align policies with global student mobility trends.

**Keywords** Higher education, International student mobility, Student-to-work migration

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

There is a noticeable trend in Asia where a number of international higher education providers have shown significant competency in the global race for talent and the higher education sector (Cheung *et al.*, 2016). Hong Kong, with five universities ranked among the top 100, is a typical example of being on a perennial trend of arousing widespread interests from the potential students (Oleksiyenko *et al.*, 2021; Postiglione, 2013). Since 2004, Hong Kong has aggressively implemented various proactive policies and initiatives, aiming to establish itself as a regional education hub and to expand its education sector (Beech, 2018). Hong Kong's strategies not only serve to develop and absorb talent but also improve the city's ability and vibrancy to thrive economically (Mok and Bodycott, 2014).

Unlike some developed countries where there are numerous restrictions on visa applications and renewals, Hong Kong's policy is clearly tilted in favor of prospective



students and graduates (Chan and Chen, 2023). Hong Kong has continuously relaxed restrictions on the employment and visa application of non-local students, which includes both foreign students and Mainland students (Peng, 2020). According to the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG), non-local students who have graduated from Hong Kong universities, regardless of whether they were studying at undergraduate or postgraduate level, would be granted visas to stay in Hong Kong and seek employment after graduation (Lai and Maclean, 2011). Moreover, they can further convert into the permanent residence after being resided for seven years.

As a matter of fact, despite the attractive immigration policies, the willingness of students from mainland China to immigrate to Hong Kong has, on the contrary, become increasingly low (Ip, 2020). Furthermore, relatively few graduates intended to renew their IANG visas upon expiry. Simultaneously, Hong Kong has faced serious competition brought about by the implementation of policies to attract and retain talent by first-tier cities in China. Despite the gradual increase of enthusiasm for pursuing higher education abroad, the brain drain phenomenon has been somewhat mitigated by the general reluctance of Mainland students to settle in their study destinations (Cheung and Xu, 2015), with the decision of returning home gradually becoming a more pervasive decision. To encourage more overseas returnees, the first-tier cities have launched attractive hukou settlement policies and intriguing talent recruitment policies designed specifically for overseas returnees (Li and Chen, 2024). Therefore, it is of great significance to identify the influence of these competitor cities on students' intentions to migrate to Hong Kong and to figure out the students' decision-making process.

Although a substantial amount of research has been conducted to investigate the migration and return intentions of international students in various destination countries (Cheung and Xu, 2015; Tan and Hugo, 2017), two significant shortcomings in earlier studies have limited our knowledge of this issue. Firstly, the international student mobility from mainland China to Hong Kong, as an exceptionally rare instance of domestic but cross-border migration, has not received the attention it deserves. Secondly, not many studies explore the postgraduation situation of Chinese students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong (e.g. Gao, 2014). Moreover, prior research on overseas returnees has primarily focused on the employment prospects and family issues (e.g. Cheung and Xu, 2015), while other variables that could influence their migration and return intentions have been less frequently mentioned. This study will not only aim to fill the aforementioned research gap but also holds significant practical implications. As students originally from Mainland China are likely to dominate the group still (Li and Jung, 2023), it is crucial to understand the decision-making process in terms of selecting the study destinations and placement after graduation among these students. Therefore, this study is dedicated to explore the factors affecting graduates' intentions to migrate to Hong Kong after graduation. The conclusions and arguments presented in this paper can further assist government departments in formulating and adjusting the policies to maintain their advantages in attracting students and persuading talents to stay.

## Literature review

### *Transnational migration and related policies*

International student mobility has been recognized as a critical component of global talent recruiting embedded within the internationalization of higher education (Yang, 2003). Given the common perception that international students are more likely to get used to the social and cultural norms of the destination country than other potential highly-skilled migrants without any experience in the destination country (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013), many developed countries designed to implement a variety of policies to entice foreign students to stay after graduation and more inclined to transform them into permanent migrants (Findlay, 2011; Tan and Hugo, 2017).

Among all the well-known study destination countries, Canada and Australia place extraordinary emphasis on recruiting skilled migrants and offer more possible settlement opportunities for international students (Hawthorne, 2006). However, scholars also have investigated the employment situation and settlement intentions of international students after graduation varying from different study destination countries, finding that securing a desired job in the place of study and successfully transitioning to permanent residence is generally not that easy for international students (Flynn and Arthur, 2013; Monahan, 2018; Tran *et al.*, 2022). Chiou (2017) indicated that some international students have undertaken an in-depth analysis of the relevant immigration policies before choosing to pursue education overseas, and that they tend to choose majors that can better achieve their immigration goals (Jackling, 2007).

Hong Kong has been easing work restrictions and facilitating the acquisition of visas for non-local graduates. The primary beneficiaries of this relaxation are students from Mainland China (Peng, 2016). Starting from 2008, Hong Kong has initiated the practice of granting visas to foreign graduates, which was in accordance with the aim of constructing the regional education hub and incentivizing these graduates to remain in Hong Kong for employment purposes (Geng and Li, 2012; Lam and Tu, 2015). Concurrently, the prior regulation restricting that graduates are allowed to remain in Hong Kong only if they could secure jobs within three months of graduation has been eliminated (Lai and Maclean, 2011). Under this relaxed policy environment, the Immigration Department receives around 10,000 applications for IANG visas annually, with the proportion of applicants from the Mainland China remaining at approximately 90% (Peng, 2020).

#### *First-tier city's hukou in China*

The hukou system is the fundamental measure implemented by the Chinese government that documents the population's place of residence and basic information and serves as the essential instrument for differential resource distribution (Wu and Treiman, 2007), which implies that the conversion of hukou status is a state-designed form of social mobility in China (Huang, 2020). By categorizing all the people into urban hukou and rural hukou based on blood inheritance and geographical location, the traditional household registration system has erected an antagonism between urban and rural areas and created a hierarchical definition of citizenship (Li *et al.*, 2015). That is, the inequalities and social stratification brought about by household registration stemmed mainly from the urban-rural divide, while inequalities based on differences in the location city of hukou were not as pronounced due to the relatively small disparities between different cities (Wu and Treiman, 2007).

Therefore, since the implementation of the household registration system reform in 2014, China has gradually ceased to distinguish the citizens based on the urban and rural hukou, and the hukou enjoyed by all citizens has been transformed into the "resident hukou". Under this circumstance, the extent to which migrants have access to public services and benefits is determined by their hukou location. First-tier city hukou is currently the most coveted, as hukou provides the holders with relatively superior social rights and public goods, especially for the public education, health care and more opportunities to apply for the low-cost housing (Yang and Dunford, 2018; Zhang, 2018). Tier-1 city hukou is distinguished from other cities by the generous treatment that accompanies it, which may gradually lead to the new type of social stratification in which those with tier-1 city hukou are pitted against those with others.

Talents, especially for those overseas returnees, are more likely to reside in metropolis and choose to transfer their hukou status. Although megacities are strictly controlling the inflow of immigrants by setting up stringent conditions for hukou application, the requirements and procedures for overseas returnees are significantly less complicated than that for ordinary immigrants. For example, graduates from universities ranked within the global top 50 are eligible to directly apply for Shanghai hukou upon securing employment in the city. Meanwhile, those graduates whose universities are ranked within 51–100 are allowed to apply

for Shanghai hukou, provided they have worked full-time in the city and contributed to social insurance for a minimum of six months (Global Times, 2022).

Currently, some studies have observed the relationship between the hukou and international student mobility (Brooks and Waters, 2021). Wang's study (2023) found that many returnees chose to study abroad since they were aware that an overseas degree would allow them to obtain a hukou in the megacity. Kang (2024) also indicated that overcoming the restrictions of the hukou system is the essential motivation for many Chinese students to study abroad. Due to the regional inequalities that have emerged from urbanization in recent decades, young people are planning to migrate from other parts of China to developed cities. With such favorable policies and strong motivation, Hong Kong, with five universities perennially ranked among the top 100 in QS ranking, is likely to offer a great attraction to potential students. As a result, the main goals of this paper are to ascertain whether Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong consider this to be a significant factor when selecting the study destination, as well as to investigate the perspectives of those students regarding the advantages and localized social rights brought about by the mega-city hukou and its further influence on their graduation plans.

#### *Brain drain and overseas returnees*

China is the country that suffers the most from the severe brain drain problem (Cheung and Xu, 2015). The Chinese government has been mindful of the huge loss of local high-level talent and was therefore inclined to introduce a range of policies to attract it back (Marini and Yang, 2021). However, as the implemented policies have tended to refer to senior talent like scientists and professors rather than ordinary international students, the analysis of the reactions of senior talent and their reasons for returning to China should not easily extend to ordinary international students. For example, social networks is considered by many scholars to be the most important reason that overseas Chinese scholars consider when deciding whether to return to China, as it determines the academic culture and research environment that they need to adapt to upon their return (Tharenou and Seet, 2014; Yang, 2020; Xiong and Mok, 2020), which is certainly not a decisive influence on the return intention of the ordinary international student. In light of the growing popularity of overseas returnees, extensive research has been conducted to figure out the rationale behind the decision of international migration or returning China. Among these, extensive research was mainly conducted to figure out the rationale behind the increasingly popular decision of return among the Chinese students studying in the developed countries where the phenomenon of "talent acquisition" was severe (Cao, 2008; Cheung and Xu, 2015; Gill, 2010). Scholars agreed that economic factors are the core motivation, suggesting that along with China's rapid economic development, there will be more attractive jobs available for returnees (Tharenou and Seet, 2014; Wadhwa, 2009). Although a few studies have found that the recognition of overseas qualifications was declining and that many international students have faced difficulties in finding employment after returning to China (Xiang and Shen, 2009; Welch and Hao, 2012; Li, 2013; Hao et al., 2016), academics still believed that having a degree from a reputable educational institution overseas is more likely to make job seekers more competitive in the domestic job market and secure well-paying jobs (Xiang and Shen, 2009; Li, 2013; Huang, 2013). Therefore, the experience of studying abroad is able to provide returnees with more potential financial rewards, which is considered to be the most important reason for the large shift in the willingness of international students to return. In addition, social and cultural factors are also thought to influence individuals' decision to return China, while they are less influential than academic and economic factors (Cheung and Xu, 2015). For example, Tu (2019) cited the data from The Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Returnees published in 2013, indicating that over 90% of the overseas graduates cited "proximity to their parents" as the main reason for returning to China, which highlighted the huge role that the traditional Chinese concept of "family" played in driving one-child generation students back to China.

Although there is a growing body of recent empirical research examining the reasons why Chinese students return to China after graduation, prior research has mostly concentrated on the issue that overseas returnees have to choose between China and their host country, which may possess extremely large social and cultural discrepancies as well as other factors that significantly affect their decisions. However, the situation in Hong Kong is its own special case. The unique political and sociocultural relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China has left an impression on Chinese students that is both familiar and strange (Yu and Zhang, 2016). Thus, it is crucial to dissect the factors influencing their propensity after graduation in this special circumstance.

#### *Mainland China students in Hong Kong*

Although Mainland students are considered to be an increasingly important part of the new Hong Kong population and talent, relatively limited academic research has been conducted on them. Academics found that non-local students are motivated to pursue master degrees in Hong Kong mainly for the career concerns (Li and Jung, 2023; Lértora and Sullivan, 2019; Peng, 2020). Even though most of the non-local students are confused and overwhelmed about their job progression after graduation, a master's degree in Hong Kong is still seen as a way for them to improve their competitiveness in the job market (Li and Jung, 2023). In order to attract more talent that satisfy its socioeconomic development needs, Hong Kong has set up distinctive visa policies for different categories of people (Cheung *et al.*, 2011), with the IANG visa specifically targeting non-local graduates by granting them an unconditional visa to pursue bright prospects in Hong Kong.

Despite the paucity of study on the destinations of Mainland students after graduation, the disparities in the migration decisions of graduates at different eras are highlighted. The willingness of Mainland graduates to stay has been found to be significantly lower over time. And even PhD candidates from Mainland China pursuing studies in Hong Kong institutions exhibit a strong tendency to prioritize Mainland China as their preferred career destination upon graduation (Li and Horta, 2024). Besides, Li's (2023) study found that even when Hong Kong's universities attracted a record number of Mainland students in the 2021–2022 academic year, they did not show a pressing need to integrate, and simultaneously, they showed little desire to build connection with the locals. Given that the overall situation of Mainland Chinese students and the social environment in Hong Kong have changed dramatically, which may clarify why previous findings cannot be applied to the present.

#### *Theoretical framework – advanced two-way “push–pull” model*

The conceptual framework of this article is mainly constructed by the advanced two-way “push–pull” model. The traditional push–pull model states that population migration is due to the fact that migrants can improve their living conditions (Van Hear *et al.*, 2018). Under this scenario, factors that can improve the living conditions of migrants in the relocation destination are seen as the pulling forces, while unfavorable socioeconomic conditions in the outflowing areas are regarded as the pushing forces. However, the “push–pull” model has been widely challenged because of its imperfections. Many scholars proposed that home countries not only have negative forces that push individuals to seek opportunities abroad, they also have favorable factors that attract individuals to return home after their studies (Cheung and Yuen, 2016). Simultaneously, while the host country has motivations that drive individuals to migrant, it also has inevitable disadvantages that may make people hesitant to do so (Li and Bray, 2007; Cheung and Xu, 2015). Therefore, this paper aims to compare Hong Kong and first-tier cities in China based on the advanced two-way “push–pull” model, revealing their effects on the willingness of different types of individuals to return to mainland China and stay in Hong Kong.

## Methodology

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study employed a qualitative research approach to gather data from Mainland Chinese graduates who had recently completed their studies in eight UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong. This method is justified by the fact that semi-structured interviews can delve further into the specifics of the participants' experiences, motivations and perceptions, resulting in relatively more thorough and persuasive arguments and conclusions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Furthermore, doing the semi-structured interview is regarded as an open-ended approach that enables the research explore various issues depending on the information gleaned from the interviews by asking tailor-made follow-up questions (Peng, 2016). In this situation, students are capable of openly voicing their thoughts, sharing their study and living experiences in Hong Kong, elaborating on their future aspirations and articulating the rationale behind their decisions regarding the postgraduation plans.

This study implemented the purposive sampling method to select appropriate participants. In order to guarantee that particular types of instances were not omitted from the interviews, a wide variety of examples with diverse qualities were included using the maximum variation sampling method. The informants are selected based on the following criteria: (1) different specialism, (2) distinctive original hukou status, (3) distinguished language proficiency and (4) disparate duration of study and length of stay in Hong Kong. Each respondent was assigned an ID number to eliminate any personal identifying information during data transcription and analysis process.

Among the 20 participants, 11 of them are female and the rest 9 are male, which was similar to the male-to-female ratio of Mainland students pursuing higher education in Hong Kong. Regarding their original hukou status, students typically originate from relatively affluent backgrounds in relatively developed cities, primarily first-tier cities, with Shenzhen being the most prevalent. The age bracket of the participants varied between 22 and 30 years old. Interviews were conducted with exclusively Mainland Chinese students who were about to graduate or had completed their studies within two year. This study comprised an extremely heterogeneous group of students. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the study, participants were recruited from all eight public universities in Hong Kong. In addition, they studied a variety of disciplines, covering arts, sciences, education, business, engineering and medicine. Not only that, the participants' length of study in Hong Kong is also distinguished, ranging from 1 year to 6 years. Specifically, two participants merely completed only their undergraduate studies, seven just pursued a one-year taught master's program, and two had obtained both a master's and a doctoral degree in Hong Kong. The remaining nine participants completed both their undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Hong Kong, with three of them additionally pursuing a second master's degree. Thus, taking into account the diversity of the students can contribute to avoiding potentially biased conclusions from collecting qualitative data from an overly homogeneous group. The interviews were designed to conduct in either Mandarin or English, depending on participants' personal preference. The interview questions in this study were wide-ranging, covering mainly their academic background, reasons for choosing Hong Kong as the destination for higher education, the challenges they encountered during their lives in Hong Kong, their intended destinations and plans, level of understanding of IANG and other talent introduction policies, and so on. Thus, to prevent from gathering the qualitative data from an overly homogeneous population and drawing potentially biased arguments, considering the variety of the student body indeed helps.

## Data analysis

The collected interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis, which is primarily used to identify, analyze and interpret themes in the collected data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The audio recordings of the interviews are meticulously transcribed verbatim, after which the researcher undertook a thorough manual coding of the transcripts. In alignment with the

thematic analysis methodology proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2013\)](#), the researcher is engaged deeply with the data, noting significant keywords and generating the initial codes. These codes are subsequently distilled into the themes, following the guidance of the theoretical framework.

## Findings

### *Overall migration intentions*

Hong Kong has comparatively open, flexible and stable study-to-migration nexus for non-local graduates. However, the willingness of the Mainland Chinese students to migrate is not high overall. Of the 20 students interviewed, merely seven of them had a firm intention of acquiring permanent residence in Hong Kong. All of them were former students who had studied for an extended period of time, with five individuals have completed both their undergraduate and master's degrees in Hong Kong and the exception of two who have studied for their master and PhD there. In contrast, none of the seven students who just completed a one-year taught master program currently had any ambitions to get permanent residency in the near future.

Nonetheless, when it came to the willingness to apply for an IANG visa, with the exception of three students who did not consider it at all, the bulk of students demonstrated the interest, even though some of them did not genuinely plan to earn a living in Hong Kong. They can be categorized as opportunists who decided to take advantage of the chance to try their luck by applying for IANG visas upon graduation. Even though they are not granted any chances within the allotted two years, they will not suffer any loss, for at least they can travel to Hong Kong on any occasions without having to apply for additional visas.

### Two-way push–pull analysis

#### *Push factors*

*Income level and career prospect.* Push factors are conditions or circumstances that drive individuals to leave their home country or region. For international student mobility, the shift from school to work is critical since it marks not only the beginning of their job seeking and achieving financial independence but also the negotiation of significant life decisions and choosing whether to settle down ([Yu, 2016](#)). The study reveals that the first-tier city in China is generally considered to offer less competitive salary levels and room for development among the participants, whether in the industry or academia.

The income level and treatment in first-tier cities is far behind Hong Kong. For example, the monthly salary of a newly recruitment in the first-tier cities can earn only half of those in Hong Kong and are of less opportunity to see potential pay rises. (10)

After completing my PhD studies, I am not dreaming of start my academic work at Chinese universities. The salary disparity between mainland university teachers and their Hong Kong counterparts is extremely obvious, as many Chinese faculty members can only receive around CNY6000 per month. (20)

In addition, respondents generally considered that the working atmosphere in China is not favorable. The rising trend of overtime work has made it hard for residents to strike a work–life balance, especially for those who working for the multinational corporation. As ID01 stated,

After I graduated, I worked for a giant tech company in Shanghai. I needed to work at least until 10p.m. every day, which is extremely common in the STEM industry. You have to endure such work pressure and extra working hours to generate enough money. (01)

*Value of first-tier city hukou.* Interestingly, while deciding the destination after graduation, participants usually began by discussing the availability of basic education resources for their children and access to high-level higher education, although none of the participants have

kids. Candidates for the Gaokao compete against each other within the same province, while the difficulty of the examination and the ratio of university enrolment are varying from different provinces, creating an unequal situation (Hamnett *et al.*, 2019). From the participants' point of view, the restriction of the children's right to access educational resources through the hukou system in China is extremely unfair, which makes Beijing and Shanghai hukou quite alluring compared to other cities lack of higher education resources. However, the competition for the highest quality educational resources within these two cities is also intense.

### *Pull factors*

*Sunk costs.* Pull factors are the attractive qualities or conditions of a destination that draw individuals to move there. The reason why Mainland Chinese students who have already studied in Hong Kong for a longer period of time are more willing to stay in Hong Kong compared to others is largely due to the fact that they have invested a great deal of sunk costs here. These costs include time, money and other aspects, making it difficult for international students to part with their past investment when making decisions.

I have paid extremely high tuition fees for five years to study and stay in Hong Kong and I am able to obtain the permanent residence in two more years. If I give up at this point, all the sunk costs I have put in are wasted. (05)

Some respondents have now found stable and well-paid jobs in first-tier cities, but due to their previous years of commitment in Hong Kong, they still constantly wonder if they have made the right choice. As ID02 stated,

I am working as a civil servant in Beijing, which determined that I cannot have the status of permanent residency outside Mainland China. Therefore, it is a pity that I have stayed in Hong Kong for more than 5 years but left without obtaining permanent residence. I have constantly wondered if I have made the right decision. (02)

*Relaxed migrate policies and the value of identity.* The gradual relaxation of the IANG policy has provided international students with more convenience and opportunities to stay in Hong Kong after graduation. It is found that those who have stayed and studied in Hong Kong for a longer period of time are well aware of the policy changes. Simultaneously, they are the groups with the greatest willingness to pursue the permanent residence. For example, the interviewee ID09, who has studied in Hong Kong for both undergraduate and graduate study, is very grateful for the relaxation of the IANG policy in 2023.

I was previously worried about meeting the requirement of 7 years of stay. However, the change of IANG policy ensured that the duration of the first unconditional stay after graduation was extended to two years, which is equivalent to a direct grant of permanent residency to me. (09)

Those seeking permanent residency in Hong Kong expressed significant concerns regarding more educational resources that would accompany this status as well. As ID10 stated,

My child will have more options to attend prestigious universities in Hong Kong and foreign countries. Additionally, he will have a far lower entry threshold than the ordinary candidate if he decide to pursuing higher education in China. Therefore, I believe there are more options available with Hong Kong identity when it comes to my children's future schooling. (10)

Apart from the above benefits, Mainland Chinese students are also concerned about the level of social welfare and healthcare protection in their potential destination, which is also determined by their identity status. Given that international students are usually coming from high SES families, they will have relatively higher requirements for healthcare standards. ID14, who studied medicine, views that the healthcare system in Hong Kong is more advanced than that in the Mainland China, with more sufficient resources and higher quality of service.

Many respondents also pointed out the value of Hong Kong passport. Whereas mainland Chinese must undergo complicated visa application processes almost everywhere they go, Hong Kong passport holders are able to travel freely to the majority of the countries without the need for applying the visa. As ID01 stated that,

I am quite envious of Hong Kong residents who do not need to apply for visas when they are hanging out. Furthermore, Hong Kong citizens are far simpler to immigrate abroad than us. (01)

Moreover, interviewees also mentioned that the value of Hong Kong identity was not only reflected in the abundance of social rights but also in the extra favorable treatment given to them in the Mainland China because of their status as compatriots:

I have been jealous of the favourable treatment that Hong Kong people enjoyed in China. They are entitled to additional subsidies and allowances for starting a business and living in China. Besides, Hong Kong people can enjoy 'super-national treatment' in China, as the governments will handle the affairs of them with greater efficiency and kindness. (03)

*Reverse Pull factors.* Reverse Pull factors refer to conditions or characteristics that attract individuals back to their home country or region after they have lived abroad. These factors often outweighing the benefits they experienced while living in a foreign country.

*Policy attractiveness.* Students are cognizant of the diverse circumstances and challenges associated with settling in prominent cities, while obtaining a degree from prestigious university is the easiest and quickest way to do so. A great number of them come to Hong Kong specifically for this purpose. They primarily focus on the ranking of the university while selecting their study destinations, as it is directly related to the settlement requirements. As captured below,

In fact, apart from Beijing, it's not that difficult to obtain the first-tier city hukou for overseas returnees. I came to Hong Kong for postgraduate study with the clear purpose of obtaining the degree from a top50 university, which enabled me to obtain Shanghai hukou conveniently and quickly. (14)

*Recognition of HK diplomas in China.* Investing in a Master's degree has become a popular strategy for getting ahead in the job race. With the massification of higher education in China, investing in postgraduate studies has become a viable way to get a scarce good job. At the same time, overseas master's degrees usually only take one year and are affordable for well-off families, which is why the majority of students study abroad during their postgraduate study. They are more concerned about the increased competitiveness of their home country employment as a result of study journey, rather than focusing specifically on the opportunities in the host country. Respondents were quite confident about their competitiveness in the domestic job market, considering that their study experience and the degrees they have obtained in Hong Kong have enhanced their human capital.

I urgently need a degree from the top university to enhance my competitiveness, as my undergraduate degree is not from a well-known university. The recognition of the diploma from Hong Kong universities exceeds that of most key institutions in the domestic job market, which has resulted in several good offers for me. I am very grateful for the leap in academic qualifications and competitiveness brought about by my study in Hong Kong. (13)

*Social and cultural relationships.* "Chaxugeju", originally articulated by Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong, refers to a unique social structure and interpersonal relationship pattern in Chinese society. It describes how individuals are connected in a hierarchical and concentric manner, with the self at the center and relationships radiating outward in varying degrees of closeness and importance. For Mainland Chinese students, the differential order pattern emphasizes the closeness of interpersonal relationships, which is also reflected in international students' decision-making on whether or not to return to their home countries after graduation.

Stable intimate relationships, especially close ties with a partner, for example, motivate international students to be more inclined to return home. This Pull may come from dependence on the partner and a desire for family life. As ID07 stated.

If I am single, I might try to look for a job in Hong Kong. But my fiancé is currently working in Shenzhen, and we've already bought a house there. For me, having a marriage and decent family life are far more essential than the value of the Hong Kong identity. (07)

Family background, expectations and sense of responsibility are also important factors influencing international students' decision to migrate. As ID17 stated.

Since I am an only child, I particularly considered my parents' feelings when deciding the destinations after graduation. The main reason that I decided to pursue my master's degree in Hong Kong is that it is extremely close to my hometown. And after I graduated with a master degree, I definitely would go back to Shenzhen and stay with my parents. (17)

Social resources and social networks in the Mainland China were cited by respondents as important factors attracting them to return. As ID16 stated,

I am merely a passer-by for Hong Kong, as I do not build any solid social connections and local networks. In contrast, I have abundant social networks and connections in the Mainland China, which probably can provide me with not only the vital resources and assistance for professional development and social life, but also the emotional support and spiritual comfort. (16)

Not only that the driving role of cultural identity is particularly evident when international students consider whether to return to their home countries. For those international students who have a high sense of identity and belonging to the domestic social and cultural circle, they are more likely to go back to China. As ID05 stated,

Although I have been in Hong Kong for about five to six years and I have adapted quite well to the lifestyle and atmosphere, I do not grow a sense of belonging to Hong Kong. I very much lack the identity of a Hong Kong citizen, and I have therefore given up the opportunity of obtaining the permanent residency. (05)

*Reverse Push factors.* Reverse Push factors refer to conditions or circumstances in a foreign country that drive individuals to leave and return to their home country. These factors often create an environment that is less favorable for living abroad, prompting students to reconsider their decision to stay.

*Policy constraints.* Many students, especially those who pursuing 1-year taught master, do not have sufficient knowledge of the eligibility criteria for staying in Hong Kong after graduation and the relevant policy information. As ID07 stated, it seems that students can stay and work in Hong Kong after graduation, but I am not sure what kind of visa to apply for and what conditions are required for the visa. When asked about their level of understanding of the conditions of stay after graduation, some respondents conveyed incorrect information, with some believing that they are regulated to leave immediately after graduation. As ID17 explained,

I am willing to stay in Hong Kong, but I think that I have to leave Hong Kong after our student visas expire. There's nothing I can do about it. (17)

*Difficulties in seeking employment.* Respondents indicated a number of factors contributed to their low employability in Hong Kong. Several respondents shared that they were forced to leave due to the dearth of employment opportunities in the relevant disciplines in which they had studied. Those students who encountered this issue are mainly majoring in STEM subjects. As ID18, who studied computer science, said,

I have considered taking up employment in Hong Kong, but there are limited high-tech companies in Hong Kong. As I have currently received a satisfactory job offer from a large corporation in Shenzhen, it is of high probability that I will leave Hong Kong right away after graduation. (18)

Apart from the homogeneity of the industry and the lack of job opportunities, students are also facing the problems such as language barriers, recognition of qualifications and local protection during the job-seeking process. The language barrier encountered in Hong Kong is a

very unique situation. Cantonese is an everyday language in work and life, but among the respondents, only two students from Guangzhou and two from Shenzhen were native speakers. Among the non-native speakers, except for three students who were quite enthusiastic in learning Cantonese since their arrival, the rest of the respondents could not speak Cantonese fluently. The study found that non-native speakers' proficiency and enthusiasm in learning Cantonese were considered to be closely related to their willingness to stay. The following is how ID15 links Cantonese and his desire to live and stay in Hong Kong,

I realized early on that having fluent Cantonese language skills would increase my competitiveness throughout the job seeking process. In addition, speaking Cantonese can improve my communication skills and enable myself to have a better understanding of the local culture, customs and social norms, which will facilitate my ability to adjust and blend in with the locals. (15)

Several respondents felt that their Cantonese proficiency could barely satisfy the need for simple daily conversation, even though they had been living in Hong Kong for a long period of time. They also admitted that the lack of spoken Cantonese skills severely constrained their possibilities of finding job opportunities.

My Cantonese is only at an intermediate level. I have once attended a job interview that the interviewers merely ask questions in Cantonese. As I could not express my ideas clearly, my performance in the interview is relatively poor. This experience made me regret that I had not learned Cantonese properly since it could have helped me secure a better job. (09)

Increasing worry about the career among Mainland Chinese students are also attributed to localism, which is typically defined as a dedication to defending the interests of locals. Respondents indicated that the need to renew their visas put them at a disadvantage, as many companies preferred local employees in order to avoid the administrative procedures and costs of sponsoring visa applications for those employees.

Comprehensive working documentation will be required for visa renewal, and many corporations do not have experience of serving as a sponsor to assist in the visa renewals. Instead, they might just recruit locals out of fear of this trouble. This may account for the phenomenon that graduates are mainly working at insurance companies, as these businesses are highly experienced with the procedure of renewing visas. (05)

Localism is not only reflected in the status held but also in the academic diplomas possessed. Some interviewees reflected that since their undergraduate studies were in institutions in China, Hong Kong employers still discriminated against them in terms of academic qualifications in the job-seeking process, even though they already possessed a master's degree from Hong Kong's top institutions.

I completed my undergraduate studies at a prestigious Chinese university, but it is not well known in Hong Kong's labor market. I believe that even though I am about to graduate from the best universities in Hong Kong with a master's degree, it would not be of much help to me in finding jobs. Employers in Hong Kong would favor hiring local graduates or foreign students who have finished their bachelor's degree there. (12)

*Living cost.* When choosing a destination city, the final choice is usually based on both economic considerations, not only the potential financial returns but also the local cost of living. The vast majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction about the exorbitant costs of items and cramped living conditions, complaining that these harsh realities have created huge financial and psychological pressures. These social circumstances even drove some participants to plan to leave Hong Kong even after acquiring permanent residence.

Although I want to take up permanent residence in Hong Kong, I actually do not like the living environment here. For the past five or six years, I have been living in a pretty small room that cost a lot, which can be really depressing at times. Even with my relatively high income, I am unable to save any money because other expenses are so high in this area. Therefore, I am decided to leave after I become the permanent residence. (15)

*Social adaptation and social network.* The inability of respondents to comprehend and adjust to Hong Kong's cultural and social norms was found to be a potentially significant factor influencing their inclination to remain. Mainland Chinese students differ significantly from local Hong Kong students in terms of social, cultural and political aspects, despite Hong Kong being a Chinese society. Except for the fact that their Cantonese language skills were insufficient to converse with Hong Kong citizens, nearly all of the interviewees admitted that they were not well-versed in the social norms and cultural values of the city. Furthermore, they typically merely stay with the Mainland China students and rarely have close local friends during their study time. The self-isolating behavior of Mainland Chinese students reflects not only their difficulties in adapting to Hong Kong's culture but also the lack of effective cross-cultural interactions among different groups. As a result, they fail to achieve positive socio-cultural integration either at university or in the transition from study to work.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study focuses on the trade-off process of Mainland Chinese students while selecting their destinations after graduation, which not only deepens the understanding of this complex social phenomenon and enriches the literature on the transition experiences of Chinese students from study to work, but also has strong policy implications and provides valuable references for relevant policy makers, educational institutions and students themselves. By implementing the advanced two-way Push-Pull model, the study have revealed the comprehensive impact of different factors on the willingness to stay in Hong Kong.

Previous studies exploring the migration of Chinese international students' willingness to return to their home countries after pursuing studies overseas are largely determined by host countries' changing immigration policy (Yu, 2016; Singh, 2020), which is often the reverse push factor among countries like Australia and USA. The results of this study also confirm the impact of visa and immigration policies on willingness to migrate, but interestingly, although Hong Kong has provided favorable visa and immigration policy, the vast majority chose to return to China, as they were driven by more attractive policies implemented in the first-tier cities in China. This finding suggests that international students make rational decisions by comparing the strengths of pull factors and reverse push factors in the same dimension. Therefore, it may be possible to enrich the Push-Pull theory by introducing the concept of comparative advantage.

In addition, the study found that economic factors, particularly the availability of suitable jobs and income levels, remain important determinants of whether Chinese graduates want to migrate, which is in line with the previous findings that economic factors have a greater deterrent effect than political and social cultural factors (Cao, 2008; Cheung and Xu, 2015). As an international financial and economic center with a wealth of employment opportunities, particularly in areas such as finance and trade, job opportunities and higher income levels in Hong Kong are seen as the strong pull factors. However, what makes Hong Kong's situation unique compared to other countries is the relative homogeneity of its industries, which leads to a wide disparity in opportunities and salary levels across different fields, thus making job opportunities in turn a reverse push factor among whose students who studying STEM-related disciplines. Moreover, the higher cost of livings and cramped living conditions are found to have strongly restricted the willingness of graduates to migrate to Hong Kong, which is usually not mentioned in the research conducted in other countries. Last but not least, from the sociocultural perspective, graduates rely heavily on interpersonal relationships when making decisions. Establishing social relationships and integrating into Hong Kong society is perceived to be difficult, and therefore graduates are more inclined to return to China and relying on the social relationships and networking resources previously maintained by their families and individuals for living, which is consistent to the previous study (Tharenou and Seet, 2014; Singh, 2020).

There are diversified measures that Hong Kong can take to enhance its pulling power. Firstly, there is a need to continue to optimize the IANG policy. The change in visa period from one year to two years gives students the possibility of obtaining status without having to work, but this is not very attractive to students who just pursued the one-year master. Secondly, to promote cultural acculturation and adaptation, multicultural exchange activities should be strengthened to help mainland students better integrate into Hong Kong society. The most important of these is the training of Cantonese. The government's current apparent underestimation of the importance and difficulty of learning Cantonese for non-local graduates may exacerbate the self-segregation of MLC student migrants. Finally, Hong Kong needs to strengthen the employment support. Previously, international students were subject to huge restrictions on internships and working while studying. Under today's relaxed policy environment, institutions need to set up a robust career guidance service system to provide international students with more internships, employment opportunities and career planning guidance to help them adapt to the Hong Kong's working environment and succeed in the further study-to-work transition.

### Limitation and further research

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing Mainland Chinese students' intention to stay in Hong Kong after graduation, it is not without limitations. One major limitation lies in the relatively small and specific sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among the targeted population. Moreover, the potential destinations of graduates are not limited to Hong Kong or the first-tier cities in China. Future research may examine the reasons why graduates make other destination choices, and follow-up longitudinal studies can be conducted to track graduates' experiences, providing deeper insights into the long-term evolving dynamics of their intentions to stay in Hong Kong.

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