

The role of parents in children's overseas education institution choices: A study of Chinese families

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore the role of Chinese parents in China in their children's decision choice of their education abroad. The result discussed in this paper is gained from a study where the primary goal was to understand how international students choose their education institutions, specifically on the effects of country of origin; however, the emergence of two strong recurring themes warrants a closer examination, these are role of parents and cultural values. The decision making process is influenced by traditional values rooted in Confucianism, child-centeredness due to China's one-child policy and modern western values. While it may appear that the final decision rests on the children, parents are still in control behind the scene.

Keywords: family decision making, Chinese cultural values, educational institutions

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Background

It is widely recognized that the family, rather than the individual, are the critical decision-making and consumption unit for many consumer purchase decisions (Atkin, 1978; Spiro, 1983; Beatty and Talpade, 1994). Individual members of a family exercise influence over each other's behaviour and therefore over the activities which form part of the consumer decision making process (Martinez and Polo, 1999). While husbands and wives have been the focus of these studies, the recognition that children also play a significant role in the family decision making process saw the gradual inclusion of children in studies (e.g. Mangleburg, 1990; Beatty and Talpade, 1994; Lee and Beatty, 2002; 2005; Flurry and Burns, 2005). Less attention, however, has been paid to the involvement of parents in their children's tertiary education, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Chao, 1996; Lee, Wong and Brown, 1996; Pimpa, 2002; Shuang Ji and Koblinsky, 2009), which points to the importance of understanding the role of parents in children's educational choices.

Past research on students' choice of study destination notes that family members, relatives, friends and agents play an important role in a student decision-making (Pimpa's, 2002; Morrish and Lee, 2008). Although the final decision of overseas study was mainly made by the students themselves, they were significantly influenced by their family members, relatives and friends who gave information and suggestions. Thus, "important others" are major supporters or co-decision makers. The influence of family, in particular parents, would extend beyond being mere providers of information; parents are more likely to also offer advice on choice of career paths and their preference on which country and or institution they should consider based on their own information sources (Morrish and Lee, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of Chinese parents and cultural values in the students' choice of overseas education. This paper is part of a study which explored country of origin effects on choice of overseas education. Next, we briefly describe the method used in this study; this is followed by the results and discussion linking to the literature. We conclude with implications to marketing and future research.

Method

This study was conducted in the Chinese language (Putonghua) among those who were either in the process of deciding where to study or have just chosen their educational institution. Our aim is to draw rich insights from participants who have experienced this phenomenon, thus it is necessary to include participants who were still actively immersed in the decision making and were able to recount their experiences. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted, 20 of these were conducted face-to-face in China and the other 20 were conducted over the telephone from New Zealand. All interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes.

The sample consisted of nine parents and thirty one students. Students included those who were still at school and now applying for either foundation courses or universities, as well as those who already have a university degree and were applying for postgraduate studies.

There are seven parts to the discussion which included a quick warm-up by talking about themselves before moving into issues related to their motivation to study abroad, choice of country, choice of university or institution, decision making process and a short discussion about New Zealand if they were aware of it as an educational destination. These recorded interviews were conducted by two native Chinese speakers, and later translated and transcribed into English. Efforts were made to ensure that the data interpretation was trustworthy by having both authors independently uncover the themes which emerged from the interviews, and later the authors discussed and debated the themes and disagreements were resolved.

Results and Discussion

Influence of parents and Confucianism

Chinese parents play a significant role in a student's decision to study abroad, this sentiment is reflected in the interviews of both students and parents. Deference is given to the parents regarding most major life decisions, similarly, parents feel it is their duty to 'help' their children make this decision:

*"It was **my parents wish** [even] before I [decided to go] to America. I did not have this wish... my parents wanted me to go to a university there" (#4, Student)*

"My parents have thought about my future...they think it could help me develop more abilities" (#7, Student)

*"My child wanted to go to America, but she is that competitive, I think. After the discussion between me and her dad, **we decided** to send her to Singapore, because there are lots of Chinese people in Singapore." (#6, Parent)*

A study by Lee, Wong and Brown (1996) on New Zealand and Hong Kong Chinese immigrant families suggests that Chinese parents are more directly involved in their children's education than New Zealand parents, who seem to take a more passive role, offering advice and leaving the final choice to their children. The study notes that Chinese parents actively participated in making suggestions regarding their children's education (career paths and education institutions) and use persuasion tactics to gain compliance. The authors suggest that a reason for the more direct involvement among Chinese parents is the strong cultural value rooted in Confucianism.

".....one should be filial....respect their elders... earnest and truthful... is it not pleasant to learn with constant perseverance and application?" (Confucius 500 BC; cited from Yen 1995).

A review of the literature on Chinese immigrant parenting by Shuang Ji and Koblinsky (2009) found that Chinese parents' beliefs regarding parenting, child care and education are influenced by Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist teachings. Confucius emphasised the importance of teaching a child to be competent and placed the responsibility of teaching the child on the parents and the responsibility to learn on the children (Shek, 2006). A child's devotion to his or her parents is governed by the concept of filial piety, which includes "demonstrating respect, nurturance, and unconditional obedience to parental wishes" (Shek, 2006); parent's devotion and love to their children is demonstrated through control and discipline (Zhao, 2001; cited from Shuang Ji and Kolinsky, 2009). Chinese children tend to be respectful and receptive to their parents' arrangements in order to maintain harmony and the hierarchical relationship (Lee et al. 1996). It is from this historical root which defines the ingrained Chinese cultural values as noted by Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) as typically *collectivistic*, that is, the need to maintain harmony and loyalty to the in-group, *masculine*, which typically assigns gender specific roles and high *power distance*, that is, maintaining hierarchical relationships.

The deeply rooted Confucian philosophy which demands children to be filial is evident from the results, the children expect to be responsible for their parents' wellbeing in the future, while parents expect their children to care for them in their retirement.

"I will come back to China... My parents are Chinese officers. If I immigrate in America, they can't go there. So I will not consider about this aspect." (#18, Student)

"Yes. I think it's a good choice to come back to China. My parents are in China. When I come back to China, I can contribute to my country and take care of my parents." (#14, Student)

"I don't want her to immigrate... Because once she immigrates, we have to immigrate as well. We are more used to the lifestyle in China." (#5, Parent)

Child-centred decision making

While Chinese parenting styles and values are still strongly influenced by Confucianism, China's open door policy, globalization, economic reforms, migration to the West, has resulted in the dilution of these ingrained values to a Western and thus more liberal parenting style (Pearce, 2006). This shift is also noted in our study where there appears to be a softening of the authoritarian style of decision making, that is, some participants assert that the choice of where they should study was made jointly and in some cases, the students made the decision themselves.

"We have to first respect his wish. Of course, we try our best to support him... It's mainly his decision. After all, he is an adult, we will respect his choice." (#11, Parent)

This shift is also because of China's one child policy which was mandated by the government in 1975 to reduce the number of people competing for resources as part of their modernization programme (Fong, 2002). Amongst the myriad of social issues and changes brought forth by this policy is the emergence of "little emperors" or "little princesses", which now forms a

generation of spoiled children (Shao and Herbig, 1994; Fong 2002). Shek (2006) notes that Chinese families today are more child-centred, more lenient in discipline, and in favour of treating both male and female children equally, for example, providing the same education privileges to both boys and girls in the family (which is contrary to Confucianism (Ko, 1991) where women were treated as inferior to men) .

“Yes, they [my parents] do [support decision]. Because I am the only child from my family, they treat me as the centre of the family.” (#14, Student)

“It is the wish of my whole family [both self and parents]. Because there is only one daughter in my family, parents had this thought, and I had this wish, so they support me to go abroad.” (#12, Student)

“We do not hope to immigrate. We hope to live in China when we are old. Regarding my daughter, I think we will respect her choice. She is the single child from our family, she may miss her hometown and parents and finally come back. But we will respect her choice. If she comes back, we will be very happy; if she stays abroad, we understand her choice. (#13, Parent).

However, in sacrificing everything for their children’s education, parents are still very much in control of their children’s decision. It is interesting to note the multiple times the collective pronoun “we” is used by the parents when discussing how the decision was made, rather than the child’s (i.e. using the pronoun “he” or “she”). Being child-centred does not necessarily imply equal power in the decision, but that the decision is made for the sole benefit of the children.

*“I want to give her a chance for further study, so **we** chose to study MBA.” (#13, Parent)*

*“...I also hope that New Zealand can help her to achieve her wish, **our** wish, and the family’s wish. Hope she can stay in New Zealand”. (#3, Parent)*

Sacrifice, education and success

Education is perceived as the ticket to a bright future, as an investment with the promise of a good return, not only for the children themselves, but for the parents. In securing this investment parents are willing to make sacrifices to secure a brighter future for their children. This concurs with past research which highlights that education, to the Chinese is viewed as a key to be socially mobile, thus emphasis is placed on education and is seen as a long term investment, with benefits, not only for the child but more so for the family (Lee et al., 1996; Shek, 2006). Education, that is, academic success is equated with financial success where the entire family is able to achieve higher status within the community as well as higher living standards.

Conversely, failure may result in shame and guilt for both the family and the child (Lui and Li, 2006; cited from Shuang Ji and Koblinksy, 2009). This is reflected in our result where a

parent noted shame she felt for her child when she failed to be admitted to a university in China.

“It’s a shame to say, that my daughter did not pass the entry examination to Chinese universities, so we thought we would try for overseas tertiary education.... She is afraid that she would lose her face in China. She did not pass the entry examination, so she could not go to Chinese universities, so she wanted to go abroad. It’s quite lucky that her dad and I have saved some money these years, so we also thought that we would send her abroad.” (#6, Parent)

Sacrifices come in several forms, for example, sacrificing financially. Most parents save to provide their children with an overseas education:

“...we are capable of paying all these costs. My parents wanted me to have a brighter future, so they are willing to spend less on themselves” (#2, student)

Although finance is the biggest form of sacrifice, students are aware that their priority is their studies, thus they need to sacrifice their lifestyle. Both parents and students themselves feel that the priority is to study, and in order to gain success, one must focus on studies and not be sidetracked with working or pleasure:

“...But if I want to be successful, I have to pay for it [in terms of lifestyle]” (#2, student)

“..I think I should overcome the climate, environment, and cultural differences. I must overcome them.” (#4, Student)

“I think the aim for her is to study hard, if the place is too convenient for shopping, it will have a negative impact on her study. The environment must be suitable for study, and this is what I emphasise.” (#13, Parent)

Implication and future research

Marketers of education to overseas Chinese students are aware of the strong influence parents have in the students’ choice of education institutions but they must also take note of the intricacies in the relationships between parents, relatives and children. Traditional Confucianism intermingled with self-sacrificial tendencies and modern, western values make this market segment particularly challenging. For example, while parents are totally committed to giving the best education and give the impression that the final decision rest on the children, parents seem very much in control behind the scene, and children too seem to finally defer to their parents. Gaining the blessings of their parents in their decisions and being filial children are still very much part of the identity of Chinese children in this modern world.

Our preliminary research has indicated that further research should be undertaken to understand the roles of these three values in decision making, i.e. traditional values rooted in Confucianism, child-centeredness, and modern western values.

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