Exploring Two Major Factors Affecting Mainland Graduates in Hong Kong Universities Back to Mainland from the Perspective of Cultural Capital Theory

Qingwen Xu

Hong Kong Metropolitan University, Hong Kong, China

melody323@163.com

Abstract. From the perspective of cultural capital theory, this paper explores two major factors influencing Mainland graduates' choices to return to the mainland after completing their studies in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions: institutional environment and family social capital. The study reveals that, although the Hong Kong government has introduced various policies, such as the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG), to encourage Mainland students to remain in Hong Kong, these policies have shown limited effects in practice. Conversely, the talent flow back to Mainland China has been significantly driven by policy incentives like the "Thousand Talents Program" implemented by the Chinese government. In addition, family social capital also plays an important role in graduates' decision-making. Factors such as family relationship, social network, and financial support significantly affect mainland students' career choice and sense of cultural belonging. This paper provides valuable insights for the Mainland and Hong Kong in terms of talent exchange and retention policies, and also suggests research directions for further optimizing the relevant policies.

Keywords: Cultural Capital Theory; Mainland Graduates; Hong Kong Universities; Institutional Environment; Family Social Capital.

1. Introduction

Aligning with the enrollment expansion of universities in Hong Kong, many mainland students have recently chosen to pursue their tertiary higher education in Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region of China (Yu and Zhang, 2016). According to the Hong Kong Immigration Department, non local graduates who intend to come/stay in Hong Kong SAR for employment can be granted to stay in Hong Kong for 24 months without other conditions through the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG) visa (Dotdot News, 2024). The extension of the IANG visa from 12 to 24 months shows Hong Kong's determination to retain top mainland graduates, aiming to develop the city into an international cultural hub bridging East and West.

Meanwhile, the shift regulations that the Immigration Department of the Government of the Hong Kong SAR of the People's Republic of China launched in November 1, 2023 dedicates to helping Mainland students to familiarize the workplace environment in Hong Kong, further to equip them with mindset to stay and work in Hong Kong after graduation. However, the figures disclosed by the Immigration Department show that since 2013, the number of Mainland graduates approved under the IANG (the arrangement for non-local graduates to stay in/return to Hong Kong to take up employment) has been drastically dropping from around 8,000 to 9,000 each year to around 6,000 in 2020 and 2021 (Wenweipo, 2022). In this regard, it can be observed that the promulgating policies released by the Hong Kong government to attract outstanding mainland graduates to stay in Hong Kong has hit a cold streak, and its policy still remains at the stage of attraction rather than retention. Many mainland graduates are regarded Hong Kong as one stop and a stepping-stone for their further development (Li and Bray, 2007). Huang (2019) interpreted Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital as contacts, social networks, and relationships that individuals can engage or operate. Therefore, the theoretical framework of cultural capital theory can be used to interpret the influencing factors of this phenomenon.

Previous studies, mainly focusing on cultural adaptation and the well-beings of Mainland students studying in Hong Kong, rarely touched upon the influencing factors of Mainland graduates in Hong Kong returning to the Mainland for development under the cultural capital perspective. To fill this gap, this study aims to apply the cultural capital theory to examine the two major factors that influence mainland graduates studying in Hong Kong backing to the mainland for further development. The significance this study lies in providing valuable reference for the mainland government to continuously maintain the polymerization of talent resources, while nurturing a quality workforce to construct the national modernization development.

2. Literature Review on Cultural Capital Theory

From the conception of Cultural Capital Theory, it applies to the individual level (Wut et. al, 2022). Social capital, another form of cultural capital, can be regarded as individual property. The exploration of the factors influencing mainland graduates in Hong Kong universities to return to the mainland for further development can be effectively understood through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Richardson, 1986). This theory posits that cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied (skills and knowledge), objectified (cultural artifacts), and institutionalized (educational credentials) (Richardson, 1986). The literature review of this study synthesizes relevant literature to elucidate the two major factors affecting mainland graduates' decisions to return to the mainland, as per the cultural capital perspective. Huang (2019) interprets cultural capital as the contacts, social networks, and relationships that individuals can engage or operate. Social capital, as an essential component of cultural capital, pro-vitalizes in the decision-making process of mainland graduates in Hong Kong. The size and strength of network can significantly influence individual's decision to stay or leave a particular location. Gu and Tong (2012) discuss the identity construction of cross-boundary students in a multilingual university in Hong Kong, highlighting the importance of social networks in their academic and professional lives. The ability to mobilize social connections is a key factor that can either facilitate or hinder the integration of mainland graduates into the Hong Kong workforce. Li (2022) interprets it from the layer of language barriers and explored the significance of English, Mandarin, and Cantonese for seeking for a job in Hong Kong, emphasizing the role of linguistic capital in the job market. Meanwhile, cultural adaptation and the construction of identity are integral to understanding the decisions of mainland graduates. Ip (2015) discusses the politics of belonging and the campaign against mainland visitors in Hong Kong, which can influence the cultural adaptation of mainland students. As a qualitative study conducted China's mainland and local university students in Hong Kong revealed that students lack opportunities for mutually engaging experiences across multiple points in time due to fragmented daily living space, defended interpersonal space, and politicized online space, which contribute to the absence of cross-group interactions (Tian, 2017). China's mainland students facing challenges in Hong Kong often maximize their chances to return to China for career growth after graduation.

3. Analysis on Two Influencing Factors

This study, from a cultural capital perspective, examines the impact of institutional environment and family cultural capital on the social phenomenon of mainland graduates returning to the mainland after finishing their studies in Hong Kong.

3.1 Institutional Environmental Factors

Education and career policies, as part of the institutional environment, greatly influence mainland graduates' career choices and development, reflecting cultural capital's role in offering opportunities to gain and build other capital forms.

3.1.1 Comparison in Policy Support

The history of Mainland students coming to Hong Kong for further studies can be traced back to the early 20th century when the University of Hong Kong (HKU), the oldest university in Hong Kong, was established (Liu, 1999). Because of the Hong Kong government's policy support, the data provided by the UGC reveals that the number of Mainland students coming to Hong Kong for tertiary education has tripled over the past 11 years, from 3,319 in the 2004/2005 academic year to 11,548 in the 2014/2015 academic year. The influx of talents to study in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions has been supported by policies enacted by the Hong Kong government, such as the Hong Kong government's policy on the arrangement for non-local graduates to stay in Hong Kong for employment (IANG) and the revision of the scope of part-time employment for non-local students studying full-time in Hong Kong, which provides opportunities to assist non-local students in adapting to Hong Kong's working environment, which is a kind of institutionalized policy environment capital. However, the effectiveness of the policy depends not only on its existence, but also on how graduates perceive and utilize these opportunities. A recent survey of mainland master's degree students majoring in education at the Chinese University of Hong Kong found that only 19% of them said that they were "likely" or "very likely" to work in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, a study of Mainland students' adaptation to living and studying in Hong Kong found that the Cantonese language environment, social relationships, political identity and discrimination were significant factors affecting Mainland students' adaptation to Hong Kong society (Yu & Zhang, 2016). These significant influences reflect the deep-level of interaction between Mainland graduates and Hong Kong's institutional environment, which in turn affects their destinations decisions on career development after graduation.

Conversely, the China's mainland government introduced the "Thousand Talents Program" policy in 2008, aiming to attract Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and overseas students to return to work in China by offering leadership, professional, or technical positions. For outstanding professionals, the government also provides benefits such as housing, medical care, comprehensive insurance, employment opportunities for spouses, and admission of children to prestigious schools (Recruitment Program for Global Experts, 2019). Therefore, this also significantly influences the choice of Mainland graduates studying in Hong Kong to return to the Mainland for career development after graduation from the policy and institutional environment level.

3.2 Family Social Capital

Family social capital, a key element in cultural capital theory, has a profound impact on an individual's educational achievement and career choices. Family social capital encompasses the social networks, social relationships, and social engagement among family members, providing additional resources and opportunities for children (Coleman, 1988). In the realm of education, this concept can be interpreted from two folds, which are family ties and social capital, thereby providing students with wider access to information, stronger social support and richer career opportunities (Huang, 2019).

3.2.1 Family Ties

Family relationships, usually referring to the connection between parents and children is often viewed as the most profound enduring bond, one that centers on inter-generational solidarity and support (Bengtson & Martin, 2001; Maccoby, 1999). In particular, the legal and moral responsibilities that parents have to their children are lifelong, and they do not perish even when the children grow into adulthood (Mulder, 2018). It has been suggested that there is an inter-generational contract in which adult children repay their parents for their upbringing by fulfilling the obligation of "filial piety," reflecting the child's responsibility to his or her parents (Liefbroer & Mulder, 2006). This unique and important parent-child relationship and its responsibilities highlight families' critical role in migration decision-making, even beyond other social networks (Mulder, 2018). Thus, analyzing migration behavior from a life course perspective reveals that inter-individual ties and dependencies

(e.g., parental duties) significantly impact young people's migration choices. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of migration can conversely impact interpersonal relationships over time (Mulder, 2018). Most mainland graduates from universities in Hong Kong choose to return to China's mainland primarily due to family responsibilities. The data from "A Study on the Attitudes and Situations of Mainlanders Studying and Working in Hong Kong" indicates that most of the "Hong Kong drifters" who plan to leave Hong Kong do so because "the center of gravity of their families is in the Mainland". For this group of only children under the one-child policy, they will stay in Hong Kong only if they can establish new intimate relationships (e.g. meeting their other half) in Hong Kong. From a long ran, they will go back to the Mainland to take care of their parents and build their own families, indicating that family ties is deemed to be significantly affecting their minds to back to China's mainland.

3.2.2 Social Capital

For mainland students, the impact of family social capital is manifested in several ways: firstly, career opportunities and networks, students with higher family social capital are able to access employment opportunities in the mainland through their family networks, and the families of these students have stronger social connections and resources in the mainland, which makes them more inclined to look for jobs in the mainland (Li, 2022). Social networks not only facilitate the flow of information in the labor market and reduce the barriers that individuals encounter when exploring job opportunities, but also assist employers in reducing the challenges they face when evaluating potential employees. In view of this, many Mainland students prefer returning to the Mainland, where they can rely on a familiar social environment and cultural background to develop their careers, rather than adapting to a completely new workplace culture and language environment in Hong Kong. Secondly, family support and sense of belonging, family emotional support and cultural identity are crucial for many Mainland students to choose to return to the Mainland (Yu & Zhang, 2016).

Cultural identity refers to an individual's identification with and sense of belonging to his or her cultural background. For Mainland students educated in Hong Kong, they may experience cultural conflict and identity challenges. Differences in culture, language and lifestyle between Hong Kong and the Mainland result in students feeling isolated, which enhances their sense of identification and belonging to the Mainland culture. This strong sense of cultural identity and belonging prompts them to prefer returning to the Mainland for better integration into the familiar cultural environment. Lastly, economic considerations, students whose families are better off financially are more inclined to return to the Mainland because their families can provide them with start-up capital or initial living expenses in the Mainland, reducing their financial pressure to take up employment in Hong Kong (Wenweipo, 2022). For those students who aspire to start their own business, the start-up capital provided by their families is an important driving force. Entrepreneurship is often accompanied by high risk and uncertainty, and financial support from the family can mitigate these risks and give students more confidence to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams. In the Mainland, such financial support may be more readily available to students due to the existence of family networks, thus making them more inclined to return to the Mainland for development. For most fresh graduates, the initial cost of living is an important financial consideration. In a city like Hong Kong where the cost of living is high, the initial living expenses may become a heavy burden. Lau Ka Fai, Chief Analyst at Midland Properties, indicates that the average rent for private residences increased by 1.2% from April to May 2024, attaining HK$36.37 per sq ft, representing a three-month rise and the highest level since December 2019. In contrast, the cost of living on the mainland is relatively low and the financial support provided by families can cover a longer period of time, giving students more time and space to plan their career paths. Data shows that the proportion of Mainland graduates choosing to return to the Mainland has risen in recent years, which is related to the enhancement of family social capital (Wenweipo, 2022). One of the surveys showed that more than 60% of the students indicated that family factors were one of the main reasons why they chose to return to the Mainland after graduation (Li & Bray, 2007). In this regard, family social capital has a significant impact on the post-graduation

career choices of Mainland students studying in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions, and the network resources, emotional support and financial assistance provided by their families are important factors that motivate these students to return to the Mainland.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study, using Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital and literature review as research methodology, finds that institutional environment and family social capital significantly influence the decision-making process of these graduates. First, the institutional environment is crucial in graduates' decision-making. The Hong Kong government has attempted to retain Mainland students through policies such as the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG) to remain in Hong Kong, which has had limited effect. In contrast, policies such as the Mainland government's "Thousand Talents Programme" offer attractive incentives for returning professionals, including leadership positions, housing allowance, healthcare, and education opportunities for their children, having attracted a large number of graduates to return to China. Second, family social capital is deemed to be an important determinant. Social networks and support systems in the family provide career opportunities and emotional support for Mainland graduates, making returning to the Mainland a more attractive option. Survey data showed that over 60% of students cited family factors as the main reason for returning to the Mainland. However, these analyses are based on the analysis of literature review and existing data and do not touch on the empirical level, which can be observed as one of the major limitations of this study.

To conclude, the decision of Mainland students to return to their home countries after graduating from Hong Kong's higher education institutions is influenced by multiple factors, including the institutional environment, family social capital, and educational and cultural identity. The Mainland offers more attractive incentives for returnees, family social capital provides critical support, and cultural identity challenges in Hong Kong further drive return preferences. Future research can explore in greater depth the interplay of these factors in different socio-cultural contexts, providing valuable insights for policymakers to formulate more effective talent retention strategies and to promote the sustainable development of China's mainland and Hong Kong in terms of talent exchange and talent reservation.

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