

Cross-border choice as identity investment: Cases of Malaysian and Indonesian ethnic Chinese students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Hong Kong has recently begun to promote cross-border higher education in other Asian countries. This paper reports a case study on two ethnic Chinese students from Malaysia and Indonesia who chose to pursue higher education in Hong Kong. By placing the students at the centre of investigation against the social, political, economic and educational contexts of their home countries as well as the host territory, the present life history study seeks to gain a holistic understanding of cross-border mobility. These include the different forces at work in the students' process of decision-making, the factors contributing to their choice and the consequences of the choice. Findings suggest the external push-pull factors were mediated by the students' personal backgrounds and dispositions in their decision-making. The juggling process is conceptualized as an identity investment involving the calculation of costs and returns. While data shows that the two students have benefitted from the cross-border mobility in terms of redefining their ethnic identity and creating global academic/professional identities, implications of the purposes of cross-border mobility and study methods for student mobility are discussed.

Introduction

In the global trend of internationalizing higher education, efforts in recruiting non-local students to study in Hong Kong have only become increasingly evident since the release of the “*Report on Hong Kong Higher Education*” in 2002 (Sutherland, 2002). In 2007/08, Hong Kong had a total of 7293 non-local students, which constituted 10% of its total student enrolment in the public-funded higher education programs (University Grants Council, 2008). The majority (93%) of these non-local students come from Mainland China. One of the reasons is probably that Hong Kong is not only a destination in itself but also a stepping stone for their further international development (Li & Bray, 2007). Nevertheless, about 5% of non-local students (347 students in 2007/08) are from other Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Although the number of non-local students from other Asian countries is small in its own right, it constitutes an increase of about 20% when compared with the enrolment figures of the previous year (292 students in 2006/07). While the growth rate of non-mainland Chinese students can be attributed to the enhanced internationalization efforts of Hong Kong at its institutional and system levels (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006), it merits an in-depth inquiry into the cross-border decision from the perspective of these students.

The present study focuses on students from Malaysia and Indonesia because many of these are also Chinese descendents. It will be interesting to understand the reasons why these ethnic Chinese decide to pursue their higher education in Hong Kong and what is involved in their decision-making process. There exists a wealth of cross-border mobility studies at the system and institutional levels. Relatively less attention has been given to the micro level study of motivating factors for individual

students against the contexts at the macro and meso levels. This study employed the life history method to examine the lives of two ethnic Chinese students whose homelands are Malaysia and Indonesia respectively, with the purpose of seeking a comprehensive understanding of the different forces at work in their border-crossing decisions. The findings add to our understanding of the individually mediated push-pull factors and the impact of such a decision on their life and career development.

The paper begins with reviewing the literature on cross-border mobility in higher education. After outlining the methods of study, it provides a contextual analysis of the three territories: Malaysia and Indonesia from which the students come, and the characteristics of Hong Kong as the host territory. Then it presents analysis of the decision-making process, the various forces at work and the impact of the cross-border choice, followed by a discussion on a new conceptual understanding of this choice among these ethnic Chinese students.

Trend and Purposes for Student Mobility

Student mobility at university level has drastically increased in the past few decades and it has been in the foreground of study on issues related to the internationalization of higher education (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Existing student mobility studies have been widely conducted from a macro or meso perspective. One major strand of the studies is related to national and regional flows and statistics (e.g. Kelo, 2006; Marginson & Wende, 2007). The impact of student mobility on internationally oriented labor markets and careers, and the values and purposes of

internationalization have also been important themes of many studies conducted at a macro level (e.g. Gribble, 2008; Musselin, 2004; Stronkhorst, 2005).

Marginson and Wende (2007) report that in 2003 there were a total of 2.117 million designated foreign students in the OECD area (accounting for 1.976 million of these) and in other nations that provided data. The figure constitutes about 2% of all higher education students worldwide and a recent report suggests this will increase to 8 million by 2025 (Altbach, 2004). Developing and high-growth regions, which cannot provide sufficient places at home, used to send students to Western countries. However, one of the recent changes found in the cross-border flows is the further pluralisation of the exporting nations. The trend of Asian students going out to English-speaking nations such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom was seen to have slowed down (Altbach, 2004). Instead, there is a growing sign that some Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and China have become attractive providers of international higher education. The attraction is considered to be two-fold. One is that the Asian host countries offer significantly cheaper education programs than their Western counterparts and the status of Asian universities has increased. The other is related to better job opportunities for the graduates in these Asian countries (Marginson, 2006; Ziguras & Law, 2006).

There is also analysis on the purposes of increased internationalization of higher education from the policy, institutional and individual levels. Knight (2004), for example, highlights, at the policy level, the pressing need for human resource development, nation building, strategic alliances, commercial trade, and social/cultural development. Rationales promoting internationalizing higher education at the institutional level include the boost of academic standards, cultural diversity,

student and staff development and income generation (Knight, 2004; Stohl, 2007). It has also been observed that there is a growing tendency that the rationales of international higher education at policy/sector or institutional level have been increasingly dominated by commercial and financial benefits in different parts of the world (de Wit, 2000; Knight, 2006).

At the individual level, the notion of “investment” has been used to refer to the source of students’ motivation in the pursuit of education. In the study of second language learners, Norton (2000) and Gu (2008) suggest that students invest in the learning of a target language in order to acquire a range of symbolic and material resources which were previously unattainable to them. One of the symbolic resources gained from the investment in a second language is the increase of students’ cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). In addition to the material gains, which Pyvis and Chapman (2007) coined as “positional investment”, there is a kind of “self-transformative investment”, which results in the development of the person.

Most studies on student mobility follow a macro or meso perspective, which contribute to our understanding of the trends and structural factors influencing cross-border mobility. While relationship between the macro/meso and micro is studied, the focus is more on how individual students’ decisions are shaped by the wider social political or institutional forces. However, a recent attempt to explore the issue of the cross-border mobility of mainland Chinese students’ studying in Hong Kong was conducted with an approach to address all the micro, meso and macro levels so as to understand the interaction of students’ internal and external factors in their decision on the destination of their higher education (Li & Bray, 2007). This holistic approach informs the present study as it promises to illuminate the

complexities of the ethnic Chinese's cross-border decisions.

Choice of Cross-Border Education

A combination of the push and pull factors offered by Altbach (1998, 2004) is a framework which has been widely applied to explain cross-border flows and analyze the choice of cross-border higher education. The push factors refer to the unfavorable conditions of students' home countries whereas the favorable conditions of the study destination are coined the pull factors. Traditional push factors include limited access to higher education or unavailability of desired programs in the students' home countries while pull factors are related to scholarships, advanced research facilities, and a better socio-economic and political environment. Muzzarol and Soutar (2002) found that the traditional push factors have become less important in recent years as many Asian countries have improved the supply of higher education locally. Instead, the pull factors are stronger, and include students' perception of the better quality of an overseas program, their ability to gain entry to preferred courses, a desire to improve understanding of foreign societies and an intention of migration after graduation. In other words, in addition to the traditional educational, economic and political factors, social and cultural factors have gained increased importance. This was echoed by Li and Bray's (2007) study on the Chinese Mainland students who pursued cross-border higher education in Hong Kong. The main motivation of these students was academic, and then followed by social and cultural factors, which came before economic considerations.

However, Altbach's standard push-pull model has been criticized for focusing on the negative forces of the home countries and the positive forces of the

study destination, which are the macro and meso contexts external to the students. It does not, therefore, cater for the analysis of the individual students' perspective in responding to similar push-pull factors (Li & Bray, 2007). The "two-way push-pull model" advanced by Li and Bray contributes further to the analysis of the home countries and institutions, which do not only have negative forces which propel some students abroad, but also positive forces to keep students at home. Similarly, potential host countries and institutions not only have positive forces which attract international students but also negative forces which repel them. By this they give prompt attention to the students' characteristics, which may cause them to respond differently to the external push-pull factors.

The two-way push-pull model, nevertheless, is confined to the identification of certain student features such as family background, academic characteristics and perception, etc, which shape the decision of taking or not taking cross-border education in a certain location. There are still limitations on illuminating the complexities involved in the juggling process situated at the micro, meso and macro levels that leads to individuals' final career choices. A synthesized push-pull model developed by Chen (2007) is of particular relevance to the present study. The model not only analyzes the two-way push-pull factors but also provides analysis of the process of choosing cross-border study.

In Chen's study of four Chinese graduate students in Canada, findings show that there are three stages in the choosing process. First, it is the *decision* to study abroad - also coined as the "predisposition" stage, which refers to the personal needs assessment, the search and acquisition of information on studying abroad and the ultimate decision to study abroad. The second stage involves the *search, selection and*

application, which includes the acquisition of information on countries, institutions, programs, locations and costs, and the comparison and analysis of all the features offered by each country, institution, program, and location. By the end of this stage, a decision where to study, as well as which schools and how many schools to apply for is arrived at. Finally comes the *choice* of a host institution, which includes the assessment of institutional characteristics (academic and administration), country-specific features (environment, visa/immigration, economic/costs), and location.

Informed by Li & Bray's (2007) and Chen's (2007) models, the present study made an inquiry into the decision-making processes of an Indonesian Chinese student and a Malaysian Chinese student who have crossed the border to study in Hong Kong. It seeks to understand the interactive forces at work in their decision making at the micro (individual characteristics), meso (higher education institution) and macro (national/territorial) levels. Moreover, it aims at offering a holistic understanding of the impact of cross-border study on the life and career development of these students.

Methods of the Study

The present study, which is a part of a larger study on the internationalization of Hong Kong higher education, focuses on an in-depth understanding of two ethnic Chinese students' decision-making processes, the factors contributing to their cross-border decisions and the impact of the choices to their life and career development. The students' career decisions are to be understood in the context of a web of political, social, cultural and economic relationships. The life

history method was employed for the study as it is deemed powerful to see the intersection of the life of people with the history of society (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This kind of inquiry strategies has been widely used in the school sectors since the 1980s. However, major attempts to use the life history method in the study of higher and adult education were not seen until the early 1990s (Hoar, 1994). The method has recently gained increasing interest in the field of higher education and migration (Fuller, 2007; Lewis, 2005) but little has been undertaken in the area of international higher education.

This qualitative study was a follow-up study of a questionnaire survey sent to non-local postgraduate students coming to Hong Kong from Malaysia and Indonesia, with the designated purpose of understanding the complexities of the cross-border decision-making processes. Based on the demographic information in the questionnaire, informants were approached and finally two volunteers were selected for the study. In-depth interviews, which lasted for two to three hours, were conducted with each informant in 2007 to explore their family and intergenerational backgrounds, education and work-related experiences. Peter, the Indonesian student, was in his final year of PhD studies. The Malaysian student, Kim, was in her first year of the two year part-time postgraduate program. Interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis. Email correspondence with the informants was employed to trace the informants' life and career development in 2008.

Life histories can be case studies, but place the person at the centre of investigation against the social, economic and historical contexts (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). For the purpose of location of the contexts, two types of documents were collected. The first type was personal documents that provide additional information

for the triangulation of the personal context. These included web-based information and photos of the informants. Another type of document was related to the national and regional histories of the three locations, Indonesia, Malaysia and Hong Kong. These included national profiles such as statistical reports, monographs on national histories, and policy papers on education systems from the websites of those specified policy makers and higher education providers. Analysis of these documents, as shown in the next sections, outlines important contexts for the understanding of the external push-pull factors in border-crossing decisions.

Contexts for the External Push-Pull Factors

Indonesia

Indonesia, a nation with 245 million people in 2007 (U.S. Department of State, 2008), is the fourth most populated country in the world. Its physical boundaries were established by the Netherlands in the colonial era. Indonesia is a multi-ethnic society, with more than 1000 ethnic/sub-ethnic groups (Suryadinata, Arifin & Ananta, 2003). Javanese culture dominates other cultures of Indonesia, but the main language of the nation is a form of Malay called Bahasa Indonesia, which has become the official language since the Dutch transferred sovereignty after World War II.

The Chinese was the sixth largest ethnic group in the 1930 Population Census in Indonesia but its rank dropped to 15th in the 2000 census. It is estimated that the actual figure is about 1.5% of the total Indonesian population (Suryadinata,

Arifin & Ananta, 2003). However, the Chinese are regarded to have controlled some 70–75 percent of medium and large scale private (non-state) enterprises (Koning, 2007). The exact number of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is never a question with a straightforward answer, reflecting a long and troubled history of this ethnic group dating back to the time when the Chinese first arrived in Indonesia in the 17th century.

Vickers (2005), an Australian writer, in the introduction of his book “*A history of modern Indonesia*”, sketches the general impression people have about the country.

Indonesia is generally featured in the world’s media for political violence and involvement in international terrorism. It has rated at the top of international corruption watch lists, and its president between 1967 and 1998, Suharto, has been named as the head of state who extorted the most personal wealth from his country. (p.1)

Chinese have frequently been the scapegoat for violence in Indonesia. Turner (2003) traced the conflicts between ethnic Chinese and the indigenous Indonesians back to the beginning of Dutch rule. The colonizers introduced a divide-and-rule policy towards the people. The Chinese established many trade monopolies and controlled most of the banking sector, setting themselves apart from the *pribumi* majority. Therefore the Javanese aristocracy, in particular, became deeply hostile towards the Chinese.

During Soekarno’s administration (1945-65), a directive that demanded Chinese to close their business in rural areas and relocate to urban areas was enforced. Then the establishment of Suharto’s New Order regime in 1966 and its consolidation of power for 30 years further intensified the ethnic tensions. A series of assimilation

policies was administered, such as strongly encouraging ethnic Chinese to change their names to become more 'Indonesian-sounding', banning Chinese script, removing dozens of Chinese language newspapers, forbidding Chinese cultural expression, and closing Chinese language schools and education facilities (Turner, 2003). At the same time, continuous official discrimination was directed towards the Chinese. An obvious measure was the identity cards that all Indonesians must carry, containing a code that allowed the holder to be identified as a Chinese or not. The May 1998 anti-Chinese riots were considered to have proved the failure of the assimilationist policy, which placed the Chinese in a paradoxical position that made them an easy target of racial and class hostility (Hoon, 2006).

Indonesia is a multi-religious nation. Islam is the dominant religion with more than 170 million followers (Suryadinata, Arifin & Ananta, 2003). Anti-Chinese sentiment, to a certain extent, was blended with wider Christian-Muslim conflicts. Some of the anti-Chinese violence was stoked by Muslim extremist groups who burnt down some Christian Chinese churches since the early 1990s (Vickers, 2005). Suharto's sanction of public discussion of sectarianism, i.e., the forbidding of the reporting of ethnicity, race and religion in the media, has contained religious and ethnic conflicts. Yet frequently it was the Chinese who were the first victims of violence in the outbreaks.

With respect to higher education opportunities, Instruction No. 37/1967 was set to restrict the educational opportunities for Chinese during the establishment of Suharto's New Order regime (Freedman, 2003). A ten percent limit on university places for Chinese students was imposed for courses in medicine, engineering, law and science (Turner, 2003). The development of higher education in Indonesia has

been lagging behind.. In terms of the development of international higher education, Indonesia attracts few fee-paying foreign students and there is a net outflow of students. Indonesia lacks a full capacity for doctoral training and most Indonesian doctorates are completed abroad (Marginson & Sawir, 2006).

Malaysia

The Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963 and marked the independence of the nation after 170 years of British rule. Malaysia is one of the most multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries in Southeast Asia, with a population of approximately 26.9 million in 2007 (U.S. Department of State, 2008). The Malays and other indigenous ethnic groups constitute 50.4 % of the population in Malaysia, who are called *Bumiputras*. Chinese are the next largest ethnic group, with approximately 24 % of the total population. (CIA Fact book, 2008). Malaysian Chinese are descendants of Mainland Chinese, some of whom could have settled in the country as early as the fifteenth century.

Similar to Indonesia, inter-ethnic conflicts are a part of the national history in Malaysia. However, ethnic Chinese have a record of much more active political involvement in Malaysia than the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Although the number of Chinese in political leadership was small, they could assert sufficient influence to protect Chinese business interests. For example, Tun Tan Siew Sin, the president of the Malaysian Chinese Association was in the position of Finance Minister from 1959 to 1974 (Heng, 1997). The May 13 Incident in 1969, which was triggered off by the election results, was basically a racial rioting originally involving Malays and ethnic Chinese, then later the Indians as well. Wealth disparities between the Malays and the

ethnic Chinese underlay the conflicts, despite the fact that about one quarter of Chinese households in the New Villages actually had incomes below the government-designated poverty line in the 1970s (Government of Malaysia, 1976).

The New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced in 1971, which aimed at nation building and economic restructuring, consisted of a range of affirmative action programs. Several clauses of the NEP, which gave economic and educational advantage to the Bumiputras, such as Bumiputra quotas in ownership of public company stock and entrance to universities, have had significant impact on the education and employment opportunities of ethnic Chinese (Time, 1969). In the ninth Malaysia Plan, the government is targeting the narrowing of the income gap between Bumiputera and the ethnic Chinese, from a ratio of 1:1.64 in 2004 to 1:1.50 in 2010 (Government of Malaysia, 2006). A national Cultural Policy to promote Islamic values and Malay culture was also instituted. There is government intolerance of non-Muslim views in the public space. The Chinese in Malaysia maintain a distinct communal identity and rarely intermarry with native Muslim Malays for religious and cultural reasons. Similar to Indonesian Chinese, most Malaysian Chinese consider their being "Chinese" simultaneously an ethnic, cultural and political identity.

In 1971, Malay was made the main medium of instruction in all state-run educational sectors, from primary schools to universities. Ethnic Chinese were determined to protect Chinese education and a Chinese organization, Dong Jiao Zong, began to run Chinese education for their children (Dong Jiao Zong, 2002). Chinese primary schools which use Mandarin as the main medium of instruction are state-supported but they receive disproportionately smaller funding than state schools teaching in Malay. These Chinese schools, which enrolled 85% of the total Chinese

school student population in 1988, suffered from teacher shortages, insufficient textbooks and poor facilities (Heng, 1997). Private Chinese secondary schools were allowed to continue but their examinations were not recognized by the government. At tertiary level, Chinese enrollment in three main universities dropped from 48.9% of the total enrollment to 26.5%, while at the same time the Malay figures rose from 40.2% to 66.2% during the period 1970 to 1980 (Ling et al., 1988, p.99). As a result, middle-class and affluent families finance their children's education in overseas schools and universities. Most graduates from private Chinese secondary schools further their studies in Taiwan, Japan or English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. A majority of overseas university graduates do not return to Malaysia (Ziguras & Law, 2006). Limited options are available for non-Malays in the government establishment and this is one of the important reasons.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is located on the south coast of China and borders Guangdong province of China. It was ceded to Britain by the Qing Dynasty government in 1842 and reverted to Chinese sovereignty on 1st July, 1997. This change of sovereignty differs from other cases of independence such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Firstly, Hong Kong has not gained independence but has been incorporated within China. The "one country, two systems" agreement promises that Hong Kong has a high degree of autonomy, which includes its capitalist economic system and ways of life for 50 years following the handover. It continues to operate its own laws, currencies and education system. Secondly, there were steps taken towards decolonization well before 1997 as Hong Kong had a long period of time (13 years from the signing of the Joint

Declaration in 1984) to prepare for the political handover. Thirdly, Hong Kong was in excellent shape financially at the time of the handover. (Bray,1997; Luk Fong, 2001).

The residents of Hong Kong are predominantly ethnic Chinese. Many of them arrived in Hong Kong during the Chinese Civil War and after the People's Republic of China state was established in 1949. A great majority (95%) of the total population (6,985,200 as at mid-2008) (Census & Statistics Department, 2008) are Chinese, with Cantonese as their mother tongue. However, Hong Kong has often been considered a metropolitan city where cultures of the East and West meet. King (1996, p. 274) argues that modern Hong Kong Chinese seem to have 'no identity problem' even with the meeting of the two cultures. Three-quarters of the ethnic Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong identified themselves as either a Hongkonger, or primarily a Hongkonger and secondarily Chinese. Less than 25% of the respondents considered themselves Chinese, or primarily Chinese and secondarily Hongkongers (Lam, et al.,1999), showing an interesting phenomenon in that ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong tend to identify culturally as Chinese yet prefer a regional rather than national identity (Leung, 1996). This may also indicate that many of the Hong Kong born Chinese tend to distinguish themselves from those living in Mainland China (Lau & Kuan, 1988). Many families have members who are residents outside the territory, largely in Mainland China, or in countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA since 1997. Thus Hong Kong has become a place where identities of people are fluid and hybrid (Luk Fong, 2001).

The education system in Hong Kong, up to now, largely follows the British model. English is taught in all aided primary and secondary schools. The influence of America is also growing in higher education as universities now have more academic

staff who has earned their degrees in the United States than in other countries (Postiglione, 2005). All these provide platforms for universities in Hong Kong to engage in global academic discourse and internationalization of higher education.

Higher education places were limited before 1989 as only 2.2% of the secondary school students could enter one of the two local universities. However, there was a rapid expansion of universities in the 1990s and currently Hong Kong has 12 degree-awarding higher education institutions (GovHK, 2008). A more visible intention towards internationalizing Hong Kong higher education was observed after the government released its Action Agenda on China's 11th Five-Year Plan (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005). It recommends the exploration of ways to attract more non-local students to study in Hong Kong and to develop Hong Kong into a regional education hub. Certain policies related to scholarships, student visas, part-time work, and employment which sponsors border-crossing to Hong Kong are already in place (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2008).

Due to Hong Kong's strong link with the Chinese mainland, a large number of Mainland Chinese students cross the border to study in the higher education institutions in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is also a place that attracts quite a number of students from Macau and Taiwan (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2008), making it an interesting meeting place for students of Chinese descendents from greater China.

Interaction of Internal and External Factors

Personal Characteristics of the Indonesian Student

Peter, an Indonesian Chinese, was granted a scholarship from a university in Hong Kong for his PhD study. He is the sixth generation of his family in Indonesia. His ancestors migrated from the Chinese mainland for “economic reasons and better living conditions”. Although he is not as proficient in English as he would like to be, he has great talent in science. He was among those few ethnic Chinese students who were able to gain a place in an Indonesian university for undergraduate study. Peter identifies himself as the offspring of the lower-middle class, as his parents “may only be able to support his graduate studies in Malaysia” if he has not been successful in securing scholarships from different transnational funds and/or from overseas universities.

Malaysia is not attractive to me, even though I haven't been there. When I was in my bachelor study, I was thinking about studying abroad. And I applied everywhere. I applied to Australia, Germany, the U.S.A., everywhere and everything. But what I got first was the scholarship to Thailand... (The Indonesian government) does not appreciate us. We have exams but we cannot compete with the Indonesians because of the discrimination issues. We are not awarded outstanding credits in the class. So, we would be outside of the top 10 (universities in Indonesia). (Peter)

Peter's potential in environmental technology was further developed in Thailand where he studied his masters degree. He was able to produce impactful research papers with his supervisor. In his master's study, Peter was highly absorbed in research work and aimed at studying further with a prominent professor in the field, who works in a Hong Kong university. Finally he was awarded an International Postgraduate Scholarship offered by that university, which has sponsored his tuition fees and living expenses in Hong Kong. Upon his graduation in doctoral degree, he was offered a job in the university.

Personal Characteristics of the Malaysian Student

Kim, a Malaysian Chinese student, was admitted to a part-time postgraduate course in Education in Hong Kong. As a Chinese descendent, Kim's grandfather

moved to Malaysia from southern China. Both her parents are professionals with a university education. Kim was sent to an international primary school when she was in grade five. She recalled the reasons for her parents' decision:

*I was in a private Chinese school from primary one to four. Perhaps my parents thought the class size was too big. I heard of some as big as having more than 70 students. I remember the school life there was really tough. For example, we had heaps of homework during the three-month school holidays.
(Kim)*

Kim had an opportunity to live in Canada for a few months and picked up English well when she was a child. She also received private tuition from an English tutor. She found English school fun and was relatively happy to be free from homework. Her secondary education was in the same “English private” school. Sometimes Kim had a feeling that she did not seem to be in the same world as her peers as “many parents were celebrities”. Moreover, her educational experience did not provide her opportunities to learn Malay well. One of the reasons is that “the grammar or spelling of Malay were evolving and kept changing in the early 90s”.

After Kim completed her first degree in Malaysia, she began her first job as a manager in a fashion chain-shop. The experience of supervising some ‘problematic’ adolescent sales assistants in the shop made her realize the importance of education.

I cannot teach in Malaysia because my university is not a local (state-run) one and my degree is not in education. That makes thing complicated. (Kim)

Kim then began to get involved in education-related jobs such as being a career consultant in the information center of some private universities. One of them she chose was a Chinese-run university because she considered “it was a good opportunity to serve the Chinese community”.

Cross-border study only became more realistic when she learnt more information about a post-graduate education program in Hong Kong, which was the result of her knowledge and exposure to career information. The information on a teacher education program in Hong Kong opened an invitation to realize her aspiration to be a teacher. Unlike Peter who as an undergraduate was always determined to study abroad and then actively searched for relevant information, the predisposition and search/selection/application stages of choosing overseas study were more interactive in Kim's case. While Peter's choice was facilitated by his competitiveness in gaining scholarships from higher education institutions or NGOs, Kim's choice was sponsored by a job opportunity in Hong Kong. She was employed to be an English instructor in a tertiary institution and her payment could support her part-time study studies in Hong Kong.

Personally Mediated Two-Way Push-Pull Factors

In the process of choosing cross-border study, the decisions of Peter and Kim were influenced by their personal characteristics, significant others, as well as the two-way push–pull factors (Chen, 2007). As an ethnic Chinese Christian, Peter perceived little opportunity for development in the country. The idea that “in Indonesia no one can get to the top position if you are not a Muslim was the critical push factor for Peter. Similarly, Kim also found the conditions unfavorable for her development.

It's not fair. Ultimately the laws are there to protect the Malays... Teachers hired by the government have a lot of advantages. They can utilize a 2% to 4% interest rate to buy a car and a house with a long grace period. (Kim)

While the pulling factors were evident out there, the border-crossing

mobility of Peter and Kim was mediated by their personal characteristics and identity. In other words, their personal need and the results of their personal assessment energized a range of career planning actions (Chen, 2007).

Luckily I am a Chinese. We are multi-lingual and more importantly, we are a group of progressive people. (Kim)

I have good education and can look around for other opportunities. (Peter)

Obviously the pull factors are related to the characteristics of Hong Kong as a destination of study. At the systemic level, Hong Kong is a Chinese-speaking region but English is the medium of instruction in most higher education institutions. This is considered to have played an important role in influencing their searching /selection/application stage. It is an advantage for Kim because English is the language she is most proficient in. For Peter, he finds his English more suitable to learn together with students in Hong Kong rather than with native English-speaking students in other Western countries. Moreover, the quality of Hong Kong education and facilities in the institutions are good and the tuition fees are lower than those in the West, including Australia (Marginson, 2006). Hong Kong's geographic proximity, business and cultural ties with the Chinese Mainland are another attraction to them. Studying in Hong Kong can serve as a stepping stone for career development in other parts of the world. The economic environment and better pay in Hong Kong, as well as the opportunity to apply for permanent residency after seven years of stay in Hong Kong, are also other pulling factors.

Despite the relative short history and thus limited visibility of Hong Kong international higher education, Peter and Kim chose the region because both of them have visited Hong Kong before. Kim came for tourism and Peter was selected to

participate in an exchange program when he was in Thailand. “Everything is so convenient,” is an impression Peter has of Hong Kong. “Convenient” not only refers to the quality of living but also to the cultural aspects such as food and dialects used. Kim does not feel “left out” because people talk to her in English when she has difficulties in understanding Chinese.

The choice of Hong Kong universities was also found to be mediated by their significant others (Chen, 2007). The decision of giving Kim an English private school education in Malaysia has opened and closed some of the education and career opportunities for Kim. Kim’s parents, who themselves completed their higher education in the United Kingdom and Canada, told Kim that “Chinese are not genuinely accepted in the West”. The remarks have had an impact on the choice of Kim’s border-crossing decision. As for Peter, the prominent figures in his academic field, including the supervisor for his Masters study in Thailand, have both directly and indirectly pointed his career path to Hong Kong.

The scholarship offered by transnational bodies, the higher education opportunities offered to non-local students, and the policy change of employment in Hong Kong at the systemic level, in turn facilitated the final choice of these students. It is important to note that the reverse push-pull factor involves a comparison with a third country to affect the final choice of a host institution (Li & Bray, 2007). Indonesians have had difficulties applying for admission in the universities in America since the September 11th incident. In Kim’s case, Singapore was once her first choice of study, but as the Singapore government only admits state-employed teachers to study postgraduate programs, Hong Kong became the best option for her.

Cross-Border Choice as Identity Investment

The motivations for the choice of these two ethnic Chinese share some commonalities, which have impacted their life and career development. The concept “identity investment” is used to capture such a feature. It is found that the decision of the two ethnic Chinese to study in Hong Kong involves not only the anticipation of material gains but also of certain symbolic resources (Norton, 2000; Gu, 2008). Ethnic identity is argued to be an integral component of the symbolic resources these students sought to attain. For the two students, the choice of crossing the border involves the surrendering of their assets with an expectation of gaining some ‘future benefits’.

My boyfriend is in Malaysia. We planned to get married but I gave up in the end after I'd got the contract as an English tutor. If you ask me what I have given up, I'd say that it is my marriage...This opportunity is hard to come by. I'd regret it if I missed it. (Kim)

There is a personal cost but also profits and gains in choosing the opportunity. I always think of the long-term impact of the present decision for my future benefits. (Peter)

The investment can be traced to the awareness of their ethnic identity and associated threat of inequality in educational, social and economic opportunities. On one hand, the two ethnic Chinese believed that the affirmative action programs in their countries pose unfair treatment to people of different ethnic and religious identities. On the other hand, both of them had good knowledge of their personal assets in language competence and excellent academic attainments in education. These constituted the assets for their identity investment, which allowed them to break new ground away from their home countries (Willmott, 1999).

We know very well we are from China and our ancestry is Chinese...Although

we are Malaysian, from the bottom of our hearts we know we have another identity (Kim).

In the same vein, Peter said he feels Chinese wherever he lives and that is his “sole identity”. Obviously the choice of studying in a community where one’s ethnic identity is no longer a barrier yields good returns for the investment. Moreover, the geographical proximity and the political relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, as well as the social-cultural characteristics of Hong Kong Chinese has prompted Kim’s search for a better understanding of Chineseness.

Now I have developed an interest in Hong Kong history. I found Hong Kong people are very hardworking...I may stay in Hong Kong for a longer time. But I'd also like to go to Taiwan, perhaps for one or two years, depending on the culture there. I want to understand how they look at themselves. That is interesting! They seem to be rejecting China and I'm curious to know if they see themselves as Chinese (Kim).

As a unique meeting place for different groups of Chinese descendents in the greater China, Hong Kong has opened up the potential space for Kim to develop further social and cultural exploration. This has facilitated a better understanding of different versions of ethnic identities- of one’s own and others’.

Cross-border higher education produces in students a global imagination (Rizvi & Lingard, 2000). This has facilitated the construction of a global academic and professional identity, which is particularly strong in Peter’s case. His academic identity has emerged since his international higher education in Thailand. He has gradually built up the capacity to write and publish academic papers in his masters program. His academic identity has been further strengthened and recognized when he succeeded in gaining selection to a transnational Visiting Fellowship Program in Taiwan and then securing a UNESCO research fund, shortly after completing his PhD

study in Hong Kong.

As Peter put it, “when I came here I didn’t think that far ahead. I just think one step ahead”. Peter has developed a global identity from his border crossing activities, first along with a regional body in Asia and then an international organization- the United Nations. It is logical to see the academic identity of Peter may be restricted if he remained in Indonesia. His global academic identity also constitutes a social identity that would most probably be denied there. Peter foresees that he will first work in universities and then go into the industrial field. One thing certain is that he will not return to Indonesia because “people choose the best for the future”.

Obviously the cross border decision of the two cases has proved to secure better educational and employment opportunities. It has also been a process of identity investment, which has opened up possibilities to juggle, in Meerwald’s (2001) words, “multiple histories, positions and politics” (p. 388). Through international higher education, the two ethnic Chinese straddled the historical influences of their home countries and those of Hong Kong. Both Kim and Peter see the sameness in terms of their race and cultural understanding with the Chinese in Hong Kong. They found “no problem mixing with people and living in the city,” although most of the time they use English to communicate in their learning and working environments.

It is interesting to note that, despite the growing global economic power of China, these two Chinese descendents have not yet shown any intention to study or work in Mainland China. The colonial history of Hong Kong and the fluid identities of people in the Special Administrative Region, to a certain extent, have become a resource for these two Indonesian and Malaysian students to explore their

Chineseness. Peter's connection with the academy in Taiwan, and Kim's indication of her interest in understanding Taiwan Chinese in the future show a continuous commitment in knowing Chinese as an ethnic origin, including both themselves and others.

Discussion and Conclusions

The two cases reported in this paper offer insights into the decision-making process of cross-border higher education among ethnic Chinese in the two Asian countries – Indonesia and Malaysia. The analytical frame for each case was to understand the process of choosing, the factors contributing to the choosing and the impact of cross border study on the students' life and career development. Given the small sample, there is no intention to make generalizations from the two case studies. Nevertheless, findings from an initial cross-case analysis, discussed below, draw attention to the common experiences of the two ethnic Chinese which might yield implications for the purposes and study of cross-border higher education.

Motivation for Cross-Border Higher Education

Analysis of the data shows that there are not only educational and economic needs, but also an identity need that energize cross-border decision among the two ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia. In the literature, investment in social identity has long been found to be associated with individuals' goals of cross-border higher education. The gaining of expertise and qualifications through international higher education constitutes symbolic and subsequent benefits for the social status

and economic returns of the students (Chapman & Pyvis, 2005; Gu, 2008). The symbolic and subsequent benefits for the two ethnic Chinese in this paper, however, are argued to be the satisfaction of their identification with their own ethnicity as well as the development of a global academic and professional identity.

Identity is found to be an important source of motivation in the cross-border decision. A need for ethnic identity is based on an acute awareness of the students' ethnic origin and the perceived marginalization of their participation in educational, social, economic and political spheres. Malaysia is a highly internationalized economy but exercises a national protection of highly skilled jobs for Malaysians. Similarly, the "waters of Indonesia have still to settle" in terms of the new political agendas of Islam and ethnic struggle (Vickers, 2005). Both the Indonesian and Malaysian Chinese students were conscious of the disadvantages and do not want themselves to be constrained by the state-defined identities. This became the major energizer for the two cases to cross the borders. Moreover, the opportunities for cross-border education sponsor the construction of multiple identities (Brewer, 1999), such as an international academic or a global professional identity as found in this case study. This is in line with previous findings that social and cultural factors have gained new prominence in cross border mobility (Li & Bray, 2007; Muzzarol & Soutar, 2002). As in the two cases of ethnic Chinese from Indonesia and Malaysia, ethnic discrimination in their home countries makes identity need prominent.

Hong Kong has been chosen as a destiny of study not only because of its good academic quality, affordable tuition fees and living expenses as compared with the Western countries, as well as its closeness to the blooming economic power of China. The unique demographic, social and cultural characteristics of Hong Kong in

the greater China region constitute a unique attraction to the non-local Chinese students. In view of the identity needs of these ethnic Chinese, Hong Kong could play a contributive role in cross-border higher education. On one hand, the good mix of many kinds of Chinese from different territories and with different social historical background in Hong Kong provides a good opportunity for the students to deepen their understanding of Chineseness. On the other hand, higher education institutions in Hong Kong that have cross-border students from these territories need to play an active role to facilitate ethnic understanding among the students. Both Hong Kong students and the cross-border students from places like Malaysia and Indonesia could be encouraged to know and appreciate the complexities involved in national histories. If Hong Kong could provide a platform for students to put the social historical and cultural development of different nations (such as China, Malaysia and Indonesia in this case) and different ethnic groups in perspective, it would help our world move towards the building of more just and humane communities where the differences in ethnicity, religion and wealth could be transcended.

Study Methods for Cross-Border Mobility

Analysis of this study echoes findings of previous studies conducted by statistical approaches which suggest that tuition fees, scholarships, and the academic quality of the universities etc. are important factors influencing the final cross border decision (Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Marginson, 2006;). With the use of the life history method, the current study nevertheless offers rich description on the complexities involved in the choosing process such as the juggling of trade-offs between leaving their beloved ones in the home countries and the imagined returns of their investment

in the destination of study. As Becker (1970) points out, the life history can give meaning to the overworked notion of "process". Life histories allow us to see how people reconstruct their identities in a range of factors at work at the micro, meso and macro levels.

While the life history method puts the students in the centre and gives them voice, what is said cannot be fully understood without a contextual analysis of the political, economic, religious, social and cultural background (Goodson & Choi, 2008). The conceptualization of cross-border choice as identity investment can only make sense when the life and career stories of the two students and their decision of pursuing higher education in Hong Kong are interpreted against the nation's political, social, economic and educational contexts. Without disregarding this study's limitation in sampling size, this method can give a fuller picture that can supplement what cannot be obtained simply through questionnaires. It also gives concrete examples to illuminate Li and Bray's (2007) conceptual frame that decision on destinations for higher education are determined by the interaction of students' internal factors and the external forces of two-way push-pull factors. Carefully conducted life-history research in student mobility with a large sample will yield promise to open up possibilities for a better future, both for the students, the field of education and the interrelated human societies.

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