

Original article

Choosing Hong Kong for postgraduate studies: A systematic analysis of the key determinants influencing intra-Asia mobility among mainland Chinese students

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of mainland Chinese students pursuing advanced education abroad, with Hong Kong being a popular destination. Previous studies on this issue have tended to be narrow in scope or focused on a relatively short period. To overcome these shortcomings, a longitudinal perspective is adopted in this work to identify the major factors motivating mainland Chinese students to pursue postgraduate studies in Hong Kong. To achieve this objective, a systematic review of pertinent literature was performed based on the developmental ecological model. Taylor & Francis, Scopus, and ProQuest Research Library electronic databases were searched, focusing on literature sources exploring the motivations and concerns of mainland Chinese students pursuing advanced education in Hong Kong. Thematic analysis of 16 studies published between 2000 and 2023 that met the predetermined inclusion criteria revealed a wide range of factors across micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems, as well as their evolution over the two decades, reflecting changing dynamics in both source and host contexts. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions seeking to better understand and support the postgraduate mobility patterns of this student segment.

1. Introduction

The rise of globalization and the massification of higher education have led to a substantial increase in the demand for cross-border advanced education among students. According to the recent OECD (2022) report, while 27% of 25- to 34-year-olds had a tertiary degree in 2000, this figure increased to 48% in 2021. Moreover, the number of international students witnessed a remarkable 70% increase over the same period (Kamm et al., 2022). While the study destinations have diversified, the primary countries of origin have remained mostly unchanged, with China and India comprising 22% and 10% of the international students, respectively (OECD, 2022).

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education (2023) estimates, since the reform and opening up policy in 1978, 8 million mainland Chinese students have studied overseas, and

the number of applications for 2022 enrollment was 23.4% higher than in 2021. Since 2015, the Chinese government has provided significant incentives for individuals with international graduate degrees to return to their native country. These incentives include the opportunity to reside in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen, as well as receiving a Talent Allowance. It has also introduced initiatives aimed at attracting outstanding foreign-trained scientists through well-funded programs. As the Chinese job market became more competitive, individuals who returned with graduate degrees were more inclined to pursue high-paying professions and invest in foreign-funded companies. Chinese students with an international degree often attained higher positions within these organizations (Du et al., 2021).

According to the poll conducted in March 2023 by EIC

Education, master's degree was the most popular choice for 81.2% of the surveyed mainland Chinese students pursuing education overseas (Zou, 2023). While the number of mainland Chinese students applying to take the national postgraduate test increased by over 200 million between 2015 and 2022, the number of applicants for the postgraduate examination saw a significant slowdown in 2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023). Since the national youth unemployment rate rose from 11% in January 2018 to 21% in January 2023 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), mainland Chinese students are increasingly choosing to pursue postgraduate degrees to improve their chances of finding jobs (Mok, 2016).

While the number of students pursuing advanced degrees abroad has significantly increased in recent decades due to the opening up policy and competitive employment market in mainland China, higher education institutions in the region, particularly in East Asia, remain most popular study destinations (Vuong et al., 2021). According to the survey report released by New Oriental, the most popular education agency of China, in the last few years, Hong Kong has experienced a significant surge in popularity as a study destination, especially among postgraduate students (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Top preferred destination countries considered by potential undergraduate students in China (New Oriental, 2023).

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
United States	45%	41%	35%	35%	34%
United Kingdom	33%	33%	32%	31%	31%
Canada	24%	27%	25%	23%	21%
Hong Kong SAR	10%	6%	10%	15%	15%
Japan	9%	13%	15%	15%	15%
Singapore	9%	10%	10%	12%	14%
Australia	20%	16%	15%	13%	14%

Table 2. Top preferred destination countries considered by potential postgraduate students in China (New Oriental, 2023).

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
United States	45%	36%	30%	28%	30%
United Kingdom	43%	46%	51%	46%	44%
Canada	12%	11%	10%	11%	11%
Hong Kong SAR	14%	9%	16%	22%	22%
Japan	12%	15%	15%	14%	12%
Singapore	9%	11%	13%	15%	15%
Australia	18%	15%	12%	12%	14%

Report published by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Immigration Department indicates that 43,732 international students pursued advanced degrees

there in 2022, a 24% increase from 2020, with over 65% of this cohort coming from mainland China. These statistics are supported by the data released by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee (UGC), an advisory council in charge of providing funding for higher education, indicating that mainland Chinese students' enrollment in UGC-funded postgraduate programs has been rising steadily, especially since 2018 (see Table 3 below). In addition, the chief executive of HKSAR proposed in the 2023 Policy Address to lift the cap on publicly-funded places at non-local higher education institutions (HEIs) from 20% to 40% in the 2024/25 academic year. This new approach is expected to make Hong Kong an even more appealing destination for advanced studies among mainland Chinese students.

In recognition of this trend, a range of push and pull factors that affect mainland Chinese students' decision to study abroad has been investigated (e.g., Li and Bray, 2007; Zheng, 2010; Mok et al., 2022). The obtained findings indicate that university prestige and socio-economic factors are key determinants of mainland Chinese students' study choices (e.g., Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2023). However, most of the extant literature in this domain either pertains to case studies or offers generalized discussions with limited empirical support. Even though current policies have encouraged Hong Kong HEIs to accept non-local students and have led to the expansion of collaboration in the Greater Bay Area, the various factors that motivate students to enroll in Hong Kong postgraduate programs remain insufficiently studied, given that the focus is typically given to the pull-push dynamics pertaining to undergraduate students coming from mainland China (Cheung, 2013).

Gill (2007) conducted a qualitative investigation on the British learning experiences of mainland Chinese students who chose to pursue postgraduate studies overseas. On the other hand, Manns and Swift (2016) examined their postgraduate education choices in business and management major, allowing them to propose a four-phase sequential model that placed emphasis on the nation, program, university, and city. While these investigations are certainly beneficial, neither was based on a systematic approach to exploring the determinants and factors affecting students' decision to seek postgraduate degrees in Asia. This gap in the current cross-border education literature (Dai et al., 2023) has motivated the present study, as a part of which the key factors that drive mainland Chinese students to pursue postgraduate degrees at Hong Kong HEIs are explored from a longitudinal systematic perspective.

The developmental ecological model was adopted as a theoretical framework to address the research question "What factors do mainland Chinese students consider when selecting a Hong Kong higher education institution for a postgraduate degree?" guiding this study. For this purpose, systematic review of pertinent literature spanning the 2000-2023 period was conducted, as outlined below.

Table 3. Mainland Chinese student enrolment at UGC-funded postgraduate programs (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2023).

	1997/98	2002/03	2006/07	2010/11	2014/15	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Full-time	882	1459	2693	4033	4909	5299	5735	5879	6089
RPg Part-time	16	16	29	8	0	0	0	0	0
Total	898	1475	2722	4041	4909	5299	5735	5879	6089
Full-time	29	101	55	40	69	90	68	56	81
RPg Part-time	10	20	4	3	0	0	13	25	28
Total	39	121	59	43	69	90	81	81	109

2. Theoretical Lens: Developmental ecological model

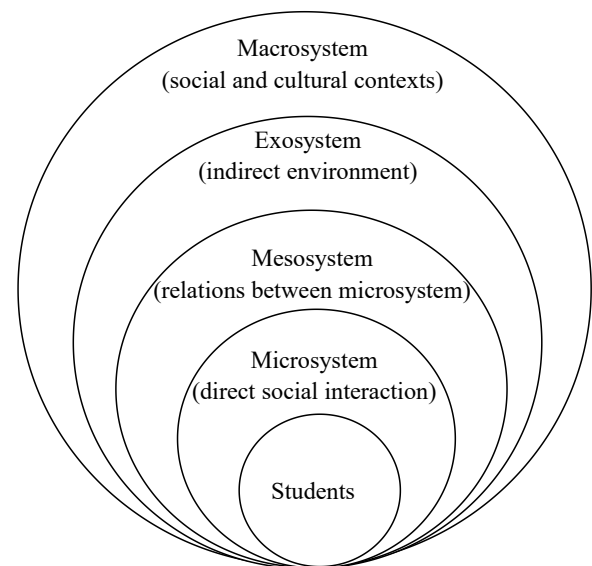
The developmental ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1986) acknowledges the reciprocal nature of interactions between individuals and their settings across time, as well as the significance of both environmental and individual influences on youth functioning. In addition to individual predispositions, this framework recognizes that learning and development are influenced by interpersonal relationships and the social environments in which they develop (Brown et al., 1993). The concept of developmental ecology originated from general and contextual system theory according to which children do not grow in a static environment but are rather immersed in a variety of dynamic systems that may have an ongoing impact on one another (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

Specifically, when a student moves from one grade to the next, important changes occur in the connections among the student, the institution, the family, and the community. Accordingly, these relationships and their roles in supporting students' educational choices and performance are the primary focus of developmental ecology (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). Multiple environmental levels make up this interconnecting ecosystem, which offers a setting for student development. Bronfenbrenner (1986) proposed five interrelated levels that radiate outward from the student in concentric circles, with the circles closest to the student representing more proximal experiences and those farther out representing distal variables (see Fig. 1).

Microsystems are the primary contexts in which development takes place, and they include any environment in which a student has direct experiences, notably educational institutions and family home as the two settings in which students spend most of their time. There is a wealth of literature on the extent to which family interactions and classroom activities contribute independently to healthy youth development (e.g., Johnston, 2010; Krezel & Krezel, 2017), but the microsystem in the developmental ecology model emphasizes the linkages and interactions between those two variables. In the microsystem, factors such as parenting style, parental beliefs, educational institution features, teacher attitudes, and teaching style are all considered.

Mesosystems serve as links and transitions between microsystems, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of interactions within them. Teachers may advise students about learning

styles that are consistent with their family values, or parents and teachers may discuss at a program introduction conference how a particular educational program will benefit students' future career and development (Downer & Myers, 2010).

**Fig. 1.** Developmental ecological model.

Exosystems are settings that influence students' performance even if they are not directly experienced by them, such as parents' workplace and program instructors' educational backgrounds.

Macrosystems are the socio-cultural and economic settings in which students operate along with their micro, meso, and exosystems. While culture and government regulation have profound effects on subordinate systems, factors like the unemployment rate, cultural values, and gender stereotypes are frequently incorporated in macrosystem analyses (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Chronosystem represents all the essential temporal elements comprising the developmental ecological model. It includes changes students experience over time, such as physiological transition and school adjustments, as well as changes in other systems that interact with student development, such as financial crises and job changes within the family, whether anticipated or unexpected.

Notably, student performance and educational choices do

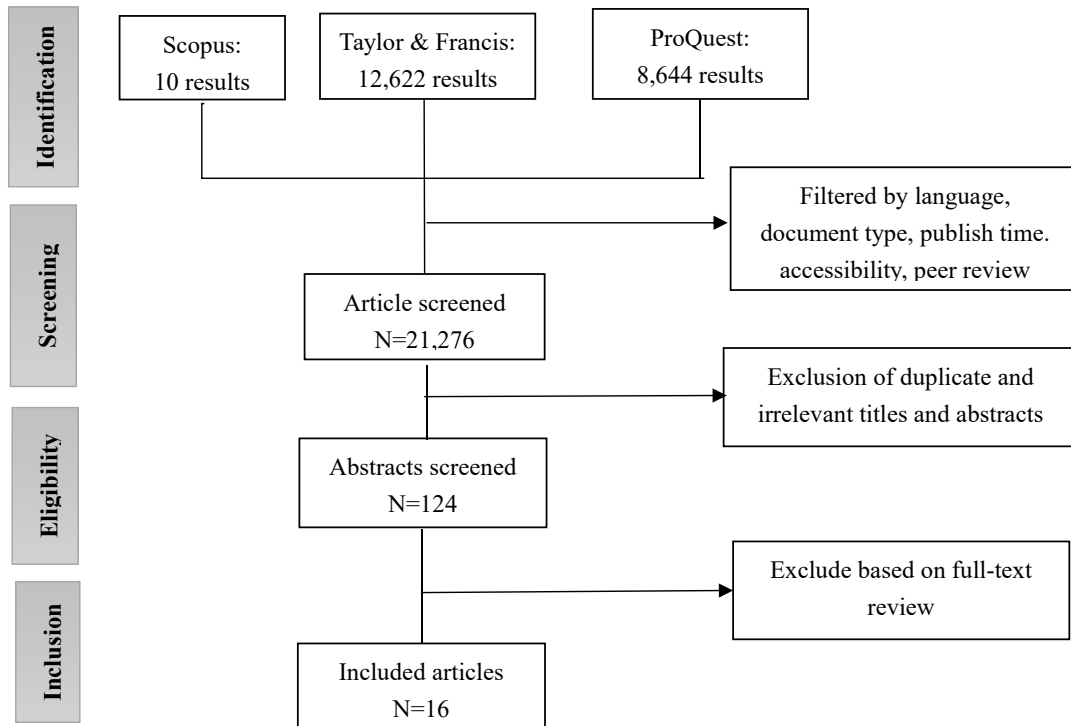


Fig. 2. Systematic review flow.

not take place in a vacuum, as the process as well as the decisions are influenced by multiple systems. Accordingly, the five levels postulated by the developmental ecological model were employed in this work when reviewing pertinent literature to determine which factors at each level affect mainland Chinese students' decision to pursue advanced education in Hong Kong. The obtained findings were used to develop a contemporary developmental ecological model of student educational choice, with the five categories of variables in individual and contextual domains serving as its basis.

3. Research design

3.1 Article search criteria

To answer the research question guiding this study, a systematic literature review was conducted whereby both descriptive and evaluative methodologies were utilized to analyze the selected literature sources (Liberati et al., 2009). The descriptive approach was employed to describe the study characteristics, such the year of publication and the methods used, providing a general understanding of the scale and focus of extant research. These descriptions were then used when evaluating the content, focusing on the identification of recurring themes. Key trends and insights were discovered by means of coding and categorization of the concepts and themes presented, culminating in a mapping of related studies which facilitated a deeper exploration of the relationships among publications (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008).

The Taylor & Francis, Scopus, and ProQuest Research Library databases were used for the literature search, as they encompass a wide range of social science studies, rendering them

particularly suitable for systematic research on education-related topics. In addition, as all publications available on these platforms undergo a rigorous peer-review process and are evaluated by an academic board, any extracted information can be considered reliable.

The following four keyword groups were combined and used in the literature search: (1) "Chinese student," "mainland student," and synonyms for these terms; (2) "study destination," "postgraduate program choice," and similar search terms; (3) "Hong Kong," "Hong Kong Special Administrative Region," and related synonyms; and (4) search terms related to "influencing factors" and synonyms such as "motivations" and "drivers." Only publications in which these keywords featured in the title, abstract, and/or keyword list were considered. After duplicate articles were identified and eliminated, the remaining set was subjected to the following inclusion criteria: original research, full article text available in English language, and publication date within the 2000-2023 period. This strategy resulted in 21,276 publications, 10 of which were identified in Scopus, 12,622 in Taylor & Francis Online, and 8,644 in the ProQuest Research Library of Social Science.

3.2 Data selection and analysis

The data analysis involved the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) four phases-identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion criteria (Littell et al., 2008). The review commenced with the title and abstract screening, after which the full text of articles that met the study inclusion criteria was reviewed. A form designed for this purpose was used to record details about the targeted student population, research features, and major conclusions.

To reduce the risk of bias, two authors independently reviewed and evaluated the quality of included studies, after which they worked jointly on theme synthesis to organize the findings and develop conclusions. To ensure transparency and rigor, the obtained results were reported in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (see Fig. 2).

4. Influencing factors for Hong Kong as the study choice of mainland Chinese students

The systematic review findings reveal a scarcity of studies specifically addressing the drivers behind mainland Chinese students' decision to pursue postgraduate education in Hong Kong. We identified only 16 articles that met our search criteria, indicating that this topic is insufficiently studied. However, as shown in Fig. 3, the number of publications on this subject has recently experienced a notable increase. In the sections that follow, we adopt the developmental ecological model to explore the key determinants of the choices made by mainland Chinese students for postgraduate studies in Hong Kong, as proposed by the authors of previous studies.

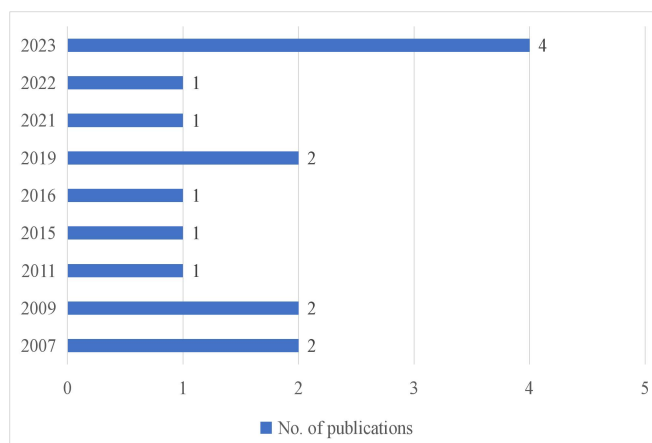


Fig. 3. Year of publication of the analyzed literature sources.

4.1 Microsystem and mesosystem factors

According to extant research, when choosing Hong Kong as a destination for their postgraduate studies, mainland Chinese students primarily consider the high quality of educational institutions, qualified teaching staff, and economic affordability (Mok, 2016). Several authors also point to the interplay between microsystem and mesosystem factors, including curriculum and program design, internationalization initiatives, employability opportunities, access to scholarships, and postgraduate teaching quality.

For example, by analyzing the survey data pertaining to the 2002-2004 period, Li and Bray (2007) concluded that the availability of scholarships (73.4%), academic ability (69.0%), the quality and reputation of the higher education institution (55.9%), ability to secure economic sponsorship (51.7%), and the convenience of being closer to home and family (25.4%) were the most significant factors considered by mainland Chinese students enrolling in postgraduate programs at Hong Kong universities.

Cheung et al. (2019) similarly demonstrated that mainland Chinese students who choose to pursue professional education in Hong Kong place significant value on the educational and employment factors that can enhance their personal development and future career prospects. They prioritize aspects of their studies that can contribute to skill enhancement and promote their overall professional growth. Focusing specifically on mainland Chinese students pursuing MEd degrees in Hong Kong, these authors found that, in their decision-making process, these students give precedence to the academic factors relative to the social, cultural, and economic factors. Postgraduate students also consider the potential economic return on their investment in education and the employment prospects upon graduation. They also appreciate the availability of part-time employment opportunities while studying, allowing them to gain practical experience and supplement their personal financial resources.

In an earlier study, Gao and Trent (2009) found that mainland Chinese students who already held teaching positions in China were particularly drawn to the English teaching profession. Thus, they were motivated by the valuable skills they could acquire by pursuing a postgraduate education program in Hong Kong. These students recognized the opportunities available in Hong Kong to enhance their teaching abilities and develop competencies that would benefit their careers. In summary, according to the extant literature, the favorable education-related factors that motivate students to pursue postgraduate education in Hong Kong include improved academic status, high quality of education, better quality of teaching staff, wide range of programs and courses, stringent academic standards, and wide recognition of diplomas received from Hong Kong HEIs (Cheung et al., 2019).

On the other hand, for the parents of mainland Chinese students, Hong Kong is usually considered prohibitively expensive as a destination for postgraduate studies. According to a survey conducted by China's National Bureau of Statistics in 2001, over 60% of Chinese families allocate one-third of their income towards their children's education (Bodycott, 2009). Thus, they consider factors such as exhibitions/fairs and recommendations from friends and relatives, as well as other factors beyond the educational experience, such as economic return, social status of their child's future career, and the potential for future migration opportunities. Given that the deep-rooted Confucian ideals and values continue to influence parent-child relationships in mainland China, filial piety has the potential to significantly impact students' decision-making process related to the choice of postgraduate program.

Recent survey-based studies, however, indicate a shift in mainland Chinese students' preferences for overseas study destinations, with Hong Kong and other Asian regions becoming more popular due to the availability of high-quality higher education, potential economic benefits, and future employment opportunities (Cozart & Rojewski, 2015; Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018). According to Lin and Liu (2023), tense political environment and language barrier do not deter students from studying in Hong Kong. Moreover, given the geopolitical tensions and hostility towards Asian students due to the recent global health crisis, as well as cultural, political, and academic

difficulties, mainland Chinese students are increasingly opting for Hong Kong and other Asian HEIs for advanced studies.

4.2 Exosystem factors

In extant studies, the Greater Bay Area was identified as an important exosystem factor affecting mainland Chinese students' choice of HEI for postgraduate studies, given that its development was in focus of the new policies introduced by the governments of the HKSAR and mainland China. These specialized policies influence the mesosystem decision-making process as they have led to an educational institution reform by providing incentives, opportunities, and support for mainland Chinese students to choose Hong Kong as their preferred destination for further education. For instance, students from mainland China who graduate from Hong Kong universities have an advantage in obtaining two-year work visas to gain work experience. Moreover, the number of joint/dual degree programs offered by universities in Hong Kong and mainland China, such as the CityU-Tsinghua MPA+EMBA and HKU-PKU Double Master Degree programs, has increased considerably. These programs offer students the flexibility to pursue their education across borders, allowing them to benefit from the resources and opportunities provided by both regions.

To inform further policies and reforms, Lingnan University of Hong Kong conducted a two-round survey between 2020 and 2021, during the global health crisis, to investigate the attitudes of both mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students towards studying abroad. Their findings revealed a decline in interest in international learning, but also indicated that Hong Kong was a popular destination for mainland Chinese students wishing to pursue overseas education during the global health crisis (Mok et al., 2022). According to the survey results, 75% of the respondents cited the close proximity of Hong Kong to their home country as their primary motivation for pursuing studies in Hong Kong. Over half of the respondents indicated that the teaching mode was a crucial factor in their decision-making process when considering advanced studies overseas.

According to the cross-sectional data analyzed by Mok et al. (2021), one potential explanation for the popularity of Hong Kong as a postgraduate study destination is its notable level of institutional autonomy, which allows for greater flexibility and adaptability in shaping the academic programs offered to meet the evolving needs and expectations of students. This factor may contribute to the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a preferred destination for responding to the requirements set forth by the mesosystem, considering the expectations expressed by both students and their parents.

During the period when global mobility was restricted due to the health crisis, many mainland Chinese students considered Hong Kong as their destination for education abroad, as they perceived the learning style and pedagogies offered at Hong Kong's top universities as resembling those of the renowned HEIs in the Western world. This perception, as highlighted by Gu et al. (2019), indicates that mainland Chinese students view Hong Kong as a cost-effective alternative that provides a comparable educational experience to traditional popular overseas destinations such as the United

States. In sum, the specialized and local policies within the exosystem play a significant role in shaping the teaching paradigm and staff development in Hong Kong's advanced degree programs. The implementation of targeted policies supports and enhances the teaching environment, fostering the growth and development of faculty members. This, in turn, contributes to the overall appeal of Hong Kong as a destination for those pursuing advanced degrees.

4.3 Macrosystem factors

Scholars have consistently emphasized the significant influence of macrosystem factors—including the political system, legal regulations, and societal culture—on the decision-making process of students wishing to study overseas.

For example, according to the survey conducted between 2002 and 2004 by Li and Bray (2007), 63.3% of the participating mainland Chinese students anticipated that studying in Hong Kong would provide them with the greatest opportunities for cultural exposure. When asked to indicate the top two expected advantages of pursuing a degree in Hong Kong, most respondents cited social and cultural experience (63.3%) and intellectual aptitude (69.0%). More recent evidence provided by Cheung et al. (2019) supports these findings, confirming that mainland Chinese students view Hong Kong as a destination with ample opportunities for broadening their horizons due to the unique "East Meets West" lifestyle and exposure to Western culture and foreign friends.

While mainland Chinese students have a desire to experience the socio-cultural aspects of Hong Kong, they still face notable cultural and social identification stressors throughout their study period. They often encounter a cultural disconnect and start doubting their ability to assimilate into the local lifestyle and social dynamics. The reality of navigating a different cultural context can lead to challenges in fully integrating and developing a sense of belonging in Hong Kong.

These assertions are supported by the results reported by Xu (2015), who conducted 30 interviews with mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, revealing that many participants realized that the actual socio-cultural situation in Hong Kong differed from their preconceived notions. Despite coming from a middle-class family, one participant expressed a sense of not belonging, stating, "I would feel we don't belong to the same world. I admire that kind of life. But then I feel, I feel that I may not be that type of people. I feel like I cannot make it there" (Xu, 2015).

Recent empirical data published by Jia and Yeung (2023) also underscores the significant socio-cultural influence on mainland Chinese students' decisions to pursue postgraduate programs in Hong Kong. These authors interviewed Chinese PhD students at public-funded universities in Hong Kong (62.16% of whom were in the second or the third year of their PhD studies) and found that these students desire opportunities to immerse themselves in the local culture, engage in intercultural experiences, and be exposed to a diverse and vibrant society. Additionally, they expressed a keen interest in making local friends and actively contributing to the communities within Hong Kong.

However, as was shown by Yu and Wright (2023), after arriving in Hong Kong, these postgraduate students face challenges in integrating in the local culture and forming connections with the local people. Many students surveyed by Pan (2011) similarly reported experiencing difficulties in the communication with university employees and supervisors, encountering acculturative stressors, and struggling with acculturation and adjusting to the new living environment while studying in Hong Kong. According to Gao & Liu (2021), the potential obstacles and adjustment issues become even more pronounced for ethnic minority mainland Chinese students, as they face additional hurdles in adapting to the socio-cultural and community aspects of their everyday living and academic life in Hong Kong. These students often encounter unique experiences due to their diverse cultural backgrounds, which can create additional barriers to integration and a sense of belonging in the local context. Their journey thus requires extra effort and resilience to navigate the challenges posed by cultural differences and societal expectations, making their adjustment process more complex.

4.4 Chronosystem factors

The world has undergone significant changes in recent years, including the impact of a major health crisis, leading to substantial transformations within higher education institutions. These changes have also influenced the factors that shape the study plans of mainland Chinese students seeking to study abroad. According to Mok et al. (2020), factors such as university rankings, financial considerations, potential expenses, and parental attitudes continue to play a significant role in mainland Chinese students' overseas study destination choices. However, recent events, such as racial discrimination and hate crimes targeting Asian students (Oleksiyenko & Fry, 2023), have led mainland Chinese students to prioritize personal safety and public security when selecting study destinations abroad (Mok & Zhang, 2022). Accordingly, due to its safe and secure atmosphere and commitment to maintaining high environmental standards, Hong Kong has become the preferred choice for these students (Cheung et al., 2019). While its popularity initially declined following the social movement in 2019, these concerns have since been abated by the implementation of the National Law and the further deepening of the Greater Bay Area development. These factors reflect the evolving priorities and concerns of mainland Chinese students amidst changing global circumstances.

As highlighted by Hughes-Warrington, M. (2012), history cannot be disregarded when analyzing the factors influencing student mobility within the context of internationalization of higher education. The history of the Asian region serves as a reminder that international education is built upon delicate and precarious settlements that are often overshadowed by hostility, competition, and conflict. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical resonances that shape these dynamics.

In a comparative study of student mobility within the Asian region, Sidhu and Ishikawa (2022) found that in several countries-including the well-known "high-performing Asian

Tiger economies"-there is a persistent sense of societal insecurity stemming from fragile social contracts and unmet rights. According to these authors, when a host region or HEI is confronted with the constraints of neoliberal austerity measures, it becomes prone to a "structure of feeling" marked by emotions such as fear, resentment, and despair when it comes to welcoming students from diverse backgrounds.

This observation underscores the importance of considering the historical context when comprehending the challenges and opportunities inherent in international student mobility. Consequently, Sidhu and Ishikawa (2022) put forward the concept of "ethics of internationalization" which calls upon all higher education systems, regardless of their location, to dedicate themselves to the creation of a "global common good." This refers to the universal goods that are indispensable for the well-being and prosperity of a collective and inclusive quality of life for all individuals. This approach recognizes that the pursuit of internationalization should not solely focus on the benefits for specific institutions or countries, but should also prioritize the promotion of equitable access, intercultural understanding, and sustainable development.

5. Conclusion: Understanding Intra-Asia student mobility

The findings yielded by this comprehensive literature review shed light on the significant interest among mainland Chinese students in pursuing postgraduate degrees in Hong Kong, which has increased considerably since the global health crisis of 2019. Our analysis reveals that this interest is influenced by a range of factors from various systems. It is important to note that the traditional microsystem and mesosystem factors (e.g., financial stability of their families, the quality of education offered, the potential for improved employability, and the opportunities for personal career growth) continue to play a crucial role in mainland Chinese students' decision to pursue postgraduate studies in Hong Kong. Despite the evolving landscape and emerging influences, the importance of these traditional factors remains strong in determining the intra-Asia mobility decisions.

However, macrosystem factors, such as political and socio-cultural considerations, have experienced significant changes and now hold increased significance for mainland Chinese students wishing to study abroad. The unexpected global crisis and the historical context within the regional chronosystem play a crucial role as potential influencing factors in the educational choices of mainland Chinese students, due to which they are increasingly opting for Hong Kong as it offers a more inclusive and supportive environment.

The cultural and social challenges encountered by non-local students in the Hong Kong society are nonetheless a cause for concern for mainland Chinese students (Yu & Zhang, 2016). These stressors can include difficulties in cultural integration, language barriers, and a sense of exclusion or discrimination. After witnessing instances of "Chinese hate" and experiencing mobility restrictions in various parts of Asia, mainland Chinese students place a high priority on study destinations that offer a sense of stability and promote well-

being. Furthermore, the historical context within the regional chronosystem, encompassing the past experiences and interactions between China and Hong Kong, shapes the perceptions and considerations of mainland Chinese students. The historical ties and dynamics between these regions contribute to their decision-making process, as they seek an educational environment that aligns with their personal and cultural backgrounds.

Through a systematic analysis of the factors impacting intra-Asia mobility decisions for students wishing to pursue postgraduate education, this study reveals a gap in existing research regarding the influence of the exosystem and chronosystem factors. Its findings also point to the declining relevance of certain mesosystem factors, such as parent-student interactions and university exhibitions, in determining mainland Chinese students' advanced study destination choices. Indeed, while employment prospects at the destination, immigration opportunities, and recommendations from friends and family previously held significant influence over students' choices of overseas HEIs (Chak-keung & Jing, 2010), these factors have become less important in recent years (Guan et al., 2023).

According to Shu and Scott (2014), the perception of an overseas study destination is more favorable when the social media content associated with it possesses higher argument quality. In this digital era, students are highly motivated to engage with and scrutinize information, while placing less significance on the source credibility. Thus, as the current generation of students has grown up amidst rapid technological advancements and has become accustomed to acquiring information through the internet, mass media (particularly social media) may serve as a significant factor in shaping mainland Chinese students' perceptions and preferences regarding overseas study destinations.

With the implementation of more specialized and localized policies by the mainland China and Hong Kong governments, it is evident that the preferences of mainland Chinese students reflect the evolving landscape of international education and the broader range of factors they now consider when deciding on the study destination. This shift underscores the need to recognize the importance of the developmental ecology of higher education systems and re-evaluate the significance of factors that influence students' mobility and choices for overseas studies. By acknowledging the significance of the developmental ecology, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics influencing mainland Chinese students' decision to pursue advanced education in Hong Kong.

Given the dynamic nature of the factors influencing students' overseas study choices, it is crucial for policymakers and educational institutions to stay abreast of the latest research findings. Effective adjustments may involve updating promotional strategies, enhancing support services, and creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for mainland Chinese students. China has long been a major source country for international student admissions, consistently ranking among the top senders of tertiary-level students pursuing education abroad (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). By proactively responding to the changing educational landscape, government authorities and

educational managers can better meet the needs and aspirations of these students. This will contribute to the strategic development of recruitment partnerships, programming, and student support services to optimize higher education cooperation between Hong Kong and Greater China going forward (Dai et al., 2023).

This work is subject to certain limitations that provide ideas for further research in this domain. First, only peer-reviewed journal articles and working papers were included in the systematic review, thus excluding potentially relevant book chapters and other published materials. Second, as students wishing to pursue postgraduate studies in Hong Kong were the sole focus of this investigation, it is essential to explore and compare the factors influencing the decision-making process of undergraduate and diploma degree students as well. Lastly, as all findings reported here are based on the analysis of secondary data, it would be beneficial to gather first-hand empirical data on the mainland Chinese students' mobility motivations and preferences.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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