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Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste

Factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program

Fangxuan (Sam) Li^a, Hongxia Qi^{b,*}, Qiang Guo^a^a Tourism College of Hainan University, Hainan University, Haiyun Middle Rd, Meilan District, Haikou, Hainan, China^b New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Chinese international students
 Doctoral study
 Choice criteria
 Decision-making
 Tourism education

ABSTRACT

This study explores the choice criteria used by Chinese tourism students to select an overseas PhD program by using a qualitative approach. Through convenience sampling and snowball sampling, a total of 30 interviews are conducted. This study indicates that Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program are influenced by personal reasons, country image effect, city effect, institution image, and programme evaluation. This study identifies both the similarities and differences between PhD students and undergraduate or master students' decision-making process. Theoretically, a model of Chinese overseas tourism PhD students' decision-making process is developed. Practically, this study provides valuable information for host universities in promoting tourism doctoral programme for overseas students.

1. Introduction

Due to the globalization of education, it has becoming increasing popular for students to undertake higher education overseas (Wiers-Jenssen, 2019). According to figures from Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2019), the number of international students increased from 2 million in 1998 to 5.3 million in 2017. Of these, Chinese international students have constituted the largest proportion of foreign students studying outside of their home country, reaching 662,100 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2019). The number of Chinese studying abroad is predicted to be peat at between 700,000 and 800,000 within five years considering China's economic growth and rising household income (Luo, 2017). In fact, China's rapid economic growth has created a number of new middle-class families with the desire and ability to send their children to undertake higher education overseas. Given the importance of Chinese market in the global education export industry, Chinese international students have attracted increasing academic attention over the last decades (Heng, 2019; Lee, 2017; Liu & Lin, 2016).

A review of existing literature indicated that the majority of existing Chinese international students' studies focused on undergraduate students (Skyrme, 2010; Valdez, 2015) and master students (Wang & Shan, 2007; Wu, 2014), while Chinese international doctoral students are relatively under researched (Li & Qi, 2019; Zhou, 2015). Doctoral students tend to be mature, while undergraduate and master students aged early 20 years old are completely different cohorts. Moreover, doctoral study as an intense process offers a profound learning experience through intensive reading and dissertations writing (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Mantail, 2017). There is a high requirement for PhD students' analytical, reflective and original thinking (Whitelock, Faulkner, & Miell, 2008). These make doctoral students be different from undergraduate and master students in many ways. Hence, previous findings of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lifangxuan12345@126.com (F.(S. Li), hongxia.qi@aut.ac.nz (H. Qi), gq@hainanu.edu.cn (Q. Guo).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2020.100286>

Received 7 August 2020; Received in revised form 5 October 2020; Accepted 16 October 2020

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undergraduate and master students may not apply to doctoral students given the uniqueness of this group (Yang, Volet, & Mansfield, 2018). Hence, this study shifts scholarly attention to doctoral students.

Among the existing studies on Chinese international students, the focus is on students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), while little scholarly attention has been paid to those in social science, even less on tourism (Li & Qi, 2019; Yang et al., 2018; Zhou, 2014). Compared with STEM majors, tourism as a study area encompasses multiple disciplines, such as geography, psychology, sociology, and management (Fuchs, Fredaman, & Ioannides, 2015). This feature makes the findings from STEM doctoral students may not applicable to the tourism area. Moreover, increasing number of Chinese international students enrol in tourism PhD program. Chinese international doctoral students in tourism management major have recently become a substantial demographic (Li & Qi, 2019). Apart from the increasing population, current Chinese international tourism doctoral students played an increasing important role in tourism. Firstly, it is generally acknowledged that PhD students need to have a publication track record prior to graduation to gain an academic job (Carr & Hayes, 2017). The increasing number of Chinese international overseas tourism doctoral students has contributed to tourism literature greatly over the last decade. Secondly, as increasing number of Chinese international students return China after overseas study (Wong, 2020), the return tourism doctoral students contributed to China's tourism development from many perspectives, such as academic, teaching, and industry. The overseas tourism PhD students who obtained faculty positions in Chinese universities enhanced the universities' research ability and teaching quality. As China's tourism and hospitality industry has a shortage of qualified employees (Sonnenschein, 2019), the return tourism PhD student who worked in the industry enable to help overcome this significant human resource challenge. Hence, given the importance of Chinese international tourism doctoral students, it will be useful for understanding how they select an overseas PhD program. Considering the scarcity of investigation into Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program, a qualitative method is adopted in this research by drawing data from in-depth interviews. This study aims to identify both the similarities and differences between PhD students and undergraduate or master students' decision-making process which has been examined by few previous studies. More importantly, this study will propose a model of Chinese international tourism PhD students' decision-making process.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourism PhD program

"The earliest documented indication of doctoral output related to tourism occurred in the post-war period in North America" (Botterill & Gale, 2005, p. 472). The most popular models of current tourism PhD programs are "Commonwealth Model" and "U.S. Model" (Pearce, 2005). The universities operating within the Commonwealth model attach more importance to the dissertation for PhD graduation; while the U.S universities focus more on course weightings and components in a variety of formats (Pearce, 2005). For example, there is a uniform requirement for U.S model PhD candidates to learn subjects such as research methods and statistics as part of the credit point structure of PhD program. However, this is not a requirement for Commonwealth PhD candidates. Pearce (2005) also identified some subtle differences between the "Commonwealth Model" and "U.S. Model", such as a longer length of study for U.S model PhD candidates, the larger share of coursework in PhD program for U.S model PhD candidates, more time and efforts on meeting the goals of producing original research for Commonwealth PhD candidates, and a longer dissertation (usually up to 100,000 words) for Commonwealth PhD candidates. Though the number of tourism PhD programs is increasing, tourism PhD programs have been overlooked by academic research (Kim & Jeong, 2018). Kim and Jeong (2018) further pointed out three directions of future research related to tourism PhD students, including recruitment, selection and retention.

2.2. Studies on Chinese international doctoral students

Chinese international doctoral students have been examined by previous studies from different perspectives, including motivations of studying abroad (Li & Qi, 2019; Yang et al., 2018); identity formation (Teng, 2019; Xu & Hu, 2019; Ye & Edwards, 2017), study experience (Ding, 2016; Gao, 2019), research writing (Chen, 2019), publication pressure (Lei, 2019; Li, 2016), socialization (Li & Collins, 2014), intercultural adaptation (Ye & Edwards, 2015), voices (Xu & Hu, 2019; Zhang, 2016), personal development (Ma, 2019; Zhu & Cox, 2015), mobility (Shen, Wang, & Jin, 2016), and career decisions (Gu, Levin, & Luo, 2018; Lee, McMahon, & Watson, 2018). It indicated that the focus of existing studies is Chinese international doctoral students' experience during their doctoral study. Obviously, there has been a comparative neglect of Chinese international doctoral students' decision-making process. One exception was Yang et al. (2018) who not only explored Chinese international doctoral students' motivations' of undertaking an overseas PhD program, but also identified both the micro-level and macro-level factors influencing this decision. The micro-level factors included family, teacher, and peer influence. The macro-level factors included institutional, supervision and financial influence.

2.3. International students' decision-making process

International students' study abroad choice is a complex decision-making process that involves three distinct stages, including motivations for studying abroad, the choice of study destinations and the choice of institutions (Lee, 2014; Mazarrol & Soutar, 2002). Various factors influencing international students' decision-making process were identified by previous studies, such as international students' attitudes towards higher education in the destination country (Chen & Zimitat, 2006), sources of information for decision-making (Gai, Xu, & Pelton, 2016; James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017; Yin, Ruangkanjanases, & Chen, 2015), the influence of family, friends and teachers (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Liu & Morgan, 2016), migrant intentions (Hazen & Alberts, 2006), and

recommendation from others who have experience of undertaking higher education (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). In terms of international tourism students, Ruhanen and McLennan (2010) found that tourism postgraduate students' decision-making is influenced by country level motivations (quality education, culture and lifestyle, and affordable education), destination level motivations (Climate/weather, size of the tourism industry and destination's attractiveness & location), university level motivations (university's reputation, course type, course quality), and course level motivations (chosen career path/are of interest, career advancement/higher wages, and increase knowledge/development). Han and Yoon's (2005) study identified three driving forces for international tourists in the decision to enrol in hospitality and tourism graduate program at the same university, including program/education quality, satisfaction with undergraduate program, and university reputation.

Apart from these common factors, some other influencing factors were identified in the context of Chinese international students (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Chao, 2015; Liu & Morgan, 2016; Rudd, Djafarova, & Wang, 2012; Wu, 2014). Bodycott (2009) argued that traditional Confucian values played an important role in Chinese international students' decision-making process. Given that traditional Confucian values are still largely upheld by parents, Bodycott and Lai (2012) further explored the influence of parents on Chinese international students' decision-making process. It was found that Chinese parents tried to convince their children to select their preferred programs and universities. In addition to the influence of parents, Liu and Morgan (2016) highlighted the importance of guanxi in shaping Chinese international students' decision-making process in the Chinese culture of Confucianism. The content of guanxi as a Chinese variant concept of social capital is seen as networks and social resources. Therefore, in order to attract Chinese international students, it is important for host universities to develop strategies that acknowledge and demonstrate respect for cultural traditions (Bodycott & Lai, 2012).

In addition to identifying the influencing factors, another important research topic is to examine the decision-making processes of international students based on a theory or model. Among these models, the push-pull model is one of the most commonly used frameworks to explain international students' decision-making process (Cai, Wei, Lu, & Day, 2015; Lee, 2014, 2017; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; Wadhwa, 2016; Wilkins, Balakrishnan, & Huisman, 2012). McMahon (1992) was one of the earliest scholars to apply the model to explore the factors influencing international students' decision-making process. In the study context of Chinese international students, the push-pull model was also used by scholar such as Lee (2017) and Li and Qi (2019), among which various factors and insights were identified. However, as the push-pull model was based relatively more on a macro-environmental perspective (Lee, 2014) and ignored the personal characteristics of international students (Li & Bray, 2007), the use of it to examine international decision-making process has also been criticised. Considering the limitation of the push-pull model and the uniqueness of the under-investigated group in this study, a qualitative approach was adopted with the aim of exploring more factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program.

3. Research method

3.1. Data collection

The objective of this current research was to investigate factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program, which essentially sought to "discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspective, and world views of the people" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). The complex detailed understanding of the phenomenon necessitated the use of qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2007).

Primary data were gathered from 30 in-depth interviews with PhD students in tourism, which allowed researchers to gain depth and multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation (Johnson, 2002). As two researchers of this paper completed their tourism PhD qualifications in New Zealand, the first four interviewees (two from New Zealand and two from Australia) were invited through the authors' personal networks. So convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques were adopted, which had the

Table 1
Profile of interviewees.

Sample demographics	Number
Gender	
Male	14
Female	16
Year enrolled in	
First year	6
Second year	7
Third year	8
Fourth year	9
Previous study experience	18
Previous degrees in China	12
Previous degrees overseas	
Country	
New Zealand	10
Australia	8
United States	6
UK	6

advantages of shortening the time and diminishing the cost to gain sufficient size participant group efficiently (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Specifically, the authors asked the participants to recommend this research to their PhD friends who were interested in participating in this research. To embrace the socio-demographic diversity of PhD students, 30 interviewees were finally selected based on gender, year enrolled in, previous study experience, and study countries (Table 1). The interviews stopped when no new information emerged after conducting 25 interviews, which was believed to achieve data saturation (Francis et al., 2010; Kelly, 1963). The final interview questions were built on both previous literature and the results of four pilot study. Due to the explorative nature of this research, open-ended questions (e.g., “Could you describe the reasons for choosing to study your PhD at this university? What drove you to select tourism program as the major for PhD study? What are the compulsory factors for you to consider during the process of decision-making?”) were proposed to encourage the emerging of new stories. Interviewees were actively asked for further explanations and clarifications on certain points uttered throughout the interviews. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2019. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin which is the mother language of the interviewers and interviewees, lasting around 45–90 min. The interviews were audio recorded with consent of the interviewees. The recordings were transcribed verbatim into text for analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The interview transcripts were not translated into English until findings were reported to retain the accuracy and richness of data. This research took a two-step coding process: initial coding and focused coding. At the first step, two researchers read the texts repeatedly and got familiar with them. They then coded the texts independently with the facilitation of NVivo 12. A number of relevant codes, categories and themes were identified, but they were provisional and remain open to further analysis. Based on this, a focused coding was undertaken subsequently, which mainly aimed to determine the adequacy of the significant codes and laid the basis for theory development. After constant comparisons and refinements, codes, categories and themes emerged from the texts (Table 2). After that, the authors compared their results and discussed the inconsistencies and reached agreement, which was valuable to ensure the validity and reliability of coding as well as to reduce the potential bias (Kwek, Wang, & Weaver, 2014). The key points were identified and recorded within the scope of research questions. The results and quotations were then translated into English after the data analysis. Two strategies proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000) were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. Firstly, member checking of taking the interview data and interpretations back to the interviewees was used to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account. Secondly, the results and quotations were double checked by a Chinese-English linguist. to minimize the possible inaccuracies of the translation.

4. Findings

Following the two-stage coding, this research identified five factors influencing Chinese international tourism students' choice of overseas PhD programs. Therefore, the findings are presented in the following five themes: personal reasons, institution, country effect, city effect and program evaluation.

4.1. Personal reasons

Personal reasons were identified as the most important factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of overseas PhD programs. This theme included personal development and advices from family members, friends and supervisors. In consistent with Li and Qi's (2019) study, most interviewees highlighted the importance of personal development reasons on the selection of overseas PhD programs for Chinese students. Among the personal development factors, enhancing career prospect was identified as the most influential factor. This finding was supported by Cheng (2018) who argued overseas education will enhance job prospects and career development in Chinese students and their parents' mind. The majority of interviewees (e.g., interviewee #1, #3, #5, and #19) argued

Table 2
The coding spectrum.

Themes	Categories	Codes	References
Personal reasons	Personal improvement	Enhance career prospect, career promotion, gain international experience	62
	Advice	Parents' expectation, recommendation from family members, recommendation from teachers	20
Institution	Institution image	Institution prestige, university ranking, research environment, supervisor reputation, international recognition	52
	Faculty	Expertise of research staff, research direction of the faculty, reputation, subject ranking, scholarship opportunities	23
	Relationship with Chinese universities	Collaboration with Chinese universities, scholarship from China Scholarship Council (CSC)	15
Country effect	Country image	Social reputation, economic development level, cost of living, immigration policy, children education quality, visa policy	16
City effect	City image	City size, safety and security, facilities and convenience	12
Program evaluation	Program quality	Tuition fees, previous graduates' comments and achievements	13

that a high quality overseas academic qualification is becoming increasingly important in contemporary Chinese society. In fact, a PhD degree from an international recognized university served as a “bricking brick” to get a good job in higher education institutions, government departments and big companies in China (e.g., interviewee #4, #10, and #13). Moreover, career promotion was another common reason proposed by interviewees. The authors found that many interviewees valued the springboard effect of gaining an overseas PhD degree for career promotion. Many interviewees who had working experience before starting their PhD argued that promotion is one of the key factors determining their decisions. In fact, only people holding a doctorate from Western universities or with some overseas study experience will be promoted to associate professorship or professorship in some high-ranking Chinese universities (Wen, 2017). Here is a typical comment from an interviewee who is studying in Australia:

As I mentioned, I worked at a Chinese university for nearly ten years. Two compulsory requirements of being promoted to an associate professor are a PhD degree and an overseas study or work experience. The best option for me is to obtain an overseas doctoral degree if I want to be an associate professor in the future. (Interviewee #2).

Another influential factor that motivated Chinese students to obtain a doctoral degree from a foreign university is the purpose of gaining international experience. This finding echoes previous studies that obtaining international experience is an important motivation for international students studying abroad (Li & Qi, 2019; Nghia, 2019). Specially, this study found that studying overseas was seen as a good opportunity to broaden horizons (e.g., interviewee #1, #7, and #9), experience exotic culture and life (e.g., interviewee #11, #25, and #29), and make international contacts (e.g., interviewee #2, #8, and #14). For example, interviewee #11 commented the following:

Moving to New Zealand was a big decision. The good opportunity for me to experience a different culture drove me to start my PhD study in New Zealand. I lived in China for 25 years before coming New Zealand. I wanted to experience different lifestyles when I am young.

This study also confirmed the previous findings that advice and recommendation from family members, friends and teachers played a vital role in influencing students' decision-making. (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Liu & Morgan, 2016; Yang et al., 2018). Among them, parents' expectation was found to be the most influential factor. Many interviewees mentioned that their intentions to gain an overseas doctoral degree were partly due to their parents' expectation. The finding was supported by Bodycott and Lai (2012) who explored the influence of parents' expectation in the decision to undertake cross-border higher education in the context of Chinese culture. Compared to western students, parents' expectation is a unique factor for Chinese students for two reasons. Firstly, their parents feel the importance of having a higher qualification in Chinese society based on their personal experience. Some students' parents who benefit from a higher qualification are eager their children to benefit from obtaining an overseas PhD degree as well. While some students' parents attributed their poor life to a lack of a higher qualification. Secondly, parents' expectation can also be interpreted as face-seeking in Chinese culture. Simply speaking, face or dignity (*mian zi*) refers to dignity or prestige. *Mian zi* is one of the most important factors influencing Chinese people's behaviours in Chinese culture (Filiari & Lin, 2017). Therefore, some parents expect their children to obtain an overseas PhD degree to earn *mian zi* for the family. For example, interviewees #19 and #25 commented:

My parents are very satisfied with their jobs and social status. They believed that one of the most influential factors is their high qualifications. Hence, purchasing an overseas PhD degree not only achieved my own goal, but also meet my parents' expectation. (Interviewee #19).

*Pursuing an overseas PhD degree is an honour for my family in my parents' eyes. My parents are very proud of introducing me to other people. My parents told me that I am earning *mian zi* for them.* (Interviewee #25).

Apart from parents' expectation, recommendation from other family members was also identified. This finding also confirmed previous literature who identified the importance of recommendation from others on decision-making (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). Several interviewees proposed that some of their families were keen to help them plan their future lives. Gaining an overseas doctoral degree was an important part of the plan (e.g., interviewee #6, #30, and #15). In addition, recommendation from interviewees' university teachers played an important role in making this decision. Seven interviewees mentioned they tend to get suggestions from the teachers they trust. As the teachers are very reliable in students' eyes, their suggestions are valuable for some Chinese students.

4.2. Institution

Interviewees evaluated the importance of institution from three perspectives, including institution image, faculty, and relationship with Chinese universities. In terms of institution image, institution prestige was viewed as a key consideration for Chinese overseas PhD students. The majority of interviewees mentioned that overall university ranking is the first thing for them to check before applying for the university. This finding was supported by Rafi (2018) who found that international students place great importance on rankings. In the international arena, although many rankings exist, the most common used rankings in China are the Academic Rankings of World Universities, The QS World University Rankings of the world's top universities, and The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. Some students believed that they enable to benefit from studying at a high-ranking university from three perspectives. Firstly, a high-ranking university ensures a high quality of education in students' eyes. Secondly, some students argued that a lot of Chinese cities only provide subsidies for PhD students who graduate from high-ranking universities. Thirdly, studying at a high-ranking university enables to save *mian zi* for students' family. For example, interviewee #13 and #18 commented the following:

In order to gain a high-quality and 'useful' doctoral degree, a high university ranking was the most important consideration for me. I would like to come back China after graduation. As far as I know, a lot of Chinese cities are providing subsidies for PhD students who graduate from world's top 200 universities, such as Shenzhen. That is a lot of money. That is really attractive. (Interviewee #13).

*Studying at an international famous university is my dream. I am studying at a top 50 university in the world. I am earning *mian zi* for my parents. They are very proud of me.* (Interviewee #18).

Another important factor related to institution image proposed by interviewees is research environment. This finding shows the difference between PhD students and undergraduate or master students. PhD students attach more importance to attributes related to research than undergraduate or master students (Li & Qi, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). Most interviewees clearly pointed out that a university with a supportive research environment is an important factor influencing their decision-making. Comments included “research-focused universities” (e.g., interviewee #20 and #30), “international famous research team in my field” (e.g., interviewee #11 and #25), “strong support for doing research” (e.g., interviewee #1 and #4). Moreover, in consistent with Yang et al.’s study (2018), supervisor’s reputation was also vital for Chinese PhD students. This finding also indicates a big difference between PhD students and undergraduate or master students. Many of interviewees (e.g., interviewee #7, #10 and #14) pointed out that a “famous” supervisor was not only important for their doctoral study, but also important for their future development. On one hand, some interviewees believed that they are more likely to improve research ability and generate publications through studying with a famous supervisor. This finding was supported by Carr and Hayes (2017) who found that some tourism PhD students are eager to publish more work in high categorized journals. On the other hand, some interviewees believed that famous supervisors may use their social resources help them find a good job in the future. The opinion was also confirmed by interviewee #16 who is finishing his PhD in New Zealand:

The university I am studying is not a high-ranking university. The main reason for me to decide to study here was the opportunity to study with Professor A. My supervisor is a world recognized expert in my field. It is really a great honour for me to be supervised by him. He not only provided useful suggestions for generating publications, but also helped me write a strong reference letter. They are important for looking for an academic job.

In addition to institution image, the faculty or department was also an influential factor proposed by Chinese overseas doctoral students. International recognition was very important in some students’ eyes. Some tourism PhD degrees are allocated in the business school. Triple Crown accreditation is one of the most important criteria to evaluate the quality of business programs. Triple Crown accreditation has only been awarded to less than 1% business schools globally. Therefore, many interviewees pointed out that they eager to complete their PhD study in one of the business schools verified by Triple Crown accreditation. For example, interviewee #25 who is studying in Australia argued that Triple Crown accreditation is one of the most important indicators for demonstrating the quality of business schools. As a tourism management PhD student, this was the most important factor for her to make the final decision. However, as many tourism PhD degrees are not allocated in the business school, the importance of Triple Crown accreditation was not identified as an influential factor for these students. Moreover, doctoral study requires candidates to examine a research area extensively; therefore, the fitness between students’ interests and the research direction of the faculty is very important. The finding also indicates the difference between PhD students and undergraduate or master students. Some interviewees shared their PhD application experience with the authors. According to interviewee #3, “I got offers both from university A and university B two years ago. My research area is related to tourism geography. Considering my research area, university B is stronger than university A. Therefore, university B is a good fit for me.” Moreover, the reputation of the faculty and subject ranking are important in some students’ eyes. This finding was supported by Shen, Liu, and Chen (2017) who highlighted the importance of institution ranking on Chinese PhD -students’ choices. For example, interviewee #29 argued that he selected university C because of its good reputation and high ranking in tourism and hospitality subject. Lastly, scholarship opportunities from the faculty emerged as a decisive factor for nearly two thirds of the interviewees in this study. This finding was supported by Qi and Li (2020) who found that one of the biggest difficulties perceived by Chinese international tourism doctoral students during their doctoral studies is financial pressure. In order to reduce family financial burden, most doctoral students preferred to choose programs with scholarship. Apart from the scholarship from the faculty, CSC also provides scholarship for Chinese PhD students who study at overseas partner universities. This is a popular scholarship program for Chinese students who tend to complete their PhD study overseas. Hence, compared to PhD students from other countries, this is a unique influential factor for Chinese PhD students.

Interestingly, some PhD students proposed that the relationship between Chinese universities and overseas universities influenced their decision-making. This is a new influential factor emerged in this current research. With the development of internationalizing higher education, partnership programs between Chinese universities and foreign institutions are becoming increasingly important for Chinese students. The most popular cooperative program is 2 + 2 program. The students enrolled in the 2 + 2 program first spend 2 years at Chinese universities in China and then, two years in cooperative foreign universities overseas. Many interviewees who enrolled the 2 + 2 program decided to contribute to complete their doctoral study at the same foreign university where they completed their bachelor or master degrees due to the following reasons, such as a relative familiar environment, (e.g., interviewee #3, #21, and #24), easier to get the offer (e.g., interviewee #9 and #13), and networks (e.g., alumni and friends) (e.g., interviewee #5, #6, and #17).

4.3. Country effect

Some interviewees highlighted the importance of country image on their decision-making. The identified influential factors include social reputation of the country (e.g., interviewee #3, #6, and #30), the economic development level and degree of internationalization (e.g., interviewee #13, #17, and #27), and cost of living (e.g., interviewee #11 and #16). The finding is consistent with previous literature, such as the economic strength of host countries (McMahon, 1992) and cost (Lee, 2017). Not surprisingly, economic development level and degree of internationalization were found to be important for tourism management PhD students who tend to find a job in the host countries after graduation. Besides that, immigration policy, visa policy, and the quality of their children’s education were also identified as influential factors influencing Chinese PhD students’ decision-making. Compared to undergraduate and postgraduate students, the quality of their children’s education is an important consideration for PhD students. Moreover, in

consistent with Hazen and Alberts' study (2006), the researchers found that some mature PhD students saw studying their PhD overseas as a steppingstone for immigration. Hence, a favourable immigration policy and visa application process were important for some of the interviewees (e.g., interviewee #10 and #13). For example, interviewee #15 from Beijing commented:

One of the key considerations for me to do my PhD is my child. My son suffered from stressful study in Beijing. I wanted him to be happy and receive the western style of education. Relatively speaking, Australia's immigration policy is better than other countries. Therefore, I gave up my job and decided to do my PhD in Australia.

4.4. City image

In consistent with [María Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño's \(2006\)](#) study, city image as an influential factor influencing the selection of PhD programs was also proposed by some interviewees. The identified factors included city size, safety and security, and city's facilities and convenience. Several interviewees who tended to work in the industry after graduation mentioned that they tend to complete their PhD in a big city. They believed that big cities enable to provide more opportunities for tourism management students than small cities. However, city size was not identified as an influential factor for students who tend to find an academic job after graduation. Not surprisingly, safety and security were identified as a key consideration for some interviewees and their parents. This finding was supported by [María Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño \(2006\)](#) who argued that safety and security as an important part of city image is one of the most important factors in the choice process. Interviewee 9 argued that "New Zealand is seen as the last pure land in the world. My parents would like to me study in a safe country. In terms of university selection, the possibility of experiencing earthquakes made me decide to reject the offer from university D." In addition, city's facilities and convenience were also found to be a factor that influence some students' decision-making. Several interviewees in this research (e.g., interviewee #16 and #23) argued that choosing a convenient city with good facilities is very important given the longer period of study compared to undergraduate and postgraduate study. Furthermore, the accessibility of Chinese restaurants and food was seen as important. Interviewee #22 who is currently in London commented:

I decided to study in London for two reasons. Firstly, London as an international famous city is very convenient. The facilities are good. I really enjoy city life. Secondly, given the large number of people living in London, there are a lot of Chinese restaurants here. I am a big fan of Chinese food.

4.5. Program evaluation

It was found that Chinese tourism PhD students tend to evaluate PhD programs from two perspectives, including tuition fees and previous graduates' comments and performance. The tuition fee of the PhD program was a key consideration for some interviewees. This finding was supported by [Bista and Dagley \(2015\)](#) who argued that some international students considered lower tuition as an important factor in their decision-making. The typical example was interviewee #1:

I got two offers at that time. One is from a New Zealand university and the other one is from an UK university. I did not get scholarship from both two universities. That was a tough decision for me. Even though the UK university's world ranking is higher than the New Zealand university, I selected the New Zealand one because of its cheaper tuition fees. New Zealand's tuition fees for PhD students is the same as domestic students.

The importance of previous graduates' comments and achievements on evaluating PhD programs was mentioned by several interviewees (e.g., interviewee #10, #18 and #22). This finding confirmed [Li's \(2020\)](#) study which highlighted the influence of previous students on Chinese students' decision-making. Given the importance of word of mouth, several interviewees contacted the students who graduated from their target PhD programs to get comments or suggestions before making an application. Interviewee #18 pointed out that he contacted three graduates who graduated from the PhD program before making a final decision. The comments from them made him have a better understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of the PhD program. To a large extent, the comments were very useful for his decision-making. Some interviewees further pointed out that they checked previous graduates' achievements. They believed that previous graduates' current achievements show the possibility of their future development. According to interviewee #7:

I found information related to PhD graduates from the tourism department website. I realized that the majority of them got a good academic job. Therefore, the information made me feel confident in studying at this school.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Given the increasing number and importance of Chinese international PhD tourism students, this study examines the choice criteria used by them to select an PhD program. From a theoretical viewpoint, the findings of this study contribute to existing literature in four ways. Firstly, even though Chinese international students' decision-making process has been examined by previous studies ([Liu & Morgan, 2016](#); [Rudd, Djafarova, & Waring, 2012](#); [Wu, 2014](#)), few studies focused on Chinese overseas PhD students. A lack of understanding Chinese international PhD students' decision-making process is identified. From this perspective, this exploratory study fills the research gap. Secondly, most international students' decision-making process studies have applied the push-pull theoretical framework from a macro perspective. The identified influential factors identified by previous studies include advanced opportunities and facilities in the host countries ([Altbach, 1998](#)), lack of educational and employment opportunities and political instability ([Altbach, 2004](#)), academic reputation/quality of institutions, faculty quality ([Chen, 2007](#)), and general economic and social dynamics ([Altbach, 2004](#)). The push-pull framework as the most commonly used framework to examine international students' decision-making process was challenged due to overlooking the micro-level elements ([Lee, 2014](#)) and student characteristics ([Li & Bray, 2007](#)) in the

decision-making process. This study examined both the macro-level and personal factors influencing the decision-making process of Chinese international PhD students based on a qualitative approach. This research develops a framework of factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program (Fig. 1). This study identifies five main factors: personal reasons, institution, country effect, city effect and program evaluation. Though the participants of this study are Chinese international tourism PhD students, the factors identified in this research share similarities with those in the previous studies related to Chinese international PhD students of other fields, such as the influence of family, friends and teachers (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Liu & Morgan, 2016; Yang et al., 2018), institution (Yang et al., 2018), migrant intentions (Hazen & Alberts, 2006), recommendation from others (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011), parents' expectation (Bodycott & Lai, 2012), cost (Lee, 2017), the economic strength of host countries (McMahon, 1992), quality of education (Luo, 2017), supervisor and financial influence (Yang et al., 2018). The proposed framework summarized the previous findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of Chinese international doctoral students' decision-making process. It can be generalized to other subjects of business school, such as marketing and finance management. Therefore, the proposed framework makes a good contribution to Chinese international doctoral students' decision-making literature.

Thirdly, the findings of this study are upgraded to decision-making theory level. The identified five factors are not equally important for Chinese international tourism doctoral students. In fact, students' choices cannot satisfy all the factors mentioned above when making the decision. In other words, students need to make their decisions based on the importance of the factors in their mind

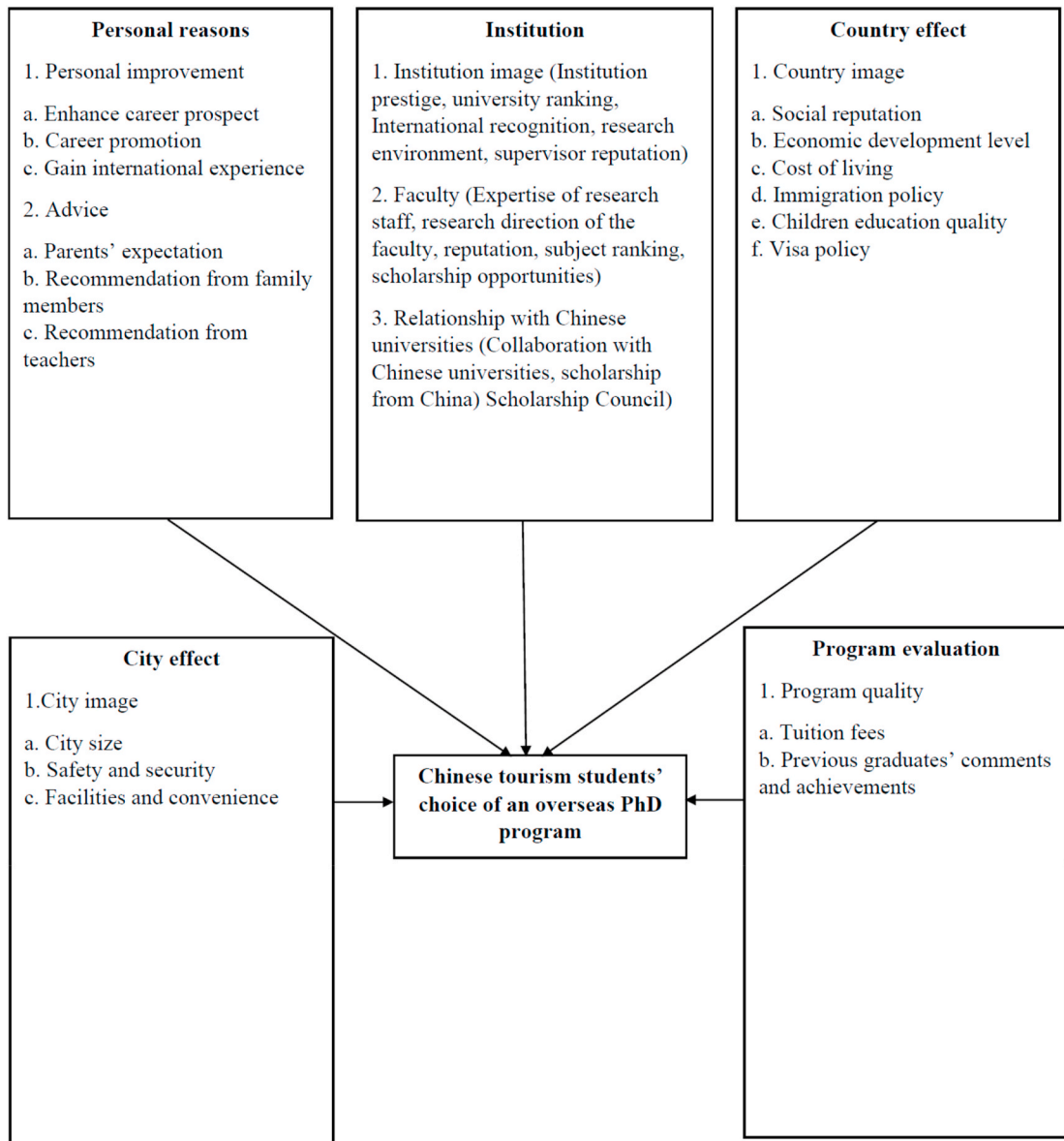


Fig. 1. Factors influencing Chinese tourism students' choice of an overseas PhD program.

when the factors conflict each other. Personal reasons and institution were identified as the most important factors among the five factors based on the frequency of codes mentioned by participants (Table 2). This study supported the existing literature that most students decided to in doctoral study primary for personal reasons (Tarvid, 2014). Therefore, personal reasons and institution are also the important factors for non-Chinese international PhD students. However, this is a significant difference between Chinese PhD students with undergraduate students. Rudd et al. (2012) found that Chinese international undergraduate students 'decisions are mainly based on the reputation of the country considering educational standards and worldwide recognition. Finally, this study highlights the importance of *mian zi* on selecting overseas PhD programs for Chinese students. Compared to Western students, this is a unique factor for Chinese students, which can be explained by the Chinese culture. The concept of *mian zi* is regarded as the core of Chinese culture (Child & Lu, 1996). Ting-toomey and Kurogi (1998) define *mian zi* as '... a claimed sense of favourable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him [that] can be enhanced or threatened in any uncertain social situation' (187). Guan and Ploner (2020) argued that *mian zi* can be equally achieved through 'acquired' personal qualities and achievements such as knowledge, ability, and education. In the context of tertiary education, higher educational qualifications are becoming increasingly important for gaining *mian zi* in Chinese society. It is generally acknowledged that the higher the educational qualification, the more *mian zi* could be derived to individuals and families (Guan & Ploner, 2020). This study confirmed the finding and pointed out that pursuing a PhD degree at an overseas university is seen as an honour to students' family. Given the importance of *mian zi* in Chinese culture, university ranking, subject ranking, and supervisor's reputation are regarded as attributes which played an important role in gaining *mian zi* in the students and their parents' eyes.

As the proposed framework can be generalized to other subjects of business school, this paper also provides valuable implications for policy makers of host universities to develop their marketing strategies to attract business PhD students. The most important factors influencing international PhD students 'decision-making process identified by this study include personal improvement, ranking, research environment, supervisor's reputation, and previous graduates' comments and achievements. Firstly, given the importance of personal improvement on PhD students 'decision-making, the host universities need to focus on introducing how the PhD program can help students' enhance their career prospect to potential PhD students. Secondly, the territory education organizations need to highlight university ranking and subject ranking when recruiting PhD students. Moreover, the official website of the faculty or department can highlight the profiles of world-class staff and research team. Finally, given the importance of positive word of mouth, it will be good for the department or faculty to provide PhD graduate employment report and previous PhD graduates' comments for students and their parents.

Due to the exploratory and context-specific nature of the current study, it was limited to the selective interview groups. Convenience and snowball sampling approaches were used, which may cause bias. All the participants are from English speaking countries (commonwealth countries and US). Although they are the main destination countries for Chinese students, many other non-English speaking countries are ignored by this study. Therefore, further research can involve participants from a wider scope and clarify whether they are influenced by the same factors. In addition, this research is culturally bound – Chinese tourism management PhD students, which can be both a limitation and a strength. Caution should be exercised when applying findings of this research to other contexts.

Declarations of competing interest

None.

No conflict is acknowledged.

Acknowledgement

This work was funded by Research Project of Teaching Task Reform in Higher Education Institutions in Hainan Province (Hnig 2020-6), Hainan University Education and Teaching Reform Research Project (hdjy 2030), and Hainan University - The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Innovation Team (HDSKTD202017).

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