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What Factors Influence Chinese Students to Choose Master Program in JMC: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

Phenomenology, Qualitative, Chinese Students, Master Programs, Decision-Making

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What Factors Influence Chinese Students to Choose Master Program in JMC: A Phenomenological Study

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The number of Chinese postgraduates in JMC has steadily increased with the growing number of JCC master's programs in China. Little is known about key factors that influence Chinese students' decisions in choosing which program attend. In order to fill a gap in the academic field, a qualitative phenomenological approach was applied to examine the experiences of seven Chinese master's students in JMC from three different universities in Zhejiang province, China. Three important themes have been created including (1) geographical advantages; (2) recommendation of peers and professors; and (3) course design and curriculum. These findings have important implications for school officials and decision makers, with respect to allocating their resources wiser to make masters programs in JMC more attractive. In addition, this research study is the first analysis of its kind to apply a phenomenological approach to study experiences of Chinese students in making decisions of choosing a master's program. This study lays a valuable foundation for similar topics through a qualitative research method. Keywords: Phenomenology, Qualitative, Chinese Students, Master Programs, Decision-Making

Introduction

China has become a more important role at the international stage with its fast but steady economic growth from the beginning of this century, delivering its strong cultural, economic, and educational influences internationally. The reform of higher education has been one of the central tasks of the Chinese government (Yang, 2010). In order to cultivate and yield more social elites, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) have been consistently increasing its financial budget to invest in higher education, making tuition and fees more affordable to more Chinese students (Hong, Shen, & Emeritus, 2017). Under these circumstances, more and more Chinese universities have started to develop postgraduate education by launching variously new master programs. According to facts provided by the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China (2016), the enrollment of students in master programs in 2015 was 1,584,719, three times larger than the number in 2002. Accordingly, the master programs of Journalism, Mass Communication, and New Media (JMC) as important subjects in China's higher education are growing rapidly too.

China's fast development and expansion of master programs in JMC should not solely be regarded as a result of the larger investment of MOE and the encouragement of the central government. Certainly, the point of view that attributes the growing enrollment of postgraduates in JMC to the stronger financial support of MOE in part explains enthusiasm at the university side but it lacks enough understandings of the global environment, the development of technology, and student bodies. In fact, the growth of student bodies in JMC

at the post-graduate level is a global phenomenon. For example, the number of master programs in JMC in China's counterpart, the U.S., has exponentially increased too. Allum and Okahana (2015) point out that the master's degree is the fastest-growing degree in the U.S. and the number of master level students in JMC is expanding at a rapid rate among all different branching programs. In 1988, the total number of master students in JMC was about 8,000, while in 2010, the number rocketed to 14,775 in the U.S (Tudor, Lee, Whitney, Chelsea, & Paris, 2011). In addition, technology innovation has been understood as one of the driving factors for the flourishing development of degree programs in JMC as it allows wider and faster use of various communication tools and news apps. Wechat, for example, a Chinese popular app, automatically delivers news to about 938 million people in China every day (Jordan, 2017). In the wake of the prosperity of new media, a myriad of new job opportunities has thus been created in the field of JMC, such as internet news editors and online freelance writers. The burgeoning market attracts many young people and propels them to pursue a higher degree in JMC and/or update their knowledge repository. A master's degree in the field of JMC seems to be ideal for those young people who look for job opportunities or get a promotion in this career.

With the growing number of master programs in JMC offered by different universities, Chinese universities have to compete furiously with one another for enrollment as Chinese students have more choices than before. While the competition among master programs in JMC of many Chinese universities becomes more intensive, only a handful of Chinese scholars and educators deeply analyze what factors attract students to master programs in JMC¹. There were two goals in this study. The first one was in an effort to fill the academic gap by helping build a comprehensive understanding of students' needs and interests with which program directors, deans, and policymakers are able to adjust their admission policies and allocate financial and human resources more wisely. As this study is the first analysis of Chinese applicants' decision-making considerations in choosing master programs in JMC with a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the second goal of this study is to provide the research direction and experiences for future studies in the similar topics through a qualitative approach.

Literature Review

College Choice Model

Chapman (1984) proposed a student college choice model in which students' choices are powerfully influenced by their own characteristics and external factors such as characteristics of the college. Hanson and Litten (1989) established a three-stage model for studying student college choices and important factors of colleges that may affect students' choice include the availability of financial aid and size and programs of colleges. However, this model does not entirely fit in characteristics of China's higher education system due to the different educational system between China and the U.S. It is worth noting that the passport for getting into a graduate school in China is not easy to obtain and most applicants have to pass the highly competitive postgraduate admission test (*Kao Yan in Chinese*) and admission interviews. Thus, the admission process is mutually selective between applicants and programs.

University Rankings

The rankings of universities do play a role in catching applicants' attention at first glance (Alter & Reback, 2014). The origin of the university ranking system was from the

¹ However, there are many good research studies analyzing factors influencing Chinese students' decision in choosing their colleges (see Chao, 2016; Wang, 2007; Zhang, 2009; Zhang, 2013).

United States as *U.S. News and World Report* started ranking universities nation-wide in 1983 to better guide students (Yu & Zhang, 2009). Although Chinese universities have never been ranked officially, the Chinese government did launch the “project 211” and the “project 985” for building world-class universities at the end of the last century (Li, 2004). Names of universities on the list of either the project 211 or project 985 are regarded as an excellent national university that many Chinese students dream about getting in. In 2003, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, for the first time in the history, developed the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) to rank all of the universities in the world by assessing their research contribution, the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, and other key factors (ARWU, 2017). From then on, Chinese students and parents started to have a clearer concept of rankings of Chinese universities.

It is unquestionable that a university enjoying a higher ranking is more attractive in many students’ eyes and even college administrators have to keep a watchful eye on the rankings for the fear that their enrollment may be hurt (Alter & Reback, 2014), but there are other important factors that can strongly influence decisions of Chinese students and their parents when choosing a university. Xin (2010) in his research project argues that Chinese college students also pay great attention to employment prospects, specialized level of subjects, and teachers’ resources from a survey with a data size of about 500 participants. More interestingly, Xin (2010) further concludes that Chinese first-batch students, top students who earned higher scores in the Chinese college entrance exam, pay much greater attention to the university rankings than Chinese second-batch students. Interviewees of Xin’s survey were all college freshmen and when it comes to a decision made by an adult student for choosing his/her ideal master program in JMC, more factors related to career development would be taken into consideration by applicants.

Location

Campus culture and location take a large share of decisions when students choose their master programs. Where the program/college/university is located can be highly influential to students as some Chinese students really want to study in big and economically developed cities where more job opportunities are offered (Zhang, 2013). China has its distinctive residence registration system called as “Hu Kou” which constrains some people from poor areas and/or less economically developed cities to big cities (Zhang, 2013), but getting accepted by a master program can help students earn a temporary residency at where the master program is located. Thus, Zhang (2013) further argues that in some situations university location is more important than the rankings and reputation of the university to some students who believe they can make more money in so-called China’s tier-one cities such as Beijing or Shanghai where are much more economically developed than other middle-sized cities and small cities.

Campus Culture

Campus culture and tradition are also important factors that many applicants have to consider in making their choices as academic corruption, unfair grades, and plagiarism have still occasionally occurred in China (Altbach, 2009). Min (2004) also contends that the partial bifurcation between teaching and research continues to be a problem in China’s higher education, so Chinese students do evaluate reputation and campus culture when making their decision to choose master programs. In general, established universities with a long history have stricter rules against academic misconduct and adopt a more academic-friendly atmosphere to postgraduates, protecting students away from latent problems, while some new programs in JMC may have more funding and research projects that allow their students to take

part in and earn their research experiences. Different campus cultures have their distinctive advantages/shortcomings and thus attract applicants in different ways.

Professors' Fame

Moreover, Chinese students in master programs have to choose their academic adviser/supervisors responsible for guiding them closely to publish papers, while in most master programs at the U.S. students do not need to choose such a professor to follow and co-work so tightly. As such, reputation and academic performance of professors have been paid more attention by Chinese students when choosing a master's program. Some researchers (e.g., Greer, 2005) believe that the relationship between advisers and advisees in China's higher education is much closer than that in the U.S., as the academic adviser's job is not limited only in academic tasks, but at the same time Chinese professors and/or advisers also have to morally inspire their students and are even supposed to counsel students' personal lives in many cases. Many Chinese students who want to apply a master's program do a full investigation on professors of their targeting programs before making their decisions. Hence, a good, patient, famous, and prestigious professor may enormously help its master program to earn more applicants.

Course Design

The course design of a master's program in JMC has been one of the key factors in many Chinese students' eyes. How coursework has been designed undeniably matters and Lowe (2007) uses scholastic capital to refer to knowledge attainment resulting from coursework undertaken in the degree program and concludes it as an influential factor in explaining students' learning motivations. There are many different types of Chinese students in JMC master programs, but they can roughly be grouped into two categories by their future career development. One group of students is to stick to the research track after graduation and they will continue to earn a terminal degree, a Ph.D., while others choose to go directly to the job market. Thus, a good and attractive master program in JMC should help have the needs of two different student groups met.

Methodology

In order to have a thorough understanding of driving factors of Chinese students' choices for admission of a master program in JMC, a hermeneutic phenomenological research method that helps researchers have a deeper understanding of lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2003; Erford, 2008), has been carefully employed into this study. By applying the phenomenological research with a recursive pattern of data collection from participants who experienced the same phenomenon, a multi-faceted explanation of their experiences can be acquired (Creswell, 2013).

The nature of this study calls for the phenomenology approach due to appropriateness. Deeper understandings of the experiences of the individual regarding how Chinese master students made their choice of choosing a master's program in JMC can be produced. With the phenomenological approach, greater insight into individual experiences allows researchers to search for commonality among experiences (Erford, 2008), so key factors influencing Chinese students' decisions are able to be identified. Overall, the design, goals, and purpose of this study is a good match for a phenomenological approach.

Participants

The participants in this study were identified as Chinese master students in JMC. Chinese master students from other fields and international students studying in China were excluded. A network sampling method was applied for participant recruitment. A total number of 7 participants was selected. All 7 participants were all attending this research study voluntarily and were master students in JMC from three different universities in Zhejiang, China. All participants were well informed about the purpose of this study, the research procedures, and the benefits and potential risks of this research study during the recruitment stage. The participants' age ranged from 23 to 35 years with a mean age of 28. Their names were replaced by pseudonyms for protection.

Procedure

All Chinese participants were interviewed face to face with an open-ended, semi-structured protocol. Research questions in the interview protocol were developed based on literature review, thoughts, and discussions of all three researchers, and feedback from a few Chinese students. The protocol covered a broad range of questions related to factors influencing how they made their decisions in choosing a master program. For example, some interview questions were: why they chose to study in their current program in JMC but not others, and what they like and dislike about this program before making their decision. During each interview, additional questions were added according to each participant's response.

All interviews were conducted on a two-to-one basis, which means two researchers versus one participant. One researcher asked questions and the participant answered the interview questions, while the other researcher was responsible for taking notes. The length of each interview lasted from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. Six interviews took place at the researchers' office and one interview was done in an empty classroom at a university. During the interviews, audio recorders were used to ensure accuracy. Participants were asked to clarify their answers when responses were not clear to researchers.

Data Verification

To verify the accuracy of the data that were collected, follow-up interviews have been held with all seven research participants as trustworthiness is a major concern in qualitative studies (Moustakas, 1994). The follow-up interviews are relatively short, about 10 to 15 minutes, and mainly were conducted through phone calls. During the subsequent interviews, the researchers skillfully asked research questions similar to previous interview questions so that the data already collected could be carefully verified. If there was anything that was not clear to the researcher from a previous interview, the researcher then asked for a more detailed explanation during short follow-up interviews. As the length of follow-up interviews was short, only were unclear answers and/or ambiguous answers to core questions tested.

Data Analysis

A three-reading cycle on research data for creating themes suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2010) was strictly followed in the data analysis process. Also, the audiotape was carefully listened to and reviewed in order to process the experiences described by the participants. Then, each individual transcript was carefully scrutinized to identify recurring themes and passages related to the same theme were grouped into one broad category.

Finally, each theme in accordance with each research question was examined by all researchers again.

Results

After a thorough analysis process, three identified themes are presented: geographical advantages; recommendation of peers and professors; course design and curriculum.

Geographical Advantages

It was found that geographical location of a master program in JMC took a large portion when it comes to applying a master program in JMC, as all participants discussed that this factor can't only hugely influence the life quality during their school time, but they believed that they can better develop their career in the city where their master program is located as they can take advantage of the people connection and resources that their programs provide.

Geographical location is really important to me. As my major is Mass Communication, only can big firms in developed cities offer certain positions for which my major fits. In addition, big cities, especially coastal cities have more shopping malls and good restaurants. When you choose the program, actually you are choosing the city where you have to live for at least two years, so you must hope that you live in a famous and big city that provides convenient transportation and good facilities. (Interview with participant B, 2018)

From my personal experiences, geographical location and weather are critical to me. I used to study in North China for four years to earn my bachelor's degree. I really dislike living back there again. The reason why I chose this program was because of the city that the master program is located. In this city, you are able to visit many historical monuments and attractions. And when you mentioned your university to other people, although they may not know your university or your program, they can still know your city. That is extra merit. (Interview with participant C, 2018)

Moreover, some participants also show their strong emotional attachment to the city where they have chosen to study for master's degrees. In the case of Participant D, E, and F, they all chose the cities first before choosing which program to apply. When the city had been aimed, they started selecting different universities and programs offered in that city. Participant E and F even used the geographical location as a tool to limit their choices, so they can compare master programs in JMC from other aspects such as rankings and research opportunities.

I graduated with a bachelor's degree in my hometown in Sichuan, but I wanted to get a job in this city where I am doing my master's degree now. I got friends living in this city and I knew the average income in this city is higher than my hometown. However, I did not think that it was easy to get a good job at that time. I only held a bachelor degree and too many people got a bachelor degree in China. Thus, I tried to get into a master's program in this city first. By attending the university, I have two more years to build my people connection and know more about this city. (Interview with participant D, 2018)

I spent four years in Hangzhou, so I know Hangzhou pretty well. It is the most beautiful city in China, even in the world. If there was a university offering the same master program in Anhui or Henan and enjoyed a higher ranking and gave me an offer, I would not go there. Why? I am not familiar with those cities. In Hangzhou, I always know where I can go for fun after class. I got a bunch of good friends here. I like here, so the location is very important to me. (Interview with participant E, 2018)

My boyfriend is in this city and we were suffering from a long distance as undergraduates a few years ago. He wanted me to apply for this program so we can stay together. I visited this city before and I felt that the city is pretty and I got many romantic memories about my boyfriend in this city, so when I made my choices for admission, I limited myself in a couple of universities only in this city. Thus, the location of a university is important to me for personal reasons. (Interview with participant F, 2018)

Recommendation of Peers and Professors

Of All 7 participants, only one (participant G) explicitly explains he has a highly self-confident personality and would not be easily influenced by the opinions of others, especially at those important decisions that can possibly have a serious impact on his future. Other participants really took the recommendations of peers and professors seriously when making their choices. Participants' opinions can really be changed with strong recommendations and/or negative descriptions of peers, advisers, and professors. Recommendations made by professors are more important and reliable than that of peers and advisers to participants according to their experiences.

I did not think recommendations from peers were important. They told you their cousins or their friend's study at that university, so this university should be good. The truth may be they never really knew about the rankings of the university that they recommended to you. However, if recommendations are from my professors, that is really different. Professors have to take their responsibility for their words, so they have to be more cautious when evaluating a university or a master program. Thus, I really took it and changed my original plan when my professor strongly recommended this program to me. I trusted him. He did not make money from helping me, so there was no reason to doubt his advice and he wanted me to succeed. (Interview with participant A, 2018)

If all peers and advisers all say good things about this program, it means that it is a good program with a prestigious reputation. Otherwise, why all people say good/bad things about this program? In my case, I did answer my program adviser about a couple of master programs during my preparation period for application. You know we can only apply for one master program and take the exam for the program per year in China. It means if you make your goal wrong, you waste one year. I did not want to waste my time. In order to save your time and energy, you have to compare different universities and collect enough information about the program that you are interested in. Hence, asking your academic adviser and peers is a fast way to get the information that you need. As advisers work at universities, they are able to know more information about

university and master programs than you. Thus, I thought their advice was important to me. (Interview with participant B, 2018)

Yes, my professor did recommend this master program to me. My major was not media and communication so I did not know which master program in JMC was good. At the same time, I realized that the rankings of the university were not always equal to the rankings of a master program in JMC. At this point, the recommendations of professors were important to me. One of my professors taught me one course, Media Industrial, and he is knowledgeable and he used to study in this master program. Then, I asked him opinions and he said a lot of good things about this program and it played an important role in helping me make my decision to apply and take the test for this master program. (Interview with participant C, 2018)

Participant D and E also experienced similarly strong recommendations with participant C, but the persons who strongly recommended the JMC program were peer friends of them but not academic advisers/professors. They confessed that these recommendations and introductions had a significant impact on them and finally their decisions were made based on these recommendations. Friends' introductions were checked for validity if too much positive information about a master's program was given in participant E's case.

At that time, as I mentioned, several friends of mine lived in Ningbo. They all said good things about this university. They have been there and they said the campus is beautiful. We got good relationships with one another, so they would not lie to me. Also, as they think that the campus is beautiful, I want to get them impressed[laughter]. I thought if I was accepted by the program, my friends got perfect excuses to visit me and the beautiful campus. Thus, their introduction and recommendation were important to me. (Interview with participant D, 2018)

There are many universities in Hangzhou, so I faced many different choices at that time. I got a close friend who repeatedly recommended this university to me, because he graduated from this university. In fact, back to that time, this university was not the first choice of mine due to the lower ranking of this university. However, as my friend repeatedly said the master program in JMC is different, it raised my interests gradually and then I checked it online. There was much news about this program as well as professors in this program, so I changed my mind and applied for this master program. (Interview with participant E, 2018)

Course Design and Curriculum

Although there are different expectations held by participants on the curriculums of master programs in JMC, all participants regard the curriculums as a core factor that must be taken into consideration when comparing different master programs in JMC. As there are some similar master programs in JMC, for example, mass communication and journalism, participants have to choose the most suitable program that they think fits best in their interests as well as their future careers. Thus, carefully analyzing and comparing curricula offered by different master programs were a necessary job that all participants did in making their decisions.

Of course I was attracted by this program with their curriculum. I did not want to spend too much time to learn some unpractical theory courses. I wanted to learn something useful and helpful for leading me to a well-paid job position after graduation. I went over curricula of other master programs and they listed some useless courses as compulsory courses, say, media history. I did not think I was interested in this course and I did not think this course could bring me a job. However, in the curriculum of my program, media history is provided as an elective course and that is reasonable. I am more interested in the news interview, news writing, and post-production, so at that time I was specifically looking for these courses in their curricula. (Interview with participant C)

If you plan to earn a master's degree in JMC, the first thing you need to know is what they teach you in the master program. For me, my major in college was new media, so I was wondering what new skills professors from the master program would teach me. Some people say all universities got similar curriculum in JMC and they are totally wrong. Some master programs in JMC are three years long, while others are two years programs. The point is that you never know it until you look at the program website and the curriculum. It is extremely important to me as I want to graduate as soon as possible, so how the curriculum of the master program is designed really matters. (Interview with participant G)

Discussion

The focus of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of Chinese master students in JMC regarding how to make their decisions in choosing their master programs and the results of the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis provided an overall picture of decision-making considerations of Chinese students at the master level in JMC who participated in the study. These results are highly valuable to Chinese higher education, especially to policymakers and education leaders of Chinese institutions, as they are not only able to have a deeper understanding of applicants' decision-making considerations but they can also adjust their recruitment strategies for applicants for master programs in JMC.

The patterns of how Chinese participants had made their choices for a master program in JMC have been clearly identified. First of all, geographical location is an extremely important factor that Chinese students have to think about carefully. The findings strongly suggest that JMC master programs in economically developed, famous, big, and coastal cities are more attractive to applicants and this result is in consistent with conclusions of previous studies (e.g., Zhang, 2013). The considerably huge gap in income between small towns and big cities in China has in part resulted in such a social phenomenon. In 2016, the average income in Shanghai, one of the most economically developed cities in China, was 6,504 RMB per month per person (Melnicoe, 2017), while rural households in China only have a per capita income of \$120 dollars a month, about 840 RMB (Shapiro, 2016). Thus, Chinese talented applicants are more likely to be attracted by postgraduate programs in JMC in economically developed cities. The findings also implied that JMC master programs in inland and small cities need to be financially supported more by MOE in order to attract good applicants.

In the current study, we also evaluated the importance of the university rankings in influencing participants' decisions of where to enroll. It was not surprising that Chinese postgraduates in JMC who were more career-driven tend to care less about the university rankings. Interestingly, few participants in interviews also doubted about the AWRU ranking system, the most authoritative ranking system in China, by complaining that ARWU gives

unfairly higher weight to research in natural sciences while paying a little attention to social sciences in ranking Chinese universities, so they did not really trust and relied on the AWRU ranking system when making their decisions of which master program to enroll in JMC.

The results of this study also suggested that parents' suggestions are less influential to Chinese applicants for master programs than applicants for undergraduate education, while recommendations from peers, advisers, and professors are relatively important and, in some situations, decisively important. As participants did their own research on the Internet for searching for information about the master program recommended by others, a stronger online presence of a master's program in JMC is more likely to be attracted to strong applicants.

The research also concluded that the course design of a master program in JMC is a critical factor in attracting applicants, which was consistent with the literature that showed scholastic resources matter to Chinese students. JMC Applicants may have their different learning needs to be addressed at the master level and some are career-based needs and others are interested-based needs. Findings implied that a more flexible curriculum which includes some elective courses for addressing the needs of different students is more attractive. In addition, a shorter learning period is in general more welcomed.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study is limited by its size and is confined to Chinese students at the master level in JMC at three universities in Hangzhou and Ningbo, two economically developed cities in China, it does provide direction and insight for future research to build upon. The sample size for a qualitative method can be accepted as a good representation of Chinese students at the master level in JMC, as the number of Chinese postgraduate students in JMC as a student group is not very large. In addition, as this study is the first qualitative analysis in its kind for understanding driving factors of Chinese students' decisions in choosing their master programs in JMC, it helps lay a valuable foundation for other research studies in studying students' decision-making considerations.

Due to the limited sample size and issues addressed in this study, researchers believe that there are additional issues which need to be further investigated. Academic research on the decision-making considerations of Chinese students at the graduate level is too limited, while the number of graduate students is growing at a highly fast rate. Besides, there is limited empirical research on the understanding of differences of driving factors between Chinese undergraduates and graduates in choosing schools.

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