
Research article

Choice of international branch campus: a case study

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Abstract

International branch campuses (IBCs) are becoming an alternative to domestic higher education institutions. Through interviews with Chinese undergraduates at a British IBC in China, this article examines the choice of a British IBC, using a combined model as the conceptual framework. It finds that the factors both affecting college choice and impacting study abroad influence the choice to study at an IBC, because of the nature of IBCs as foreign presences in the host countries. Academic achievement and supply of resources are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the choice of IBC. Further, students choose IBCs over other universities with similar entry requirements because of their capital and habitus, represented by their socio-economic status. Both students and their parents hope to leverage their accumulated cultural capital to reproduce their cultural capital, or to convert their existing economic capital into cultural capital. Moreover, social capital affects the choice to study at an IBC, and its impacts depend on the volume, strength and quality of the social network. Parents are the most influential persons, impacting the choice of IBC with their capital. Last, institutional characteristics, particularly as a gateway to studying abroad, attract students to study at IBCs.

Keywords internationalisation; transnational higher education; international branch campus; college choice; socio-economic status; habitus; capital; China

Introduction

An international branch campus (IBC), which is a higher education institution (HEI) wholly owned by the home HEI or a joint venture with partners physically located in another country to provide degrees from the original country, is becoming a significant strategy of internationalisation for some HEIs. The choice to study at an IBC for domestic students is similar to the process of college choice, which is described as part of a process whereby students transfer from secondary to postsecondary education, including whether or not to attend college and enrolment in a specific institution (Hossler and Stage, 1992). However, the choice of IBC is different from the choice of traditional HEI because of the institutional characteristics of IBCs, which are foreign presences in the host countries.

Recent studies on the choice to study at an IBC have mainly been carried out in Gulf countries (Wilkins and Huisman, 2013, 2015), Malaysia (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2015; Pyvis and Chapman, 2007; Sim et al., 2020) and China (Lee, 2016; Li, 2019; Mok and Han, 2016; Tsang, 2013; Yang and Wu, 2021; Yu, 2020), which are the largest host countries of IBCs (Yang, 2023). Studies in the Chinese context have revealed that the choice to study at an IBC is impacted by a series of factors at the individual level. First, study abroad in the future is seen as one of the most important motivations for students and their parents to choose IBCs (Mok and Han, 2016; Tsang, 2013). China's middle class nurtures their children to study at IBCs by utilising their capital, and then to study abroad with the qualifications obtained from IBCs to reproduce their social status, even though their children fail to apply to Chinese first-tier HEIs (Tsang, 2013). Their children do not study abroad directly as they want to acquire cosmopolitan cultural capital for future international mobility beforehand (Yu, 2020). For example, students choose to study at IBCs for their personal development, such as improvement in English-language ability, international/intercultural experience and future career prospects (Li, 2019). Second, the *gaokao* (the National College Entrance Examination of China) score is another dominant factor at the individual level (Lee, 2016; Li, 2019). In China, the HEIs sponsored by Project 211 and Project 985 – the programmes of the government of China to build about one hundred key universities, disciplines and specifications, as well as world-class universities in the twenty-first century, respectively – are usually the first choice of students, as they represent the 'best' HEIs in China. Only a few students studying at an IBC put the IBC as their first choice (Yu, 2020). These students could not meet their goals to be admitted into Project 985 universities. Students perceived that the IBC in this study was as competitive as Project 211 universities, but not as competitive as Project 985 universities. They chose IBCs over other HEIs with similar entry requirements because of their opposition to certain Chinese social rules, and their curiosity about foreignness, including the desire for novelty and uniqueness and their interest in Western culture. Third, most students at IBCs in China are from socio-economically advantaged families. Therefore, their families are knowledgeable about IBCs, and can afford the costs of IBCs (Yang and Wu, 2021).

Furthermore, the choice of studying at an IBC is impacted by particular institutional characteristics, including relatively lower costs, location, international study opportunities, ranking and reputation, faculty and programme quality, qualification recognition by employers and the host country's government, and foreign-language environment (Lee, 2016; Li, 2019; Mok and Han, 2016). First, although the costs of IBCs are much higher than those of domestic HEIs, they are much lower than the costs of studying abroad. Studying in the home country makes living costs affordable, and seems less daunting than studying abroad (Lee, 2016). Second, study abroad opportunities are important in the decision to study at IBCs (Mok and Han, 2016; Tsang, 2013), which matches students' motivation at the individual level to choose IBCs for study abroad in the future. Third, the choice of IBC is influenced by institution image, programme evaluation and 'city effect' (Li, 2019). Students evaluated institution image from the perspectives of quality of teaching, prestige, social recognition and facilities, and legality. According to Li (2019), there are many pseudo-Sino-foreign cooperative institutions and projects in China. Students and/or their parents propose a choice set when they choose an IBC to avoid selecting these pseudo-institutions and projects. Students evaluated programmes with proposed criteria, including the host university's recognition, the foreign university's recognition, the quality of programmes, total costs and finance, graduates' achievements and programme suitability. The impacts of the city effect on decision-making included city image, geographic distance and cultural distance (Li, 2019).

Moreover, the choice of studying at an IBC is impacted by a variety of national characteristics. These national characteristics, including inadequate access, the lack of international recognition or exposure,

the poor development of English-language proficiency and the perceived lower quality of domestic HEIs, push students to choose IBCs rather than domestic HEIs in China and Malaysia (Lee, 2016).

Overall, the choice to study at an IBC is influenced by the factors at the individual, institutional and national levels in China. However, current studies examine the choice to study at an IBC from a single econometric or sociological perspective. The influences of cultural factors and significant persons, to which more attention should be paid for the institutional characteristics of IBCs, are not well studied. This study aimed to comprehensively examine the choice to study at an IBC using a combined model, which integrated econometric and sociological indicators in the decision-making process. The following research questions were considered:

- 1a. How does demand for IBC, represented by academic achievement, shape the choice to study at an IBC?
- 1b. How does the supply of resources, represented by family income, impact the choice to study at an IBC?
2. What is the relationship between students' habitus and the choice to study at an IBC?
3. How do significant persons affect the choice to study at an IBC?
4. What is the relationship between institutional characteristics and the choice to study at an IBC?

Conceptual framework

Over the past decades, econometric, sociological and combined models have been developed to describe and explain the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1989). Econometric models, based on human capital theory and rational choice theory, posit that students are rational and seek to maximise their utility while minimising risk. Econometric models effectively link college choice decisions to influential factors. Sociological models, informed by status attainment theory, explain how social and cultural factors shape educational aspirations. Recently, Bourdieu's (1986) theories of capital and habitus, referring to 'the physical embodiment of cultural capital, to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that we possess due to our life experiences' (Longhofer and Winchester, 2016: n.p), have been adopted in studies of college choice (see, for example, Hong and Zhao, 2015; Y. Wu, 2008; X. Wu, 2013; Yang and Chen, 2016), which establish relationships between capital, habitus and college choice decisions. However, neither econometric nor sociological models can fully explain how the development of perceptions of college benefits and costs, and the impacts of these perceptions, shape college choice decisions, or how an individual student processes and integrates information into the decision-making strategy (Young and Reyes, 1987).

To address the limitations of econometric and sociological models, combined models, which incorporate the most influential indicators from both models, have been developed to provide a more comprehensive conceptual framework for college choice research. The combined models are proposed as a sequence of stages in the decision-making process (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Perna's (2006) combined model is highly cited today (see, for example, Ashraf et al., 2017; Bell et al., 2009; Bennett, 2022; Koricich et al., 2018; Means et al., 2016). This combined model puts the econometric model at the forefront, in which students' decisions are based on the comparison of expected benefits and costs. The expected benefits include both monetary and non-monetary benefits, and the expected costs include college costs and foregone earnings. The comparison of expected benefits and costs is shaped by factors at different layers, including the demand for higher education and the supply of resources at the core layer, habitus at the first layer, school and community contexts at the second layer, higher education context at the third layer, and social, economic and policy contexts at the outermost layer. The demand for higher education is indicated by academic preparation and academic achievement; the supply of resources is represented by family income and financial aid. An individual's habitus is represented by their demographic characteristics, and their social and cultural capital. The school and community contexts include the availability of resources, type of resources, and structural supports and barriers. The higher education context recognises the role that HEIs play in shaping college choice, and the social, economic and policy contexts recognise the influences of wider contextual factors. The social context includes the demographic characteristics of the population. The economic context is typically represented by the labour market. The policy context includes financial aid and tuition policy, and a broader range of

policies, such as K–12 (kindergarten to twelfth grade) educational policies and affirmative action policies (Perna, 2006).

Perna's (2006) combined model overcomes the limitations of both econometric and sociological models that investigate college choice from just a single perspective. It provides a conceptual framework for researching college choice with factors at different levels. It has been successfully adopted to examine college choice in China (Ashraf et al., 2017).

Method

Research context

This study focused on a British IBC in China, chosen due to the significance of China and the UK as host and home countries for IBCs, respectively. In China, foreign HEIs have to partner with Chinese HEIs in order to operate IBCs (Yang, 2023). An IBC can be either a full-scale HEI or an academic unit within an HEI (Yang and Wu, 2021). This study was conducted at a full-scale IBC in Zhejiang Province, China. There are over eight thousand students, and more than seven hundred and fifty faculty and staff, who are from over seventy countries. Its reputation and quality are high: according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, 2021), it ranked in the top 100 in China in 2021. The academic standards and the quality of student learning experience have been judged to be equivalent to those of its home campus, which is ranked in the top 101–150 universities in the world, suggesting that the academic standards and learning experiences of this IBC are high. It is very selective: admitted students ranked in the top 5.8 per cent of the *gaokao* participants in China in the academic year 2019/20, and there is an additional English subject performance requirement due to the instruction medium being English. The education system of the IBC is British style, and it largely adopts the pedagogy, curriculum and quality assurance of the home campus. The estimated annual costs for students living and studying at this IBC are approximately RMB 140,000 to 170,000, which are significantly higher than those of other Chinese HEIs.

Sample

All Chinese undergraduate students at this IBC received an email invitation to participate in interviews to discuss their choice of IBC. Fifteen participants were purposefully selected with respect to year of study, programme and gender, based on their responses to a short questionnaire about their demographic characteristics. The demographic characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that all the interviewees are from families with incomes over RMB 100,000 per year, which are classified as middle-income and high-income families in China (Li et al., 2020). Although Helen has two siblings, the income per child for her family is still over RMB 500,000. The parents are well-educated: 13 fathers and 12 mothers have received higher education, and they work as officials, managers, private entrepreneurs, professionals and clerks, and as self-employed individuals, and therefore belong to the upper and middle classes in China (Lu, 2002). In short, the parents are comparatively wealthy, very predominantly well-educated and in privileged occupations. This is a representative sample of Chinese undergraduates at this IBC, where most Chinese undergraduates are from socio-economically advantaged families (Yang and Wu, 2021).

Data collection and analysis

The demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 were collected from a questionnaire. The measurement of capital and habitus was a challenge. Lu (2002) presented the political, economic, social and cultural capital possessed by different occupations in China. Han et al. (2015) found that social capital is significantly positively related to family socio-economic status (SES), which is a composite comprised of family income and parental education and occupation. Further, the embodied form of cultural capital and external wealth can be converted into habitus through appropriate experiences accumulated over time (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, capital and habitus were represented by proxies of SES. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. In the case when the interviewees were not clear about their family incomes, their perceptions of the affordability of the costs of this IBC were measured.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interviewees (N = 15)

Pseudonym	Year of study	Programme	Gender	Family income (in RMB 1,000)	Number of children in family	Family income per child (in RMB 1,000)	Parental education		Parental occupation	
							Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Ada	Year 2	Environment science 2+2	Female	500–750	1	500–750	Junior college	Junior college	Private entrepreneur	Private entrepreneur
Betty	Year 3	Communication	Female	500–750	1	500–750	Bachelor	Junior college	Manager	Self-employed
Cathy	Year 4	International business	Female	200–300	1	200–300	Bachelor	Bachelor	Official	Professional
Daisy	Year 4	International relations	Female	300–400	1	300–400	High school	Below high school	Self-employed	Self-employed
Emma	Year 4	Computer science	Female	200–300	1	200–300	Bachelor	Junior college	Official	Clerk
Frank	Year 1	English	Male	300–400	1	300–400	Bachelor	Bachelor	Official	Official
George	Year 3	International relations	Male	200–300	1	200–300	Junior college	Bachelor	Manager	Professional
Helen	Year 2	Communication	Female	>1,500	3	>500	Below high school	High school	Private entrepreneur	Private entrepreneur
Ina	Year 2	Finance management	Female	500–750	1	500–750	Master	Bachelor	Professional	Professional
Jenny	Year 3	International business	Female	750–1,000	1	750–1,000	Junior college	High school	Clerk	Self-employed
Kathy	Year 4	Communication	Female	100–200	1	100–200	Bachelor	Junior college	Clerk	Clerk
Lewis	Year 2	International business	Male	100–200	1	100–200	Junior college	Junior college	Official	Professional
Martin	Year 4	International business	Male	200–300	1	200–300	Bachelor	Bachelor	Professional	Professional
Nancy	Year 1	International business	Female	200–300	1	200–300	Bachelor	Junior college	Official	Clerk
Oliver	Year 2	International economics and trade	Male	200–300	1	200–300	Master	Bachelor	Manager	Professional

The following interview questions were designed as a guide for the semi-structured interviews:

1. How easy is it for your family to afford the costs of this IBC: very difficult, difficult, neutral, easy or very easy?
2. What were the attitudes of your family, friends and peers, as well as your teachers, regarding your choice of this IBC?
3. Why did you choose to study at an IBC?

The interviews – conducted in Chinese, as both the interviewer and interviewees are Chinese – were recorded with the participants' consent, and then translated into English. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data.

Ethical issues

Approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the IBC, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, no record was kept of their names, and pseudonyms are used in this article.

Results

Research Question 1a: demand for IBC and choice to study at an IBC

The demand for IBC was indicated by academic achievement, which is represented by the *gaokao* score. Overall *gaokao* score was one of the highlighted topics, which was a focal point for 5 of the 15 interviewees. The interviewees' achieved *gaokao* scores were not high enough to allow them to enrol in prestigious Chinese HEIs. These interviewees chose this IBC because it was the best destination available in their choice sets, which were limited by their *gaokao* scores. Of the 15 interviewees, 13 prioritised this IBC in their choice sets. For example, Betty responded:

Because one of my high school schoolmates was studying at this IBC and I cannot be admitted to a good '985' or '211' university because my *gaokao* score isn't good. This was the best university [I could get into] with my *gaokao* score.

Helen said:

My *gaokao* score was embarrassing. I didn't want to study at those Chinese universities. We [my parents and I] thought there were more opportunities for change at IBCs.

The other two interviewees did apply to other prestigious Chinese HEIs in the hope of being accepted, often strategically listing their choices in descending order of university 'quality', but they ended up being admitted to this IBC because their *gaokao* scores were inadequate for those HEIs. For instance, Ina failed in her application to other HEIs, and she was eventually admitted to this IBC. She expressed:

I didn't think too much ... The admission score for this IBC was very high, I applied to universities from top to bottom, and then I was admitted to this IBC.

Kathy used the same strategy to apply to HEIs:

I had applied to other universities but wasn't successful. Finally, I was admitted to this IBC.

Research Question 1b: supply of resources and choice to study at an IBC

Given the high costs of IBCs, the supply of resources is becoming increasingly important. Family income (shown in Table 1) was the main supply of resources. Despite the high costs of this IBC, financial support was not widely highlighted by the interviewees. It seems that the interviewees were not sensitive to financial support, which may be due to their high family incomes. Only Cathy and Lewis, whose annual family incomes were between RMB 200,000 and 300,000 and between RMB 100,000 and 200,000, respectively, perceived that the costs of this IBC were difficult to afford. Cathy mentioned the importance of financial support from her parents:

My parents weren't very wealthy, as they were wage earners. It wasn't so easy for them to afford the tuition fee, but it wasn't very difficult. The tuition fee possibly gave them some pressure, but the pressure wasn't very big.

Financial aid provided another supply of resources. Although this IBC provides a few scholarships, the value of each individual scholarship is small compared to the costs. There is a national student loan scheme in China. However, the cap for this loan was only RMB 8,000 per student per year in 2019. Therefore, the financial assistance provided by this IBC and the government is not significant compared to the high costs.

Research Question 2: habitus and choice to study at an IBC

The composites of SES, including family income, parental educational attainment and parental occupational status, are proxies of capital and habitus. As shown in Table 1, SES indicates different amounts of capital (Han et al., 2015; Lu, 2002).

Intercultural attitude influences the choice of IBC. In contrast to local students, who perhaps do not welcome the unfamiliar, three interviewees (Ada, Cathy and Jenny) saw this IBC as a platform from which to open new cultural horizons. Ada, whose parents were private entrepreneurs possessing economic capital (Lu, 2002), wanted to acquire cultural capital through IBCs:

At that time, I had a feeling that I should go out to see a wider world and experience different cultures, if my score and other conditions were sufficient.

Cathy's father was an official, and her mother was a professional. Thus, her family possessed political and cultural capital (Lu, 2002). Cathy also wanted to broaden her outlook through this IBC, which may be affected by her accumulated cultural capital:

I listened to a lot of European and American popular music, and watched movies and dramas when I was in junior and senior high school; I was very interested [in them], and my English was very good from my childhood ... I wanted to broaden my outlook and get to know the world outside through this IBC.

Foreign language ability and interest may be barriers for students to choose to study at an IBC, while they may also be motivating factors. English language interest motivated the interviewees to choose this IBC. Daisy and George hoped to improve their English language abilities through their studies at this IBC. Daisy's parents, who were self-employed individuals possessing little economic capital (Lu, 2002), had shown their English language interest. They expected their child to acquire English language ability through her studies at this IBC:

The English-teaching environment was novel. My parents thought I could get two skills: professional knowledge and English language ability.

English language ability also motivated the interviewees to choose this IBC. Emma, whose father was an official possessing political capital and mother was a clerk possessing little political and cultural capital (Lu, 2002), demonstrated her English language ability:

My English was very good. My *gaokao* score in English subject is 138 [out of 150]. I got to know that the instruction medium of this university is English ... So, I applied to it.

Research Question 3: significant persons and choice to study at an IBC

This study identified the influences of significant persons on the choice to study at an IBC. Parents play a significant role in the choice to study at an IBC. Of the 15 interviewees, 11 stated that they had received positive encouragement from their parents. Parents are a channel of information, which is particularly important at the search stage. Frank's parents, bachelor's degree holders and officials possessing political capital (Lu, 2002), recommended IBCs to him:

My parents told me there were some IBCs in China, such as this IBC, which I could consider.

In addition to recommendations, parents may search for information to help their children to make decisions. George's father, a junior college graduate and a manager possessing cultural capital and some political and economic capital (Lu, 2002), searched for information about this IBC for him:

My father searched for some information about this IBC. Others, including my family members, classmates, friends and teachers, didn't know this university well.

Parents, particularly those with little or no cultural capital, sometimes made decisions on behalf of their child, even if their child did not have a strong will to apply to IBCs. Those parents possessing economic capital and little or no cultural capital were concerned with the opportunities to improve their social status through their children's studies at IBCs. For example, Helen chose this IBC mainly due to her parents – who did not receive a college education, worked as private entrepreneurs and possessed economic capital (Lu, 2002) – who were seeking opportunities for change:

In the beginning, it was mainly the idea of my parents that I applied to this university. My *gaokao* score was embarrassing, and I didn't want to study at those Chinese universities. We thought there were more opportunities for change at IBCs.

Kathy, whose parents were clerks who possessed little political and cultural capital (Lu, 2002), also listed this IBC in her choice set because of her parents' will to seek opportunities at IBCs, although she did not have such a will:

At that time, my parents' wills were very strong. They thought, according to my *gaokao* score, I couldn't be admitted into a very good Project 985 university. Compared with others, this university offers a better opportunity and platform ... I applied to other universities, but was not successful. Finally, I was admitted to this IBC.

Study abroad in the future was seen as one of these opportunities by parents with varying amounts of cultural capital. Nancy's father was a bachelor's degree holder and an official, and her mother was a junior college graduate and a professional, and so her family possessed political and cultural capital (Lu, 2002). Her parents wanted her to study abroad to increase her competence:

Today, society is very competitive. My parents thought it would be very beneficial if there was an opportunity to study abroad.

Jenny's mother, a high school graduate and a self-employed individual who possessed little economic capital (Lu, 2002), always wanted her daughter to study abroad:

My mother heard of this IBC from a friend. She wanted me to study at a Sino-foreign high school before, but I didn't. She always wants to send me abroad.

However, parents may not support their children in applying to IBCs because they lack knowledge about IBCs. Betty's father, a manager possessing cultural capital and some political and economic capital (Lu, 2002), and her mother, a self-employed individual possessing little economic capital (Lu, 2002), were not aware of this IBC before they further investigated it:

My father and mother didn't agree with me applying to this university. They agreed after they investigated the university and thought it was OK.

Although Emma's father, a bachelor's degree holder and an official possessing political capital (Lu, 2002), recommended this IBC to her, her mother, a junior college graduate and a clerk possessing little political and cultural capital (Lu, 2002), did not know about this IBC, and worried about its quality:

My father suggested that I applied to this university, but my mum, relatives and classmates didn't know this university well. They thought of it as a degree mill.

Not all parents got involved in the college choice process. Lewis's parents, who were junior college graduates, and an official and a professional, respectively, possessed cultural capital and some political and economic capital (Lu, 2002). They did not give Lewis any suggestions, and said that he could apply to any place of his choice. He made the decision himself, although he thought it was difficult for his family

to afford the costs of this IBC. His parents' attitudes suggest that his perception of his family income and wealth may not be accurate.

Friends and peers were another significant group influencing the choice to study at an IBC. IBCs are not a common choice among high school students, and most friends and peers lack knowledge of IBCs. As a recruitment strategy, this particular IBC sends its current students back to the high schools where they studied to promote itself. It is not surprising to find that friends and peers who were studying at, or would like to apply to, IBCs had positive influences on the choice to study at an IBC. Betty said:

One of my high school schoolmates was studying at this IBC. They promoted this university in my class. So, all my classmates knew this university and thought it was good.

Jenny stressed:

My friends and peers didn't know this university except for one. They also wanted to apply to this IBC but were not successful. They were happy for me when I was admitted.

However, friends and peers who lacked knowledge about IBCs, and who thought of them as degree mills, had negative influences on the choice to study at an IBC. For example, Martin's peers thought that this IBC was a degree mill:

I talked to seven or eight peers ... The rest didn't hear about it and thought it was a degree mill.

High school teachers were also identified as influencing the choice to study at an IBC. Their influences on the choice to study at an IBC were varied, perhaps giving their opinions when they were approached by their students and/or students' parents. Teachers who had a good understanding of IBCs sometimes gave positive recommendations to the students and/or students' parents, as indicated by Daisy:

My teachers didn't know this IBC very well, except for my history teacher. She wanted her son to study at this IBC. She mentioned this IBC one time, but without detail.

Ina said:

My teachers also thought this university was suitable for me. They said I should apply to this university if I wanted a good campus environment.

However, teachers who did not have a good understanding of IBCs and thought that prestigious Chinese universities such as Project 985 and Project 211 universities were better than IBCs, gave negative recommendations to their students and/or students' parents. Jenny said:

They [high school teachers and relatives] thought it was better to apply to a Project 985 or Project 211 university, and this IBC was not credible. That was in 2015, this university was not well-known.

Martin's high school teachers also had negative impacts on his choice of IBCs:

My high school teachers didn't hear about this university and advised my mum to be careful.

High school teachers may not have been contacted for advice because they lacked knowledge about IBCs, or because they did not have good relationships with their students. Emma did not contact her teachers for advice because she thought they lacked knowledge about IBCs. Lewis did not approach his teachers because his relationships with his teachers were not good.

The interviewees with good academic performance received more encouragement from their teachers. Cathy was supported by her high school teachers because she was top in her class. She explicitly expressed:

Almost all [my teachers] knew [I was applying to this IBC] at that time. They all were very supportive because I was top in my class. They would like to try their best to help good students ... For example, they contacted the alumni studying at this IBC to ask for information about the 3-in-1 exam, and then they told me the information and how to prepare for the exam.

In addition, relatives were identified as influencing the choice of IBC, providing either positive or negative recommendations to the interviewees. Martin's relatives recommended this IBC to him, while Jenny's relatives recommended Project 985 and Project 211 universities rather than IBCs, which may be due to the different social capital, indicated by SES, which their families possessed. Both Martin's parents had bachelor's degrees and were professionals, with a family income between RMB 200,000 and 300,000, while Jenny's parents were junior college and high school graduates, and were a clerk and a self-employed individual, with family income between RMB 750,000 and 1,000,000.

Research Question 4: institutional characteristics and choice to study at an IBC

The findings reveal that the influences of institutional characteristics of this IBC on the choice of IBC relate to college costs, geographical location, education system, teaching quality, reputation, programme availability, facilities and transition to study abroad.

First, students' perception of the high costs of this IBC was one of the reasons for high school students *not* choosing this IBC. The costs of this IBC are high, and the estimated annual costs for students living and studying at this IBC are approximately RMB 140,000 to 170,000, which is 10 times more than the cost of public HEIs in China. Despite the high costs, most interviewees perceived the costs as being affordable. However, the costs may be a barrier for some high school students in choosing this IBC. The concerns about the costs of this IBC can be seen in the responses of friends and peers, indicating that the costs of this IBC were perceived as being high. Cathy's friends thought that her family was wealthy when they heard that she would apply to this IBC:

I discussed [the application to this IBC] with some best friends ... They thought my family must be wealthy to afford my studies at this IBC.

Martin's peers had the same response:

I talked to seven or eight peers ... Two or three peers seemed envious that my family was wealthy.

The geographical location of this IBC was also considered by the interviewees. The desire of many 'local' students and their parents to remain in Zhejiang Province, where this IBC is located, was highlighted. Cathy, who is from Zhejiang Province, stressed:

The parents from Zhejiang Province would not like their children to leave Zhejiang Province. They hope their children can stay in Zhejiang Province or Yangtze Delta Area.

Ina, who is from Zhejiang Province too, also wanted to study in Zhejiang Province:

Because I'm from Zhejiang Province, I only wanted to study in Zhejiang, but there were not many choices.

This IBC does, however, attract students from other provinces, so that distance from home does not necessarily present a barrier, although the reasons for choosing it may be very difficult to anticipate. For instance, Daisy chose this IBC for the very personal reason that she likes the sea.

Furthermore, the education system, including pedagogy and student experience, which is inherited from its British partner, and which is different from those of Chinese public HEIs, attracted students to study at this IBC. First, British pedagogy attracted the interviewees to study at this IBC. Ada wanted to experience British education:

The UK is a developed country. I thought its education, such as the educational model, would be different, I would like to experience it.

In addition to the attraction of British education, the dissatisfaction with domestic education pushed the interviewees to apply for IBCs. Lewis chose IBCs because he did not like the traditional Chinese educational style:

British education attracted me, and I disliked the traditional Chinese educational style.

Second, the student experience attracted the interviewees to study at this IBC. Kathy's parents supported her in studying at IBCs because they thought her characteristics were 'more suitable for a freer environment', which is provided by IBCs. Third, as an outcome of the internationalisation of higher education, IBCs offer more international exchange opportunities, which attracted the interviewees. Nancy clearly expressed:

There're exchange opportunities at this kind of university ... I will apply for an exchange opportunity to study at the home campus.

Moreover, college quality influences the choice to study at an IBC. The perception of the low quality of Chinese HEIs drove the interviewees to choose IBCs, while the perception of the high quality of IBCs drew the interviewees to study at IBCs. Jenny clearly expressed her perception of the low quality of Chinese HEIs:

I always think the teaching in Chinese universities is bad, it's widely presented that students learn nothing.

Furthermore, as a joint venture, the reputations of this IBC itself, its Chinese partner and its foreign partner have impacts on the choice of IBC. Cathy clearly expressed her consideration of the reputations of this IBC and its Chinese partner when she chose this IBC:

The word of mouth of this university was better year by year, and its promotion was also effective. We thought this university was very trustworthy, and we never thought of it as a diploma mill from its inception. As we are local, we knew its Chinese partner was also trustworthy.

In addition, programme availability was considered by the interviewees. Betty chose this IBC because she was interested in all its programmes and had the flexibility to change her programme:

I've looked at the programmes of this IBC, and I was interested in all its programmes. I may even change to another programme if I cannot be admitted into my first-choice programme, so I can still study here.

The facilities, including teaching faculties and accommodation, also influence the choice of IBC. Ina was attracted by the campus environment:

I was thinking about the campus environment, like teaching facilities and accommodation. From this perspective, I thought this university was in the top two in Zhejiang Province.

Last, it was commonly believed by the interviewees that study at this IBC was a transition to study abroad. They did not study abroad for undergraduate studies because there were some challenges for them to study abroad at that time. These challenges included the procedure for study abroad, the lack of confidence in their abilities and their financial difficulties. Frank applied to this IBC because he did not have enough time to prepare for study abroad:

It was too late to study abroad because there wasn't enough time to prepare for IELTS [International English Language Testing System]. So, I applied to this IBC.

George chose this IBC because of the complicated procedure to apply to foreign HEIs, and because of his lack of confidence. He would like to improve his ability to study abroad in the future through his studies at this IBC. He stressed:

I had a plan to study abroad, but I was afraid my English wasn't good enough to live abroad. Here, there is foreign teaching and learning, and [this IBC] is in China, giving time for me to prepare and practise my English ... I also wanted to pursue postgraduate studies abroad. I heard it was very complicated to apply to undergraduate studies abroad, which requires preparing many items, such as ability, curricular activity and programmes, while I focused on study in high school. I only had a *gaokao* score, I did not prepare anything else.

Jenny chose this IBC because she had some financial difficulty studying abroad at that time. She stressed:

There was some financial difficulty if I studied abroad directly at that time. This IBC was used as a springboard during this period.

Although the costs of this IBC are high, they are relatively low compared to those associated with studying abroad. Thus, Jenny's family had time to accumulate wealth to support her studies abroad in the future. Another reason that the interviewees did not study abroad for undergraduate studies was that they wanted to improve themselves through their studies at this IBC, and then apply to better HEIs abroad in the future. Betty hoped that she would be able to apply to a better HEI abroad for postgraduate studies through her studies at this IBC:

Because my *gaokao* performance was not good, I hoped I could apply to a better university abroad for my postgraduate studies. So, I could catch up [with peers].

Discussion

This study reveals that the academic achievements of the admitted students, represented by *gaokao* scores, are comparatively high – enough to be admitted by Project 211 universities, but not enough to be admitted by Project 985 universities. However, higher academic achievement does not necessarily correspond to higher demand for IBCs. Academic achievement is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for enrolling at IBCs. Students may choose other prestigious Chinese HEIs if they get better *gaokao* scores. In contrast to a previous study that found that only a few students studying at an IBC put it as their first choice (Yu, 2020), this study finds that most students studying at this IBC put it as their first choice. The difference may be attributed to the different time periods of data collection, during which the reputation of this IBC has improved.

IBCs in China have favoured students from socio-economically advantaged families, where the parents are comparatively wealthy, very predominantly well-educated and in privileged occupations. The relatively high family income is expected, given the high costs of attending IBCs. Family income is a dominant determinant of entry to IBCs, because of the high costs, so its influence is stronger for IBCs than for other Chinese HEIs. The demographic characteristics of students suggest that IBCs are becoming 'elite universities' in China. IBCs provide more and different types of educational opportunities to fulfil the demand for higher education in China, while they may cause problems of equitable access.

Students choose IBCs over other HEIs with similar entry requirements because of their habitus, once they meet the entry requirements and can afford the costs. First, the choice to study at an IBC requires more knowledge, because IBCs are a new type of HEI. Parents with high SES can recommend, provide information and make decisions on behalf of their children. Second, students and their parents possessing cultural capital would like to reproduce their cultural capital through students' studies at IBCs, while students and their parents possessing economic capital and little or no cultural capital would like to convert their economic capital into cultural capital through students' studies at IBCs. Both groups see study abroad in the future through study at IBCs as an important way to reproduce or produce their cultural capital. Intercultural attitude, foreign language ability and foreign language interest have impacts on study abroad decisions (Goldstein and Kim, 2006; Stroud, 2010). They also influence students to choose IBCs because of their positive intercultural attitudes, their good English language abilities and their positive interest in further developing their English language abilities. This suggests that the choice of IBC is influenced both by the factors influencing college choice and by the factors influencing study abroad, because of the nature of IBCs as foreign presences in the host countries.

Furthermore, significant persons influence the choice of IBC through their comments, their direct advice or their own choices, and through their impacts on the images of IBCs constructed by students through their recommendations and feedback. Parents influence the choice of IBC by providing information to their children; their high SES ensures that they are knowledgeable about IBCs. Some parents, particularly those having little or no cultural capital, even make decisions on behalf of their children, which suggests a strict parent-child relationship in these families. This hints that parents play a significant role in the choice of IBC in Confucian countries. Unlike the positive influences of parents, the influences of friends and peers, as well as of high school teachers, on the choice of IBC are more varied. Friends and peers who are studying or would like to study at IBCs have positive influences on the choice to study at an IBC, while the rest may have negative influences due to their lack of knowledge of IBCs. High school teachers who have a good understanding of IBCs may recommend that their

students choose IBCs; otherwise, they may not suggest that their students choose IBCs. This suggests that there are limitations for high school teachers to play the role of counsellors, because they lack the knowledge of college choice. This study also reveals that students with better academic achievements receive more encouragement from their teachers. This leads to the discussion of inequality in education in senior secondary schools. The strength of contact between teachers and students depends on their relationships, and the family relations in students' social networks affect the choice of IBC differently. This suggests that the impacts of social capital on the choice to study at an IBC relate to the volume, strength and quality of the social network. Further, the various influences on the choice to study at an IBC suggest that, as a recruitment strategy, IBCs should promote themselves to parents, who are most influential on the choice to study at an IBC, and also improve their visibility among high school teachers who are not knowledgeable about them.

Moreover, the institutional characteristics of IBCs have strong influences on the choice to study at an IBC. The high costs of IBCs may be a barrier for high school students to choose IBCs. However, despite the high costs, students at IBCs are not very sensitive to the costs. This may be explained by the fact that students from families with high incomes are not sensitive to the costs. Further, the current student loan policy is not very helpful to students at IBCs, as the amount of the loan is not enough to cover the costs of IBCs.

The geographical locations of IBCs are taken into consideration by students. Students prefer to study in economically developed areas and/or areas with better living environments. HEIs, including IBCs, in economically developed areas tend to retain local students and attract students from other areas, and HEIs, including IBCs, in areas with better living environments – in a broader sense than just economic development – lure students from other areas.

The pedagogy, quality and reputation of IBCs have strong impacts on the choice to study at an IBC. The foreign pedagogy attracts students to study at IBCs, while the Chinese model pushes students towards choosing IBCs. This suggests that IBCs cater to the diverse demands of students. Further, the quality of IBCs pulls students to choose IBCs, while the quality of Chinese public HEIs pushes them to choose IBCs. This implies that IBCs fulfil the demand for high-quality education. Chinese public HEIs should reflect on their pedagogy, and enhance their quality to meet the needs of students. As a joint venture, the reputations of an IBC itself, its Chinese partner and its foreign partner influence the choice of IBC. In addition to the above, student experience, exchange opportunities, programme availability and campus environment also influence the choice of IBC, although these influences are not as powerful as those of costs, teaching and learning model, quality and reputation.

Transition to study abroad is an important motivation for students to choose IBCs. IBCs are often seen by students and their parents as stepping stones to better foreign HEIs. First, students do not study abroad for undergraduate studies for a variety of reasons, such as worries about their abilities to live and learn abroad, financial hardship and complex application procedures. Second, students choose IBCs to prepare for study abroad in the future. They hope to acquire cosmopolitan cultural capital for future international mobility (Yu, 2020). This implies that IBCs are a gateway to studying abroad for students.

Conclusions

This study comprehensively presents and discusses the factors influencing the choice to study at an IBC in China, which encompass student characteristics, significant persons and institutional characteristics. IBCs are perceived as the best HEIs in the choice sets of the students with comparatively high *gaokao* scores. Nonetheless, students may not put IBCs as their first choice once they get better *gaokao* scores. This indicates that academic achievement and family income are necessary but not sufficient conditions for students to choose IBCs. Students opt for IBCs over other Chinese HEIs with similar entry requirements due to other influential factors. First, they choose IBCs for their accumulated cultural capital, or aspiration for cultural capital to reproduce or produce their cultural capital. Since IBCs are foreign presences in the host countries, it is not only the traditional factors influencing college choice, but also the factors influencing study abroad, including intercultural attitude, language ability and interest, that affect the choice of IBC. Second, the impacts of social capital on the choice of IBC depend on the volume, strength and quality of the social network. Parents are the most influential persons in the choice to study at an IBC. They recommend, provide information and make decisions on behalf of their children, which depend on the capital and parent–child relationship in the family. Third, students choose IBCs for

the perceived superior pedagogy, quality and reputation, and the perceived inferior pedagogy, quality and reputation of Chinese HEIs with similar entry requirements. Transition to study abroad is one of the most important motivations for students to choose IBCs, and IBCs can fulfil these motivations.

This study has comprehensively examined the choice to study at IBCs in China with a combined conceptual framework, which overcomes the limitations of the models that employ a single perspective. The study has highlighted the cultural factors and significant persons in the choice to study at an IBC, which have been neglected in previous studies. The study is beneficial for practitioners of IBCs to recruit students, especially during the outbreak of Covid-19, when IBCs have been facing challenges to recruit high-quality students. It is also advantageous for policymakers to make decisions about the establishment of IBCs, to tackle the inequity caused by IBCs, and to adjust student loan policies.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Nottingham Ningbo China ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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