When the Cultural Model of Success Fails:

Mainland Chinese Teenage Immigrants in Hong Kong*

Wai-chi Chee

Department of Anthropology,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

This paper argues that when teenage immigrants from mainland China come to Hong Kong to join mainstream secondary education, they are expected to perform according to a cultural model of success—that is, by immigrating to Hong Kong and getting a "good education," they believe they are guaranteed future economic success. The migration decision is mainly made by parents, but the success is expected to be achieved by the children. This research looks into how these teenagers internalize this cultural model and what happens when it fails them. The gap between model and reality does not seem to shake their belief. Instead of querying the validity of the model, they accept success as their personal responsibility, feel guilty if they do not achieve it, and act in ways that perpetuate the cultural model of success.

Keywords: China, teenagers, migration, education, cultural model

* I am grateful to the three anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions. My writing also benefited from discussions with Nicole Newendorp and my supervisor, Gordon Mathews. I thank Mary Roberts for her careful reading of the manuscript. An earlier version of this article was presented at the SEAA & TSEA Taipei 2009 Conference "East by Southeast: Multiple Perspectives on Asia" at Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, July 2009. My attendance at the conference was funded by the organizers and CUHK Postgraduate Student Grants for Overseas Academic Activities.

Introduction

Studies of what determines migration generally make a distinction between economic and non-economic motivations. The human capital theory of migration (Sjaastad 1962) explains migration decisions as an individual investment choice to maximize economic gain, even if that may come at a cost such as losing one's social network. Studies on internal migration in China also reveal the differences in regional economic opportunities as a major migration determinant (Fan 1996; Li and Li 1995; Wei 1997; Zhao 1999). From this perspective, the migration decision is based on a calculated rationale of costs and returns. Other studies, however, have focused on non-economic forces and these tend to emphasize the roles of cultural and social variables (Green 1997; Harbison 1981; Hugo 1981; Smith 2004).

Real life migration decisions usually involve a combination of different considerations. This paper deals with a situation where economic calculations and household considerations are submerged by a cultural model that shapes behavior. The present study shows how people act according to the cultural model of success (which stipulates that a good education is a sure path to future financial success) even when it defies the principle of maximizing economic gain and household well-being. I argue that because this model directs people to make calculations based on expected future benefits rather than immediate gain, it shifts calculations from the present to the future with such determinate direction and force that it makes present sufferings endurable because they are seen as temporary. They will in the end be compensated by greater future economic and social gains.

Of the myriad studies on migration, very few investigate its impact on children, who have almost no say in the decision to migrate yet are expected to follow and adjust to household arrangements. A large section of this paper is devoted to an analysis of the complicated situation whereby the migration decision is made by the parents but the children are expected to carry forward the promise and burden of future success. The parents see the hardships and downward social mobility in migration as a trade-off for better education and hence a better future for their children and hopefully the whole family. The children are inculcated with this model and struggle hard to live up to it, feeling a strong sense of obligation. This paper investigates how the cultural model of success shapes the migration decision and the experience of teenage migrants.

The Setting

Despite the fact that Hong Kong has the lowest total fertility rate in East Asia, 0.98 in 2006, which is far below the replacement level of 2.1 (Census and Statistics Department 2007), the population is increasing. One important reason has been the substantial inflow of immigrants, especially one-way permit holders (OWPHs) from mainland China.[1] Between 1983 and 2006, over 960,000 OWPHs were admitted, which represents about 14% of the population of 6.86 million in 2006 and over 70% of the growth in population over that period (Bacon-Shone, et al. 2008: 1). More recent data suggests that the inflow of OWPHs continues to be significant, despite a general downward tendency. According to the "Mid-year Population for 2009" report, the provisional estimate of the Hong Kong population was 7,008,300, representing an increase of 0.4% over mid-2008. The number of births during this period was 81,200 and the inflow of OWPHs was 41,400 (Census and Statistics Department 2009), meaning that the ratio of births to OWPHs is roughly 2:1.[2] The number of children from mainland China newly admitted to secondary schools showed a gradual increase from 454 in 1985 to the peak of 3,414 in 1998 (Bacon-Shone, et al. 2008: 47). In the subsequent years the figures fluctuated and dropped to 2,011 in 2003, but rose gradually again to 3,361 in 2008 (Education Bureau 2010).

The significant number of the new arrivals, together with the increasing dependence of Hong Kong on mainland China for economic prosperity, the keen competition between Hong Kong and other Chinese cities like Shanghai, and the devastating global economic downturn, makes the inflow of the immigrants from mainland China problematic. Immigrants from mainland China on the one hand can be seen as competitors for economic and social resources, and yet on the other hand they can be seen as human capital that enhances Hong Kong's competitiveness.

---

1 The entry of Mainland residents into Hong Kong, a special administrative region (HKSAR), for residence is provided for under Article 22 of the Basic Law, which states that "For entry into the HKSAR, people from other parts of China must apply for approval. Among them, the number of persons who enter the Region for the purpose of settlement shall be determined by the competent authorities of the Central People's Government after consulting the government of the Region." The daily quota of One-way Permits is 150 (Immigration Department 2008).

2 In the period of mid-2008 to mid-2009, the overall population increased by 30,600 (provisional). The ratio of the inflow of OWPHs to the overall population increase was 136 percent, and the ratio of the number of births to the overall increase was 266 percent (Census and Statistics Department 2009).

This paper focuses on teenage mainland migrants who came to Hong Kong to join the mainstream secondary education system and investigates their adaptations. I argue that the cultural model that identifies getting a good education as an avenue to future success is a key force behind their coming to Hong Kong and their aspirations to excel. While some do excel academically and so model success effectively, some quickly find that they are being pushed to perform something they cannot achieve. In many cases it is the discrepancy between this cultural model and their reality that leads to frustration and failure. Still, this does not seem to shake their faith in the model. Instead of querying its validity, teenage immigrants attribute their failure to other reasons and act in ways that perpetuate the model and inspire more teenage migrants to come to Hong Kong. The repeating and reinforcing of this pattern of beliefs and behaviors leads to what I call "copycat migration."

Data for this paper were collected by participant observation and semi-structured interviews done at three secondary schools over a period of three to six months. One of the three schools specializes in a full-time six-month initiation program for newly arrived children from mainland China. The children can choose to attend this program prior to attending mainstream schools. A part of the support services for the newly arrived schoolchildren provided by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, this integrated program includes both academic and non-academic elements that aim to help the children integrate into the local education system and the community. The academic portion provides intensive training in English, traditional Chinese characters, and spoken Cantonese, to prepare the students for a smooth transition to mainstream schools. The non-academic portion involves activities and excursions to familiarize students with Hong Kong society and help them adapt to the life in Hong Kong. The other two schools provide mainstream education and school-based induction programs for the newly arrived children from mainland China, aiming at helping them adapt to the education in Hong Kong. Most of the focus is on English-language enhancement. These two schools have roughly 30 percent and 10 percent mainland students, respectively.

Data for analysis are drawn largely on interviews with thirty students from these three schools, using convenience and snow-ball sampling. Of the thirty students, fifteen were from the special initiation program and had been in Hong Kong for less than six months at the time of the interview; the remaining fifteen from the two mainstream schools had been in Hong Kong from a few weeks to three years. Sixteen of the students interviewed did not speak Cantonese, the local language of Hong Kong, upon arrival.

Certain striking phenomena about these children must be noted. First, a high percentage of them (27 out of 30) were raised in a single-parent household or by extended family (usually grandparents). Second, their migration to Hong Kong, which

they claim was to pursue a better life, has had the paradoxical effect of worsening their lives. And yet they still believe that the ultimate effect of migration will be to improve their standard of living. I argue that these observations can best be understood in terms of the students' embedded and unquestioned belief in a cultural model of success.

The Cultural Model of Success

Psychological anthropologists like Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1994) have argued that our cultural understandings are based on learned prototypes called *schemas*, and that our thoughts and actions are mediated by these prototypes. Vanessa Fong's (2004) research on Chinese children reveals the salience and prevalence of the cultural model of success among Chinese parents and children and provides insights into how that model shapes thoughts and behaviors.

Focusing on the driving force of cultural models that create narratives, expectations, and goals out of the chaos of experience, Fong (2004: 13-14) studied Chinese youth in urban Dalian (a large coastal city in northeastern China) born after the 1979 one-child policy and concluded that their ambition derived from their internalization of China's model of modernization (*xiandaihua* 現代化). "China's one-child policy was designed to create a generation of ambitious, well-educated children who would lead their country into the First World. This strategy has succeeded, but at a price" (ibid.: 2-3). These "only children" get the full attention of parents but at the same time are burdened by parental and societal expectations. According to Fong, they are expected to bear traditional responsibilities to family, exhibit humility and self-sacrifice even as they are instilled with ambitions to become modernized social elites. But the problem is, economic opportunities have not kept pace. After being showered with attention and the best education the family can afford, they are expected to get a good job and provide for their aging parents. But this is a responsibility that they cannot fulfill since they face nationwide diploma inflation and keen competition. The nation's lack of a social security plan and having only one child in the household to rely on makes the situation even more pressing. The result may be personal frustration, tense family relations and societal stress (ibid.).

There are parallels and yet differences between the "only children" Fong studies and the teenagers in my research. Fong argues that the modernization model establishes the expectation that China's only child will lead family and eventually the entire nation into First World Modernization. I argue that the students in my research are expected to do something similar, and yet there are marked differences. Immigrant children are expected

to achieve affluence for the family, not necessarily the whole nation, and the means are different. If parents in urban Dalian push their children to modernization by investing heavily in education; the parents of the students in my research push their children to perform the cultural model of success by bringing them from rural areas to the city, from poor places to a place of affluence, Hong Kong, where they believe the children are guaranteed a good education and hence future economic success. Most of the students in my research are not "only children" despite being born after the one-child policy had been launched. Their parents do not have the mentality of the urban Dalian parents in Fong's research, that is, the belief in First World fertility and education patterns, in which birth decline leads to fewer children who have heavier parental investment, which leads to a generation of well-educated young people (Fong 2004: 13). The children in this research have much less family support than their Dalian counterparts. Many of the parents thought all they had to do was move the children to Hong Kong, where they would have greater access to resources.

The secondary student immigrants I interviewed have been inculcated with the prototypes of the cultural model of success. One such prototype, mentioned just above, is that a move from rural to urban areas will provide access to the tools of modernization. Another is that by moving from the Third World to the First World, they will again get access to the means of modernization and thence affluence. Migrating to Hong Kong fulfills both these requirements, since Hong Kong is perceived as one of the most advanced and affluent cities in China. Many students mention that in their hometowns, it is considered a laudable ambition to leave and seek one's fortune. Those who do not harbor such ambition are seen as having grim prospects. This belief is especially common among children coming from places famously known as hometowns of overseas Chinese (*qiao xiang* 僑鄉).[3] Hong Kong is a popular destination, because it is perceived as a city of migrants, where migrant success stories prevail.

Hong Kong, a British-colony-turned-Special-Administrative-Region, is seen as distinct from mainland China. "Hongkongness" as a cultural identity began to emerge in the late 1960s and 1970s when "a postwar generation reached adulthood that had only known Hong Kong as home – a Hong Kong beginning to emerge from poverty into middle-class affluence – and that felt cut off from China, immersed in ideological strife and closed to the world outside" (Mathews 2000: 127). This Hongkongness is characterized as "Chinese plus." It can be "Chineseness plus internationalness /

---

3 Such areas include Fujian 福建 and Siyi 四邑or four counties: Taishan 臺山, Xinhui 新會, Kaiping 開平 and Enping 恩平.

Westernness," "Chineseness plus affluence/capitalism/cosmopolitanism," "Chineseness plus English / colonial education / colonialism," or "Chineseness plus freedom/ democracy / human rights/the rules of law". The general discourse of this "Chinese plus" notion is "superior Hong Kong vs. inferior China." A Hong Kong identity connotes affluence, openness to the world, and pragmatism (Mathews, Ma and Lui 2007: 11). The teenagers in my research believe they are coming to "superior" Hong Kong to realize the dream of gaining access to affluence for themselves and their families.

The cultural model of success thus shapes behaviors that lie beyond economic calculation and considerations of household well-being. Chunghing[4] lived with her elder brother and parents on the mainland where the family ran a small grocery store and led a reasonably good life. But her father decided to go to Hong Kong in 2004. Applications for immigration were processed on an individual, not household, basis, so her father was the only family member eligible for settlement in Hong Kong. He went alone, leaving the family behind. Lacking recognized qualifications or experience, he could only work as a waiter. After five years, Chunghing, her brother, and mother were granted permission to immigrate to Hong Kong under the OWP scheme for family reunion. Her father told them that he had come to Hong Kong to "pave way for them," so they could come and receive a better education and have a brighter future.

But there did not seem to be any immediate gains brought about by immigration. On the contrary, the downsides are quite apparent: the family was split; the father, who had owned a shop in mainland China, had to take a low-status job in Hong Kong; their living environment, as Chunghing describes it, is much worse in Hong Kong since they can only afford a tiny apartment; both parents work long hours and spend very little time with the children; and the children lag behind in school as they face an unfamiliar curriculum. All these hardships, as understood by the family, are just temporary sacrifices to "pave the way" to a better future. The same understanding is shared by many families with a similar immigration story. The rosy future promised by the cultural model of success masks the sufferings.

The Gap Between the Cultural Model of Success and Reality

I argue that the gap between the cultural model of success and the reality of the immigrant experience can be so big that "temporary" sacrifices may turn out to be much

4 All names of the informants in this paper are pseudonyms.

more persistent and the "better" future more remote. This gap, which leads to frustration and failure, can be attributed to three main reasons: (1) split families are created because of immigration policy, which causes many problems; (2) teenagers experience a downward social mobility they are not prepared for; and (3) they have no control over the timing of immigration, meaning that planning ahead is almost impossible. The result is a strong sense of obligation and guilt when they feel they do not live up to the expectations of parents who have sacrificed so much for them.

The Creation of Split Families

Most of the teenagers in my research come to Hong Kong for family reunion, but the irony is that the split occured in the first place precisely because of the decision to migrate. Only two out of the thirty students I interviewed were born to mainland mothers and Hong Kong fathers, where their immigration really meant the reunion of a family that had been split all along. I believe the disproportionately small percentage of children of cross-border marriages in my research had a lot to do with my focus on the teenage immigrants. In general, children of cross-border marriages come to Hong Kong at a younger age. The teenage students in my research demonstrate an alternative mode of migration and the special problems that mode may create. Most of the families in my research were not split in the first place, but in order for the whole family to eventually immigrate, one parent had to come alone first and later apply for the spouse and children to join him/her under the OWP family reunion scheme. Parents who immigrated initially were granted eligibility only after enactment of Article 24(2)(3) of the Basic Law in Hong Kong in 1999, which states that persons born in mainland China have the right of abode in Hong Kong by descent from either parent who is a permanent Hong Kong resident (Immigration Department 2008). Twenty-three out of the thirty students in my research shared this story of migration: One of their parents has a parent who is a permanent resident of Hong Kong, and that parent applied to immigrate. When the application was successful, that parent came to Hong Kong alone and then applied for the spouse and children so the family could be reunited. In the course of waiting for the family to become eligible, which on average takes five years, the parent in Hong Kong worked there to support the family and returned to the hometown on holidays.

These split families cause tremendous problems. One obvious difficulty is that the children grow up with only one parent. When the children come to Hong Kong, they often find it hard to get along with the parent whom they have been seeing only a few times a year over the past five or six years. On holiday returns to the hometown, that parent usually brought the children gifts and took them out to enjoy their time

together. Or sometimes, the parent took the family to Hong Kong to spend a few days. Both children and parents were in a holiday mood and treasured the time together. Back in the hometown, in addition to the parent who stayed with them, there were usually other relatives, grandparents in particular, to help take care of them. Many children said they were loved and well taken care of in mainland China. It is likely that relatives tried to make up for the children's lack of a father's or mother's care and pampered them. But once the whole family is together in Hong Kong, the situation is quite different. The children miss the care, love, and support they enjoyed from their extended family and complain that their parents are too demanding. The parents expect them to do well at school, to spend money carefully, and to share household chores. Tension builds up as they interact on a day-to-day basis.

This is quite understandable. It is easy for a parent working in Hong Kong to support a comfortable life for spouse and children on the mainland. But when the whole family is in Hong Kong, the financial burden is huge. Often, both parents need to work, usually long hours, and sometimes the children need to work part time. The crowded living environment adds to the problems. Most children said the tiny living space and the noisy environment are among the biggest difficulties they face. It is not uncommon for a family of five or six to cram together in a unit of 200 square feet. For home visits, the students sometimes took the teachers to a relative's home or to a Chinese tea café nearby, instead of to where they lived. They were too embarrassed to let the teachers see their poor living environment.

Another problem resulting from the split family is the strained relationship between parents. Some couples divorced since they had lived separately for so long or one of them had had extramarital affairs. The children unavoidably suffered. Six students in my research reported that their parents got divorced while their mothers worked in Hong Kong and the fathers and children awaited migration approval. (In such cases only the children eventually immigrated.) I know of a few cases in which the children were moved around from household to household. A girl from Sichuan (a province in southwestern China) said that when she was a few years of age, her mother came to Hong Kong alone; she later abandoned the family and married someone in Hong Kong. The girl lived with her father until he remarried; then she was under the care of her fraternal grandmother. After a few years, her mother came to pick her up. The girl said at that time she was very happy because she thought finally her mother had come for her. But her mother only took her to Shenzhen (a city immediately north of Hong Kong) where she lived alone for one year (she was only thirteen then) before she finally came to Hong Kong. She says she is unhappy in Hong Kong because she is seen as an outsider by

her mother, step-father, and half brother. She thinks all the love goes to the brother and everybody just treats her like a free domestic helper.

Two brothers from Fujian have another unhappy story. Their parents divorced while their mother was working in Hong Kong and the father and sons were in mainland China. Their father passed away, and the mother later remarried and had a daughter. Since the two brothers managed to get to Hong Kong, they live in a flat a street away from their mother's family. But living separately did not resolve the family tension. After a few months, the younger brother had a bad fight with the step father and was sentenced to one year's probation.

Sometimes the tension takes another form. If it was the father who went to Hong Kong to work, the mother, almost as a rule, did not work but stayed at home to take care of the children; if it was the mother who worked in Hong Kong, more often than not the father felt uneasy about the shift of gender role. Most did not work, but some chose to continue working and put the children in others' care. The children thus lost the care of both parents. I know of a few cases where the father was not willing to come to Hong Kong, and only sent the children to reunite with the mother. It is a paradox that when the children were in mainland China, they missed their mother; now that they have come to Hong Kong, they miss their father. A true family reunion was never realized.

Unprepared for Downward Social Mobility

Another source of stress was the downward social mobility of the whole family once they moved to Hong Kong. When one parent was working in Hong Kong, the money sent back was enough for the family to live comfortably in mainland China, and the children's impression was that the parent was earning a lot in the city. But now that the children are in Hong Kong, they began to realize the parent has been working a low-status job. The other parent who originally enjoyed the luxury of not working at all now has to work, often also in a low-status job, because his or her qualifications and work experience are not recognized. The families usually say that they have chosen to come to Hong Kong for a better future for their children. But this puts tremendous pressure on the children since they tend to interpret this as the whole family suffers because of them, and their family relies on their future success to improve their standard of living. The importance of education is everywhere reinforced as they see their parents, without recognized qualifications, can only get low-paying jobs. Those who feel that the family is sacrificing for them feel strongly obligated to repay the family. If they do not do well at school, they believe they disappoint the whole family. A Secondary Two girl told me it pains her to see her mother get up at 2:30a.m. and work until 3:30p.m., and to see her

worn down by the work.[5] She says her mother works her fingers to the bone so that she can concentrate on her studies and need not work part-time, so she must do well at school. Many parents tell the children that they must study hard; otherwise they will just end up like the parents, meaning only able to earn a low salary. Some children have a strong sense of guilt when they cannot live up to the families' expectations.

No Control Over Timing

Another important reason why families cannot plan ahead is they have no control over when they can come to Hong Kong. After submitting their immigration application, there is nothing they can do but wait. And once the application is successful, they must come to Hong Kong within a certain period (different lengths of time have been reported, ranging from a few days to a few months), otherwise the one-way permit will expire. One parent explained to me that they lived in a rural village, and by the time the permit reached them from the provincial administration, it was already three weeks after it had been issued, leaving them only two months or so to get through the other necessary procedures. Another girl told me that they missed their first permit because when it was issued, her mother had been under detention in Hong Kong for having overstayed her visa, so they had to re-apply.

The children had known for years that one day they would come to Hong Kong, but could not tell exactly when, so planning ahead was almost impossible. In some cases this mentality worked against their adaptation. Instead of preparing, some children thought that they would get to Hong Kong some day and start over, so it did not matter if they did not do well at school in mainland China. They figured they would need to learn something different in Hong Kong anyway, so they could just start from the beginning. When they finally came to Hong Kong, they realized they had been wrong, but by then it was too late. They are frustrated now that they cannot even get a school placement, let alone a good education. This certainly has a lot to do with their lack of information about the education system of Hong Kong and their parents' inability to help, since most of them are poorly educated.

The fact that they have no control over the timing of their immigration also explains why most children had to leave their hometowns in a rush. One girl returned home after an examination and the family told her that she need not finish taking her examinations.

5 Her mother works in a take-away fast food stall and gets hourly pay. She has to start preparing Chinese breakfast foods like congee and fried noodles as early as 3:00a.m.

And the next day, she found herself in Hong Kong. Another girl had a similar experience. One Friday she returned home after a morning session of examinations, and her brother told her she could not finish the examination. And on the following Monday, she traveled to Hong Kong with her brother to join the rest of the family. A third girl could not believe her eyes when she unexpectedly saw her mother at school. Her mother, who was supposed to be in Hong Kong at that time, had come to pick her up and take her to Hong Kong the following day. Most of the students said it felt like they suddenly woke up and found themselves in Hong Kong; they all lamented not having had a chance to say goodbye properly to their friends.

Not being able to say goodbye is nothing compared to the serious disruption of education if the timing is bad. Students coming to Hong Kong in May or June find it difficult to get a place in school since it is toward the end of the school year, and most schools will ask them to apply in July for the coming semester in September. Even when the students go the Education Bureau of Hong Kong (EDB) for help, they are likely to be told to come back and register in July. A social worker explained to me that EDB has pledged to arrange school placement for newly arrived schoolchildren within twenty-one working days after registration. The EDB officials know that it is unlikely to keep this pledge in May and June, so they simply refuse to let students register. Most of these students end up spending four boring months in a tiny home, having no friends, no money to go out, and not knowing how to get around in their new city.

So, many students' education is disrupted for a few months, but shockingly, some students' education is disrupted in terms of years. Many students need to repeat one or two or even more grades. Those at the Senior Secondary level are often the worst affected because they are unprepared for the senior secondary system in Hong Kong,[6] which requires students to take the public examination HKCEE[7] after Secondary Five, and HKALE[8] after Secondary Seven. One particularly illustrative case is that of a student who came to Hong Kong as he was preparing for the university entrance examination in China, thinking that he could register right away for the HKALE, and after passing, could

6 Here I refer to the old education system of three-year junior secondary, 2-year senior secondary and 2-year matriculation. This old system is being replaced gradually by the new 3-3-4 system, with three-year junior secondary, 3-year senior secondary and 4-year university education.

7 HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations) is the public examination to be taken after Secondary Five, the results of which determine whether one can continue to study in Secondary Six.

8 HKALE (Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination) is the university entrance examination to be taken after Secondary Seven.

go to university. He was ultimately shocked to find that the syllabus was totally different and no school was willing to admit him to Secondary Seven. He thought he could start with Secondary Six but again he could not find a place, since all schools required him to have taken HKCEE. He then tried Secondary Five, but again no school was willing to admit him since they did not think he could handle the public examination in a few months' time. Finally he ended up in Secondary Four, where he felt embarrassed because he was three years older than most of his classmates. And what made him feel worse was that his old classmates in mainland China were off to university while he studied in Secondary Four (equivalent to Senior Secondary One on the mainland). He was bored because all the subjects were too easy for him except for English, which was far too difficult. So he was trapped, having to redo all the subjects that he found too easy and having no idea how to catch up in English. He began to skip lessons. Noticing this, one teacher told him that since he was over eighteen he could register for HKCEE as a mature student (no one had mentioned this rule before). He sat for HKCEE as a private candidate and managed to do well enough to get to Secondary Six, and that saved him a year of Secondary Five. But in Secondary Six, English presented as a big problem as ever. He was at the bottom of the class and never passed. He was still studying in Secondary Seven when his peers on the mainland were in their third university year, a fact that made him vastly unhappy. When he finally sat for the HKALE, he failed English and could not in the end go to university. If he had stayed on the mainland, things might have been different. Although we cannot be sure he would have gone to university had he stayed in his hometown, his experience in Hong Kong borders on the tragic.

A Model that Cannot Be Achieved But Remains Unquestioned

Immigrant children are told they should study hard, get a good education, and then get a good job; but some quickly find that this is something they cannot achieve. As mentioned above, adaptation can be very difficult as they lose social support and friends, and find themselves unprepared for many challenges of downward social mobility, crowded living conditions, family tensions, and a very different school curriculum. Nonetheless, these do not seem to shake their faith in the cultural model of success. They usually claim that the problems they face are temporary and can be overcome if they try hard enough to catch up and adapt better.

As Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1994) point out, cultural models can be embedded and taken for granted, and have an expectational force. Fong (2004: 13-

14) also argues that "[f]ailure to attain the goals generated by particularly powerful cultural models causes suffering, while the attainment of those goals causes happiness. The content and motivational force of any given cultural model is determined by a combination of cultural meanings and individual experiences, and subject to change in response to changing circumstances. Meanings, experiences, and circumstances are in turn shaped by social, political, and economic forces." My observation is that most students accept with almost no reservation the idea that if they study hard enough, they should be able to get a good education and be able to improve the family's living standard, that this is their personal responsibility and if they do not do well they feel guilty for not succeeding. This same formula is repeated to them by family, schools, their significant others, and society. I argue that this is what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), in studying the French education system, argued that education maintains social class segregation by reproducing educational success or failure, and thus perpetuating unequal social and economic capital through the unequal transmission of cultural capital. For this reproductive mechanism to work, its power relations must be concealed so that the system is accepted as legitimate by all members, and so they are all inculcated to the "cultural arbitrary" of the dominant group. And this is a kind of symbolic violence. Curricular and pedagogical practices such as legitimate knowledge and examinations are all parts of this reproductive mechanism.

The Marxist analysis of differential socialization of children of different social classes is echoed by many researchers in the United States (for example, see Bowles and Gintis 1976; Hayes 1992; Ogbu 1981; Trueba 1988). They argue that it is an American democratic myth that education functions as an instrument of social justice and economic mobility. Migrant students are usually at an even greater disadvantage since most of them lack the social and cultural capital valued in the host society. Some other researchers find that meritocracy is also a myth (for example, see Breen and Goldthorpe 2001; Griffin and Kalleberg 1981; Jencks 1979; Maxwell and Maxwell 1995; McNamee and Miller 2004; Petersen, et al. 2000). The idea that success is based on individual merit is problematic, and it can be twisted to blame an individual's lack of effort for failure.

In the case of Hong Kong, English proficiency is valued cultural capital, both in school and in the job market. In Hong Kong's education system, those who are not good at English are barred from Band 1 schools,[9] where English is the medium of instruction.

9 Hong Kong secondary schools are differentiated into three bandings, according to student achievement in primary school. Band 1 schools have roughly the best one-third students in the territory.

Those who fail English in HKCEE cannot advance to Secondary Six and Seven, and those who fail English in the HKALE cannot go on to university. Students from mainland China, where they usually start to learn English only in Senior Primary, find it difficult to catch up to the language standards of Hong Kong's education system. Many need to repeat lower grades because of English problems, and that may lead to other problems. For one thing, the age difference between them and their local classmates is a source of pressure. They feel embarrassed that they are not as good at English as local classmates who are younger. Another problem, as mentioned in the case above, is being bored at having to take subjects which they find too easy. Sometimes, even when they are doing quite well in English, they still lack confidence and think they are not as good as others.

In 2002, at the age of 17, Shayiu came to Hong Kong from Fujian (a province on the southeast coast). She was in Senior Secondary in mainland China but could not get into Senior Secondary in Hong Kong. As a transition, she studied in a six-month initiation program for Secondary Three, which is the highest level taught in the program. After the program, her parents thought she should work to help support the family (Her elder sister was working and her younger brother was studying at the time). She insisted that she should be allowed to continue her studies, had a big fight with her family, and went so far as to lock herself in a room for two days and refuse to eat. The school intervened, her story was covered in the newspaper, and people donated scholarship funding for her. The family finally compromised: they would let her study, on condition that she had to fend for herself and would not get any money from the family. She worked part-time and studied until Secondary Seven. Unfortunately, she failed English despite good grades in other subjects. She tried again the next year as a private candidate, but failed again at English. She then worked full time for one year. This year, at the age of twenty-three, believing that there was no way she could pass the A-level English examination, she sat for the Joint Entrance Examination for mainland Chinese universities and the Sun Yat-sen University entrance examination. I had several tutorial lessons with her before the examinations. Her English is not bad at all; she writes better than the average Secondary Six and Seven student in Hong Kong. Her biggest problem is lack of confidence, especially when speaking in English. She is one of the hardest-working students I have ever seen and she likes to study, but the system has excluded her on the grounds that her English is not good enough. The irony is that her Chinese is excellent and she wants to be a writer. Why should she need to be good at English to become a good Chinese writer?

Shayiu is not one of the thirty students who participated in this research, but she is an alumnus of the initiation program. When I was doing research at her school, the principal referred her to me and asked if I could give her extra tutoring in English. I have decided to include her story here because I think she demonstrates not only how

a student must struggle to gain the cultural capital of English proficiency in Hong Kong, but also how a student internalizes the cultural model of success and strives to realize it at great cost.

Unlike parents of the students in this study, Shayiu's parents objected to her pursuing further education. Most other parents share the value that education is important to their children and when more sources of income are needed, it is usually the parents who take up extra jobs. In fact, Shayiu's class teacher said that hers was the only case where he had met parents who pressed their children to quit education.

I believe the cultural model Shayiu holds on to comes mainly from her school. When her parents pressed her to quit school once she had finished the initiation program, it was her school (mainly her class teacher) who tried to persuade the parents to change their minds, and who found scholarships for her. With support from the school she was able to resist her parents' demand. And years after her graduation, she still has close contacts with the school. Her case demonstrates the strength and persistence of the cultural model of success once it is internalized by children.

If Shayiu was a "failure" who wanted to study at university against all odds, Suetli must be considered an early success story; but as I will describe, she too faces tremendous pressure. Suetli is often cited by the teachers of the initiation program as a model student who adapts well. They were impressed that she learned Cantonese almost from scratch, and in only three months was able to attain near-native proficiency. She is also doing well in most other subjects. But as I have gotten to know her more, I realize she is having a hard time. She takes all manner of pressure and responsibility on her own shoulders. When she faces a big problem or feels depressed, she says, she will not tell anyone because she does not want others to worry; she will go alone up a small hill near her home and cry her heart out.

Suetli was the first-born, and being a girl, she says, she has disappointed her parents since birth. She has a younger sister, and she explained that her mother gave birth to the second daughter only because the doctor made a mistake and thought that the baby was a boy. As far as she can remember, her mother has had five abortions and, more painfully, she remembers seeing a baby covered in blood. She has also witnessed her mother being battered by her father. She says that she remembers only two happy years of childhood, when she lived in the country with her grandmother and younger sister, away from her parents. Later her parents divorced and her mother remarried "a much older man." Her mother told her that she had chosen to remarry only because the man was from Hong Kong. Suetli says that before, friends and relatives looked down upon her mother because she had no sons and was beaten by her husband, but after she married a Hong Kong man, they changed their attitudes and showed more respect. She says, "A relative who once

insulted my mom that she was worth no more that RMB50 now takes the initiative to build a good relationship with us." Suetli has determined that she will not let her mother suffer any more. She believes she must outsmart the boys. "Whatever boys can do, I can do better," she says.

She told me she insisted on coming to study in Hong Kong despite objections from her teachers in mainland China. She explained that she used to be the star of the school and brought honor and money awards to her teachers. She said, "I believe I will have more chances in Hong Kong... I used to be the star of the school on the mainland; here I must remain one of the best students." And she has. As mentioned above, she attained near-native competence in Cantonese in just three months. Towards the end of the initiation program, all students had to look for mainstream schools. Suetli was very careful about calculating what would be the most favorable situation for her. She is a brilliant student, with excellent academic results and could have gone to a better school, but she thought if she went to a better school, she would just be one of the average students whom teachers would not pay much attention to. So she chose a school which is not so good, but is improving. She calculated that with the school striving hard to improve, they would devote more resources to students with good potential, and she would be one of those. She expected to get scholarships and special attention from this school.

We should consider the tremendous pressure Suetli is taking on. She thinks her mother has suffered too much and she feels obligated to provide for her as she gets old. She must study hard, go to university, and get a good job. She said she is determined to be successful, even to the extent of giving up romance. Once she fell in love with a classmate who also liked her very much, but she decided not to let the relation develop for fear that it would distract her from her studies. She made up her mind not to have a relationship before graduating from university. She told me that the following sentence best depicts her situation: "I have designed a map for myself. No matter how hard you try, you can never find happiness on it." She added, "Maybe I can be happy only in my next life." She is an extreme example of a person who feels that she cannot have her own life, but must live up to others' expectations. When I talk to her, I feel that she has a maturity that does not fit her age—she is only thirteen .

In the cases of Shayiu and Suetli, while the model of success may have been instilled by different agents and the children's experiences are different, the model they share is similar (a good education guarantees a good future), and the internalization of that model shapes similar behavior, since each strives hard to realize it at all costs.

As we have seen, many immigrant parents experience downward social mobility when they move to Hong Kong, since their academic qualifications and work experience

on the mainland are not recognized there, and they can find only low-paying manual labor in the food service or sales sectors. The parents think they are sacrificing for the benefit of their children, but in many cases, their children's future seems to be jeopardized rather than enhanced by the move. However, this does not seem to shake anyone's belief in their internalized model of success. The parents and children still cling to the hope, no matter how grim their present circumstances, that in the future the children can go to university and thus gain upward social mobility.

The mother of the two brothers from Fujian has only a vague idea that they can either continue to study in secondary or, if they cannot catch up, go to a vocational school and learn occupational skills to get a job. She insists they have better prospects, more opportunities, and can earn more in Hong Kong. The younger brother says he wants to study computer engineering because he likes playing computer games, but the boys' English teacher told me that their expectations are not at all realistic since they know very little English and do not speak Cantonese. They had studied English for only one year before they arrived. When the teacher talked to the boys, they said they were interested in computers, but from our conversation, I discovered that they spend hours each day playing computer games and that it is in this sense that they are interested in computers. They do not do well in computer class, where they complain that their computer teacher does not speak Putonghua and so they cannot catch up. Judging from their lack of information and poor academic standing, one cannot help being skeptical as to whether they will realize a better future in Hong Kong than they would have in mainland China.

Instead of questioning the validity of the cultural model of success, the students attribute their failures to other reasons and act in ways that perpetuate its influence. When asked whether they regretted having come to Hong Kong, most said no and affirmed that Hong Kong is a place with more opportunities. Some said they wanted to go back home, but would not do so because they had become the focus of admiration in their hometowns for having the chance to come to Hong Kong. They feel that they must be successful before they can return. One sixteen-year-old boy studying in the initiation program said, "I told my friends that I wanted to come to Hong Kong. I feel I'll lose face if I go back now." Another boy said, "I know one or two students who have gone back. People say they are failures... I cannot go back like that." He added, "Whenever my friends in the hometown say 'How lucky you are to be able to go to Hong Kong,' I just smile and say nothing. If I tell them Hong Kong is not as good as they imagine, they will think I am just trying to show off." In reality he is at a loss about his future. When he left the mainland he had finished Senior Secondary Two, but when he came to Hong Kong, he could only enroll in an initiation program for Secondary Three. After the program,

he was admitted to a good school to study Secondary Four in September, but it is a Direct Subsidy School,[10] meaning that he will have to pay tuition. Unless he can get a scholarship, he will have to pay the annual school fee of about HKD10,000, which he cannot afford. Finally he went for his second choice, another Direct Subsidy School with lower tuition.

"Copycat Migration"

Chinese parents' commitment to providing good educational opportunities and their children's reciprocal obligation to achieve good academic marks is morally commanding and is understood by both parents and children as unquestionable and non-negotiable (Li, et al. 2008: 13). Unlike parents who can afford to send their children to other places for better education, the only means available to parents in this study to provide access to an education they believe is better was to get the right of abode in Hong Kong. In most cases, such access became available to them quite suddenly in 1999, after the enactment of Article 24(2)(3) of the Basic Law in Hong Kong, which grants individuals born in mainland China the right of abode in Hong Kong by descent from either parent who is a permanent Hong Kong resident.

With this new eligibility, families decided to apply based on the belief that going to Hong Kong would be better than staying in mainland China because Hong Kong is more advanced, enjoys more prosperous economic development, offers better chances to earn money and provides better social welfare. And this fits the cultural model of success. Most of the families of the children I studied did not consider their specific situation but migrated just because they had the chance to. I call this kind of immigration "copycat migration." In a given town or village, most of those eligible to apply for migration to Hong Kong did so. If someone is eligible but does not apply, other people say he is missing a good opportunity. When their application is granted, the families believe they have secured a much-anticipated opportunity, one that not everyone can have. If they do not seize it, it may be gone forever. And when those who have migrated to Hong Kong come back home to visit, they do seem to be better off. But this is mainly due to the gap in earning and living standards between Hong Kong and mainland China, especially the

10 Students studying at government schools or aided schools in Hong Kong do not need to pay tuition, but Direct Subsidy Schools charge a fee, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand HKD per month.

rural areas. People earning the low wage of a few thousand dollars in Hong Kong can be big spenders at home. Moreover, people who have immigrated to Hong Kong avoid talking about the downside of their life there. The belief that "Hong Kong is a place to earn more money" prevails and helps to reinforce the cultural model of success that shapes migration behavior and results in "copycat migration."

Conclusion

This study examines the complexity of migration decisions and experience. It shows how seemingly irrational immigration decisions can be understood in terms of expectations set up by a cultural model of success and how this model is perpetuated despite its initial failure to fulfill what it promises. I argue that when the economic calculations and household considerations are embedded in culture and become a cultural model, the high cost of migration may be endured and the expectations for return may be deferred. The promises of the model mask from the eyes of parents and children alike the frustrations created by the gap between the model and the realities of migration. People tend to cling to the model even when it fails them.

Most of the student immigrants have internalized the cultural model of success, and have the faith that they have come to Hong Kong to gain access to affluence for themselves and their families. They accept that it is their personal responsibility if they do not succeed, and face tremendous pressure from family, and relatives and peers on the mainland, and from themselves. But I argue that because they lack family or social support, and have no control over the timing of their migration, it is not reasonable that teen students be held personally responsible. Often the family thinks that simply by bringing them to Hong Kong, they have done enough to secure them a good future and they are left to their own devices. They are forced to conform to and achieve in a system of education and public examinations for which they are ill-prepared.

Yet, the students do not question the validity of the cultural model of success – even when immigrating to Hong Kong works to the disadvantage of both parents and children – and act in ways that perpetuate this cultural model of success, which inspires more teenage migrants to come to Hong Kong, repeating and reinforcing this pattern of beliefs and behaviors, leading to "copycat migration."

Reference

Bacon-Shone, John, Joanna K.C. Lam, and Paul S.F. Yip

2008 The Past and Future of the One Way Permit Scheme in the Context of a Population for Hong Kong. Hong Kong: Bauhinia Foundation Research Center.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron

1977 Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis

1976 Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life. New York: Basic Books.

Breen, Richard, and John H. Goldthorpe

2001 Class, Mobility and Merit: The Experience of Two British Birth Cohorts. European Sociological Review 17(2): 81-101.

Census and Statistics Department

2007 The Fertility Trend in Hong Kong, 1981 to 2006. Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics. 2007(Sep.): FD6. Electronic document, http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/products_and_services/products/publications/statistical_report/population_and_vital_events/index_cd_B112001702_dt_detail.jsp. Accessed 24 September 2009.

2009 Mid-year Population for 2009. Electronic document, http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/press_release/press_releases_on_statistics/index.jsp?sID=2381&sSUBID=14260&displayMode=D. Accessed 24 September 2009.

Education Bureau

2009 Education and Support Services for Newly Arrived Children. Electronic document, http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=635&langno=1. Accessed 20 February 2009.

2010 Figures and Statistics: Secondary Education. Electronic document, http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeID=1039&langno=1. Accessed 1 May 2010.

Fan, C. Cindy

1996 Economic Opportunities and Internal Migration: A Case Study of Guangdong Province, China. Professional Geographer 48(1): 28-45.

Fong, Vanessa

2004 Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-child Policy. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Green, Anne E.

1997 A Question of Compromise? Case Study Evidence on the Location and Mobility Strategies of Dual Career Households. Regional Studies 31(7): 641-657.

Griffin, Larry J., and Arne L. Kalleberg

1981 Stratification and Meritocracy in the United States: Class and Occupational Recruitment Patterns. The British Journal of Sociology 32(1): 1-38.

Harbison, Sarah F.

1981 Family Structure and Family Strategy in Migration Decision Making. *In* Migration Decision Making. Gordon F. De Jong and Robert W. Gardner, eds. Pp. 225-251. New York: Center for Cultural and Technical Interchange between East and West, Inc.

Hayes, Katherine G.

1992 Attitudes Toward Education: Voluntary and Involuntary Immigrants from the Same Families. Anthropology & Education Quarterly 23(3): 250-267.

Hugo, Graeme J.

1981 Village-community Ties, Village Norms, and Ethnic and Social Networks: A Review of Evidence from the Third World. *In* Migration Decision Making. Gordon F. De Jong and Robert W. Gardner, eds. Pp. 186-224. New York: Center for Cultural and Technical Interchange between East and West, Inc.

Immigration Department

2008 Entry of One-way Permit Holders. Immigration Department Annual Report 2007-08. Electronic document, http://www.immd.gov.hk/a_report_07-08/eng/chapter01/index.htm#b12. Accessed 7 October 2009.

Jencks, Christopher

1979 Who Gets Ahead? The Determinants of Economic Success in America. New York: Basic Books.

Li, Jin, Susan D. Holloway, Janine Bempechat, and Elaine Loh

2008 Building and Using a Social Network: Nurturing for Low-income Chinese American Adolescents' Learning. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development 121: 9-25.

Li, Wen Lang, and Yuhui Li

1995 Special Characteristics of China's Interprovincial Migration. Geographical Analysis 27(2): 137-151.

Mathews, Gordon

2000 Global Culture / Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket. London: Routledge.

Mathews, Gordon, Eric Kit-wai Ma, and Tai-lok Lui

2007 Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation. London: Routledge.

Maxwell, James D., and Mary P. Maxwell

1995 The Reproduction of Class in Canada's Elite Independent Schools. British Journal of Sociology of Education 16(3): 309-326.

McNamee, Stephen J., and Robert K. Miller

2004 The Meritocracy Myth. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ogbu, John

1981 School Ethnography: A Multilevel Approach. Anthropology and Education Quarterly 12(1): 3-29.

Petersen, Trond, Ishak Saporta, and Marc-David L. Seidel

2000 Offering a Job: Meritocracy and Social Networks. The American Journal of Sociology 106(3): 763-816.

Smith, Darren P.

2004 An "Untied" Research Agenda for Family Migration: Loosing the "Shackles" of the Past. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 30(2): 263-282.

Sjaastad, Larry A.

1962 The Costs and Returns of Human Migration. Journal of Political Economy 70(5): 80-93.

Strauss, Claudia, and Naomi Quinn

1994 A Cognitive / Cultural Anthropology. *In* Assessing Cultural Anthropology. Robert Borofsky, ed. Pp. 284-297. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Trueba, Henry T.

1988 Culturally Based Explanations of Minority Students' Academic Achievement. Anthropology & Education Quarterly 19(3): 270-287.

Wei, Yehua

1997 Interregional Migration in Socialist Countries: The Case of China. Geojournal 41(3): 205-214.

Zhao, Yaohui

1999 Labor Migration and Earnings Differences: The Case of Rural China. Economic Development and Cultural Change 47(4): 767-782.

Appendix

Brief Profiles of the 30 Students in this Research

Student	Gender (M/F)	Whether Speak Cantonese upon arrival (Y/N)	Both mainland parents; one parent was eligible for immigration to HK because of Article 24(2)(3) of the Basic Law in HK*		Remarks
			Mother came first	Father came first	
1	M	N	√		Parents divorced when mother was in Hong Kong (HK); father passed away on the mainland; later the mother remarried a HK man; while awaiting immigration the child was under the care of maternal grandmother
2	M	N	√		Brother of student 1, same situation
3	F	Y			Child of cross-border marriage (mainland mother, HK father); Father returned to the mainland for retirement, but still applied for OWP family reunion scheme; mother and the child stay in HK
4	F	Y		√	
5	M	N		√	
6	F	N			Both mainland parents, but divorced; mother later remarried a HK man and came to HK and then applied for the child to join her; during that period the child stayed in school hostel in mainland China
7	M	Y	√		When mother was in HK, the child lived alone in mainland China since he "could not get along with the father" and "did not like the restrictions of school hostel"
8	F	Y	√		
9	F	N	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced; mother remarried a HK man
10	F	Y		√	
11	M	Y			Both mainland parents; child was eligible for immigrating to HK because he was born in HK
12	F	N			Child of cross-border marriage (mainland mother, HK father); child was born in HK but raised on the mainland
13	M	N			Parents and child came together under Capital Investment Entrant Scheme
14	F	Y	√		

15	F	N			Both mainland parents, but divorced; mother later remarried a HK man and came to HK first and then applied for the child to join her; during that period the child was under the care of fraternal grandparents
16	M	Y	√		
17	F	Y	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced
18	M	N		√	
19	F	Y		√	
20	M	Y	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced
21	M	N	√		
22	M	Y	√		
23	F	N			Both mainland parents, but divorced; mother later remarried a HK man and came to HK first and then applied for the child to join her; during that period the child was under the care of first the father and when he too remarried, the fraternal grandmother
24	F	Y	√		
25	F	N	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced; mother remarried a HK man
26	M	Y	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced
27	F	N	√		
28	F	N	√		When mother was in HK, parents divorced; mother remarried a HK man
29	F	N		√	
30	M	N		√	

* The parent who came first was eligible for immigration to Hong Kong as a result of the enactment of Article 24(2)(3) of the Basic Law in Hong Kong in 1999, which grants individuals born in mainland China the right of abode in Hong Kong by descent from either parent who is a permanent Hong Kong resident; this parent immigrated to Hong Kong alone first and then applied for the spouse and children to join him/her under the OWP family reunion scheme.

Wai-chi Chee
Department of Anthropology,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, NT, Hong Kong
cheewaichi@cuhk.edu.hk

成功文化模式也有失敗時：移民香港的中國大陸青少年

徐渭芝
香港中文大學人類學系

本文說明近年移民到香港的中國大陸青少年，如何肩負父母期望，依從成功文化模式 (cultural model of success)，希冀通過移民到香港接受良好教育，以期有機會出人頭地，改善將來的生活。但由於移民過程中若干不利的因素，致使現實與成功文化模式有所差距。即使如此，他們也不會質疑這種文化模式的合理性，反而認為是個人問題所致，因而繼續複製這個文化模式。

關鍵詞：中國，青少年，移民，教育，文化模式