

What Attracts Me to Stay? A Qualitative Study on the Destination City Choice of the College Graduates

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Abstract. Retaining university students after their graduation is one of the goals pursued by many cities. Understanding the college graduates' willing to stay is of great benefit to the task improvement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 9 college graduates who stayed in Quanzhou city where their universities is located, this paper considers the choice of stay or not is the result of the comprehensive effect of multiple driving forces. It includes right position, climatic amenities, social amenities, and pace of life. Most choose to stay, while a small number are looking for a chance to leave. Based on the empirical results of this paper, some policy recommendations are suggested, such as internship opportunities offering, entrepreneurs funds supporting, and good social security services providing.

1. Introduction

Regional population growth is an important indicator of an area's desirability for both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas[1]. Human capital and knowledge are key drivers of economic growth[2]. Some regions benefit from the influx of skilled labour and their counterparts suffer from severe brain drain. Regions are expected to benefit from higher education located within its domain, presupposing that highly educated people would be retained after their graduation and enter local labour markets, increasing local human capital levels[3].

Some students who move to an area for higher education are likely to stay in the area after their education is complete[1]. The migration behaviour of college graduates has been the focus of multedisciplines including geography, sociology, and public management for a few years[3]. The relationship between influence factors and human mobility is neither simple nor linear, rather it is often indirect and mediated by social, cultural, and economic drivers. Consequently, this paper contributes to the need in demography to expand and deepen the understanding of destination choice of college graduates, by producing empirical evidence on the first job destination choice of college graduates in third-tier cities of China.

This article begins by reviewing the relationships between regional development and the retaining of college graduates. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section2 described the data and the methods of the article. After that, in Section 3, the results are presented. In the concluding Section 4, results are discussed regarding the migration pattern of university graduates in Quanzhou and, further how the results can be used to develop skilled worked capital attraction of Quanzhou.

2. Methodology and research setting

The research presented in this paper is drawn from interviews with 9 participants from July 2018 to April 2019 in Quanzhou. The research including data collection, coding, and analysis followed an iterative process. In adopting this process, new questions generated from the results of the preceding stages were used to inform the following research stages. Open coding identified factors attracting staying; overlapping or similar codes were combined into 4 reasons.

2.1 Methodology

As the most exciting and the most challenging of the methods currently in wide use, the interviewings are now amongst the most common of the qualitative approaches utilised by human geographers in the collection of information about past and present lives and the circumstances that influence the course that they take[4]. Semiconstructure interviews offer a more flexible approach to the interview process. Its flexibility allows us to pursue a series of less structured questioning and also allows us to understand interviewees' thoughts more accurately.

2.2 Research setting

As one of the starting points of the Maritime Silk Road which was flourishing for about 1000 years, Quanzhou had been regarded as one of the two global biggest harbors. Though its importance in the country had declined considerably, its GDP remains the first position of Fujian province for 20 years since 1999, which mainly due to the private economy development. Job opportunities provided by numerous private enterprises of Quanzhou have been attracting a large number of immigration from central and west regions of China. And the graduates of colleges are integral component of immigration. Colleges located in Quanzhou are less than other regions of the country. The previous studies related to the city do not yet offer a sufficient overall picture of the stay of college graduates.

2.3 Research process

Convenience sampling and snowball sampling were used to select potential interviewees. After the first interview with the most familiar respondent who meets research requirements, we ask him(/her) to recommend suitable interviewees, and select the next interviewee from the potential interviewees based on the principle of maximum difference. We keep doing this until the information is saturated[5]. We covered three questions: When did you decide to live and work in Quanzhou? Are you planning on leaving in future (and why)? Why did you decide to stay here? All consented to recorded audio interviews, which were transcribed verbatim and translated from Mandarin to English.

3. Results

Studies in U.S. have shown that in general post-colleges are more likely to live in the state in which they attend college[6]. A similar phenomenon had been reported in China[7]. Our research in Quanzhou also reach the similar conclusions, but with some subtle and important differences. We will briefly cover the similarities and focus on the differences.

3.1 Right position

Unlike older migrants of U.S.[8], China's skilled migrants prioritize their career prospects over the quality of life in the migration decision-making process[9]. Similarly, many graduates hope to find a job that is in line with their major. This is also the reason why some graduates choose Quanzhou instead of first-tier cities. After graduation, M1 went to a first-tier city for postgraduate study and then returned to work in Quanzhou.

"Now the first-tier cities all want higher education. I am looking for a professional position. I came for an interview when I saw the recruitment information of this position and was hired."(M1)

Similarly, M2, who working in a first-tier city for a short time after graduation, returned Quanzhou.

"I came back after working three months. The bar for that job is too low to learn anything. Now this position is what I want, and I have improved a lot in the past few months."(M2)

3.2 Comfortable life

A happy, settled, and comfortable life is everyone's dream. Some graduates attach great importance to this aspect. The milder weather conditions, the moderate city size, the tolerance of people with

different cultural backgrounds, and the familiarity of the city after four years of college life make Quanzhou the first choice for many graduates.

3.2.1 Climatic amenities

Places with favourable weather like warmer winters and cooler, less-humid summers are the migration destination for many U.S. residents[10]. Its impact on skilled internal migration in China turns out to be small and less clear[9]. The three following extracts come from such interview discussions around climatic amenities:

“Yes, I like the city very much. My hometown is very cold in winter, you know...the southern coastal cities were our first choice when we(she and her parents) made the choice of the area in which the university is located. My college entrance examination result decided that I could only choose Quanzhou in coastal areas.”(F1)

“No. I didn’t have any idea about the city. I felt too wet when I was a freshman. But I have been becoming accustomed to such warm and moist environment. To my surprise, I even felt a little uncomfortable for the cold of my hometown when I went home last Spring Festival.”(M3)

3.2.2 Social amenities

Working in a city with many relatives and friends can take care of each other. Several interviewees chose college in Quanzhou because their parents work in here.

“My parents have been working here. I came here every summer holiday when I was primary school student and middle school student, and they asked me go to colleges in the city.”(M4)

The interpersonal relationship during college also influences the destination choice of graduates.

“I stayed here just because my good friend...I had nothing to do after I had quited my first job. My best friend from college asked me to participate in my current job.”(M3)

“My boyfriend’s family lives here, so I was staying.”(F2)

“My boyfriend chose to work here and I came back after graduate school.”(F3)

“The entrepreneurial environment here is much better than my hometown. My entrepreneurial partners from college are all here.”(M5)

3.2.3 Pace of life

Empirical findings generated from a countrywide model of U.S. white male migration reveal that older migrants more attracted to amenable locations than their younger cohorts[8]. But China’s skilled migrants have the opposite choice[9]. With a bit different to skilled migrants, some graduates value the quality of life.

“Instending of going to work at 7 o’clock or ealier every day in first-tier city, I always get up at this point and I was never late for my work. The rent of apartment in the downtown here is only half of the same space in the outskirts of first-tier city.”(M2)

3.3 Leave or stay

3.3.1 I’m leaving next month

Although more stressful and higher pay of its life, greater space for development and more varied lifestyle in super cities has been attracting some people away from the lower tier cities. The phenomena of staying in the city where the college is located after graduation and seeking better opportunities is similar to other studies.

“I’m leaving here next month. One of my relatives has found a new positon for me in Fuzhou. My boss asked me to hang on for this month before I quit.”(M2)

“I’ll go to Guangzhou if possible. (Why?) Many of my relatives live and work there.”(M1)

3.3.2 Stay here forever

After several years of college life, some graduates have gained well understanding of the city. Buying a house in Quanzhou after working a few years is a good example of their choices.

“I’ve started buying a flat by installment. I plan to buy a bigger apartment after I get married.”(F1)

“We had bought an apartment several months ago. My fiancee is a local.”(M6)

4. Conclusion and discussion

A high level of human capital is an essential precondition for region development. Retaining college graduates seems to be especially challenging for lower-tier cities like Quanzhou. Full attention should be pay to the critical role that college can play in urban development.

Having colleges in a city is not a sufficient precondition for obtaining a highly educated work force[3]. Retaining college graduates after their graduation is important for the city competitiveness. To achieve this aim, measures to meet the requirements of college graduates ought to be adopted. In addition to ensuring a higher income and better job opportunities, the following aspects should be given special consideration: Some measures such as providing plenty of internship opportunities to the college students, giving funds support to the entrepreneurs who is fresh out of colleges, and providing good social security services must be implemented more thoroughly.

Some limitations in this study should be considered. Interviews are often used in association with other methods – both qualitative and quantitative – to explore and analyse social phenomena.

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