Filial Piety and its Role in Decision-Making:

A Qualitative Study on Negotiation and Power Relations in Choice of University and College Majors among Malaysian Youth

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Abstract: The process in deciding college or university majors is complex, especially for youth who have completed their secondary education and have been taking advice from seniors. Such complexity has been caused by the contestation in decision making, whereby applicants have to struggle between obeying their seniors, and taking control of their own lives. This paper discusses the decision-making processes employed by Penang Chinese youths as applicants of college admission or choosers of university majors, and those of their parents, where unequal power relations is built on filial piety, or '孝 (xiao)' in Mandarin. Findings show that Malaysian Chinese youth constantly negotiate the exercise of filial piety under different circumstances. In cases where they disagree with their parents' decision, they would demonstrate an innate guilt that is often tied to the filial responsibility they expect to fulfil. Nonetheless, their negotiation power would increase when they are clear of their own career path upon graduation, as they strive to convince their parents that the graduates will maintain their family reputation. Such promise is also a demonstration of filial piety, which then gives Malaysian Chinese youth the upper hand in decision-making.

Keywords: Filial piety, decision making, family, Malaysian Chinese, education

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INTRODUCTION

1. DECIDING A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY MAJOR

Deciding a college or university major is one of the most perplexing choices to make for youth who seek to pursue their tertiary education after completing their secondary education. The decision-making process is perplexing as youth, who are in the midst of entering adulthood, wrestle with the need to abide by parents' instructions and the desire to exercise autonomy in deciding possible career pathways.

Past studies suggest that parental influence plays a role in a child's education (Butler & van Zanten, 2007; Fizer, 2013; Khoo, 2015; Westbrook & Scott, 2012; Cherlin, Scabini & Rossi, 1997, as cited by Colombo, 2011). A quantitative study that involved 380 respondents in Penang by Khoo (2015) reveals that parents top the list of "person of influence" in deciding college and university programmes on behalf of their children. According to Westbrook and Scott (2012), it is common for potential university or college applicants to seek advice from their parents before making a decision, as they perceive parents to be a credible source who are well-equipped with knowledge and information about choices in relation to higher education. This corresponds with the idea of parents being treated as role models by their adolescent children (Cherlin, Scabini & Rossi, 1997, as cited by Colombo, 2011).

In a quantitative study, Liu (2018) examines factors such as reciprocal filial piety, authoritarian filial piety, expectation, student-perceived competitiveness and safety, and student-perceived parental perception in competitiveness, safety, and knowledge in influencing decisions to study abroad, university choice and country of selection. Statistical findings show that such decisions are significantly influenced by students' authoritarian filial piety and student perceived parental perception in safety and knowledge, and no significant correlations were discovered for the other factors.

According to Chen (2016), who also conducted a study on Chinese parental influence on their children's education, two primary forces that shape parental decision-making behaviour are the highly hierarchical Confucian value system, in which filial piety is emphasised. Nevertheless, there are signs whereby children are given the opportunity to voice their opinions during such decision-making processes, even

though parents still play a pivotal role in determining their children's education.

Yet at the same time, youth are more determined in deciding their own fate and challenge the pathways predetermined by the elders in the family. They avoid succumbing to the social norms that the mainstream society imposes on them (Colombo, 2011). At this stage, they experience what is known as the psychosocial moratorium (Erikson, 1968), in revising their commitment and responsibility in the hope of finding a new identity for themselves before marching into adulthood. To a certain extent, this also marks the intention of breaking free from the unequal power relations they have experienced with their parents. According to Cherlin et al., 1997, as cited by Colombo, 2011, adolescents will only acknowledge parents as their role models if the difference between the thoughts and perceptions of adolescents and their parents is minute. In other words, if there is a clash between the youths' personal interest and that of their parents, it is likely that they will stop looking to their parents as role models or for advice to establish autonomy. While youth tend to seek greater autonomy and explore new roles (Turiel, 2002), other studies suggest that they also strive to maintain a good relationship with their parents by exploring conflict resolution and negotiations (Chen-Gaddini, 2012; Lahat et al., 2009).

2. Relationships, Decision-Making and Negotiation

Historically speaking, social relationships have been the subject of study among the scholarship on decision-making and negotiation, in relation to factors including informational exchange, competitive-cooperative tactics and concession making (Walton & McKersie, 1965; Rubin & Brown, 1975; Loewenstein, Thompson & Bazerman, 1989; Druckman & Broome, 1991; Valley et al., 1995; De Dreu et al., 2007).

According to previous studies, negotiators involved in the decision-making process are more willing to compromise to avoid conflict and confrontation with people with whom they have established an intimate relationship (Gelfand et al., 2006; Curhan, Neale, Ross and Rosencranz-Engelmann, 2008). At times, the decision to compromise could result in financial benefits, future negotiation opportunities and the development of one's social capital (Valley et al., 1995; Mannix et al., 1995; Curhan et al., 2010).

3. MALAYSIAN CHINESE AND FILIAL PIETY

Two important values embedded in the Confucian culture, as practised by the Chinese community are filial piety, or '孝 (xiao)' in Mandarin, and family harmony. The tenet of filial piety, as reiterated by Bengtson and Putney (2000), focuses on maintaining family order by emphasising the importance of responsibility, interdependence, sacrifice and family harmony. Parents are endowed with the authority and responsibility to educate their children, so that such values will be passed on to the next generation. It is important for their children to exercise filial responsibility because filial piety is the "foundation for them to achieve benevolence towards people in future" (Analects of Confucius, Chapter 15, Legge, 1971). As the future that is promised seems rewarding, children are expected to demonstrate obedience and reverence to their parents and seniors in the family as the expression of filial piety, and bring glory to the family name through success in endeavours of education and occupation (Ho, 1996).

Even when conflict arises during a parent-children interaction, children are supposed to know their limits and not challenge their parents' opinion (Luo et al., 2013). The importance of filial piety is not merely limited to communities in contemporary China but also Chinese families who live abroad (Chen et al., 2007), as well as in Malaysia (Lee et al., 2001; Cheah et al., 2017). Among the Malaysian Chinese, the need to conform to this particular social rule has caused its youth to remain obedient to their parents, and this obedience is observed as a threat to their autonomy in decision-making (Lee et al., 2001).

The decision-making process is further complicated by the cultural and contextual realities. As a result of the processes of globalisation and Westernisation, Chinese of the younger generation, regardless of whichever country they are in, are exposed to the importance and value of independence and autonomy (Yue & Ng, 1999; Wang et al., 2010). This is also evident among Malaysian Chinese as well (Chua, 2004).

Cheah et al. (2017) argue that despite the Malaysian Chinese respondents expressing their desire to pursue their own interests, they also prescribed the need to uphold the value of being filial to their parents and not brush aside their suggestions. Respondents view such concession as a moral obligation, rather than a demonstration of love and respect they have for the parent-child relationship. Such cultural and contextual

realities experienced by the Malaysian Chinese youth have also affected their choice of a college or university major, and this paper aims to examine the negotiation between Malaysian Chinese youth and their parents in the decision-making process of the subject matter by addressing the following research questions:

1. How does the expression of filial piety towards parents influence the decision of Malaysian Chinese youth in choosing a college or university major?
2. How do Malaysian Chinese youth negotiate the decision in choosing a college or university major with their parents, as far as their personal interest is concerned?

While many of the previous studies reviewed have adopted the quantitative approach in their research, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the dynamics and negotiation in the decision-making process. Moreover, the inclusion of filial piety as a focus of study, within the specific context of Malaysian Chinese will provide invaluable insight into the subject matter of filial piety.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted to collect data in response to the research focus. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 respondents, whose ethnicity is Chinese, regardless of the ancestral clans they belong to, and who had grown up in a Mandarin speaking environment, adhering to Chinese norms and values.

The table below documents the demographic details of all the respondents:

Respondent	**Age**	**Family social-income status**	**Programme enrolled**
1A	18	Household income unknown; both parents are small traders	Mass Communications (Diploma)

Respondent	Age	Family social-income status	Programme enrolled
2B	20	Household income unknown; White-collared professionals	Mass Communications (Degree)
3C	19	Household income of approximately RM8,000 a month, small business owner	Business (Diploma)
4D	19	Parents are economic rice stall owners, household income of approximately RM6,000 a month	Electronic Engineering (Diploma)
5E	19	Household income unknown; White-collared professionals	Electronic Engineering (Diploma)
6F	20	Occupation unknown; Household income of approximately RM8,000 a month	Computer Science (Degree)
7G	19	Father is a an insurance agent, mother is a housewife; household income unknown	Human Resource (Diploma)
8H	19	Both parents are teachers; household income unknown	Quantity Surveying (Diploma)
9I	20	Father is a college lecturer, mother is a piano teacher, household income of approximately RM11,000	Computer Science (Degree)
10J	19	Household income unknown; White-collared professionals	Hotel Management (Diploma)

Respondent	Age	Family social-income status	Programme enrolled
11K	18	Father is pest control business owner, mother is an admin clerk, household income unknown	Science (Foundation)

Respondents were newly enrolled in college and university programmes within a period of less than eight weeks in 2019. This is to ensure that their recollection of the decision making process involved in choosing their tertiary educational programmes remains fresh so that they are able to provide a clear picture of the decision-making process. Another criterion in respondent selection is that their parents should have either provided advice, feedback or influenced the respondents in their choice.

Interviews were conducted in the first half of the year, based on January and April student intakes. Peer debriefing and member checks with the respondents were carried out to ensure the data collected is valid and reliable. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ease the thematic analysis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSES

1. THE FINANCIER AS A MEASURE OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

The negotiation often arrives at a dead end when parents emphasise their roles as the financier of tertiary education. This is true among respondents who are dependent on family support, and have no intention to work and finance their own education. Parents might not resort to this tactic during the process of negotiation but when the time to enrol approaches and the decision has yet to be achieved, they would subtly insinuate that they are providing financial backing for the studies of their children, and that youth should trust them.

> "We talked about it for quite some time [about university major], and the discussion was okay, but I was a bit lost … but towards the

> end, they made the decision for me and I agreed …They are … paying my college fees … I don't see any problem with that… They will want the best for me …"
>
> 5E, electronic engineering student (diploma)

> "They told me to trust them, so I trust them. They are paying the money [tuition fees], so I just follow their decision… If I am paying myself, maybe I will be daring to have more say, but it's okay …"
>
> 9I, computer science (degree)

In cases where parents only provide partial financial support, or students are expected to be financially independent once they are enrolled in university programmes, youth have more negotiation power during the decision-making process, but this does not guarantee the final outcome, as parents will still be able to convince them that they have their best interests in mind.

> "My parents agreed to pay for my tuition fees each semester but they expect me to work and earn money to pay for my living expenses … I'm fine with that. But I kind of wish I could pay the tuition fees myself and they pay for my living expenses, so I will probably have more say in deciding what programme to enrol."
>
> 8H, quantity surveying student (diploma)

2.0 Maintaining Family Reputation by being 'Obedient' and 'Mature'

Unlike parents who assert their role as the education financier, respondents tend to perceive obedience as a 'primitive instinct' in response to enrolling in the programmes that will bring glory to the family name. To a certain extent, parents emphasise on keeping the family reputation by enrolling in programmes that will ensure promising careers, but they do not directly express to their children that following the parental advice given is a demonstration of obedience.

While such a case gives respondents greater negotiation power as compared to parents who exert direct pressure on the respondents'

choices, the instinctive nature prompts them to make decisions that match their parents' implied expectations.

> "They [parents] said whatever I decide to study, I need to think of the future … good income … easy to find a job ... this pushes me to opt for programmes that have promising career than something that will fit my interest."
>
> 7G, human resource student (diploma)

> "They [parents] trust that I'm mature enough to make my own decision but will give advice here and there. They have high expectations of me, so I want to make them proud."
>
> 2B, mass communications student (degree)

There is also the fear of being labelled as rebellious, especially among respondents who come from a close-knited family.

> "Growing up, I have always respected my parents and the decisions they made for the family. And I think they are reasonable people. If they are unreasonable and drive me nuts, I think I would have no issue to go against them. But because they are 'nice humans', how can I act 'gangster' in front of them?"
>
> 5E, electronic engineering student (diploma)

Respondents who claimed to have a rather distant relationship with their parents have also expressed that they had been regarded as the black sheep of the family, and by taking their parents' choice of a diploma or degree major into account this will be a chance for reconciliation.

> "Since young, I have always defied my parents … well not in an aggressive manner but I threw tantrums on and off when things did not go my way. I'm quite a difficult child to deal with, and my parents had a hard time 'controlling' me. They eventually gave up and stopped forcing me to study what I'm not capable of, and suggested hotel management. I don't hate this decision … don't know how to feel about it either, but I think I have learned to give

> and take. By taking up hotel management, I hope to fix my relationship with my parents, especially my mum, since I would not be able to spend more time with them after completing my studies."
>
> 10J, Hotel Management (Diploma)

3.0 Striking a Balance between Fulfilling Filial Responsibilities and Personal Ambition

Respondents find difficulties in juggling between exercising filial responsibilities towards their parents and maintaining their own ambition. As mentioned earlier, emphasis on the need to exercise filial responsibilities is not a form of direct pressure parents exert onto their children, but it is their inner battle to fight in order to prove they would prioritise parents' advice.

The negotiation becomes more difficult when the expectations of the respondents and their parents are not aligned, whereby respondents themselves would like to pursue a different career path upon graduation. Though it might not involve open communication, respondents would drop hints in a subtle manner so that their parents understand what they want for their lives.

> "I may have agreed to pursue computer science for my degree, but on and off I will remind them, I will decide my career path… it's not that I already knew what I want to do in life, but I just want them to know I need to take control of my life as an adult."
>
> 9I, computer science (degree)

> "The funny thing is … I like IT stuff, but it's not computer science. I'm confused too, and I let them (parents) know. If eventually I realise computer science is not where my interest is, I will still complete my degree, because I don't want to create problems for my parents, but I might pursue other career options. I told them about my thoughts as well, and I think they are fine with it."
>
> 6F, computer science (degree)

In this instance, as far as their personal ambition is concerned, they would have to re-define, or rather, convince themselves that the act of 'filial piety' is not limited to being obedient.

> "Yes, putting my personal ambition first before my parents' wish for me is considered as disobedient. But that does not mean I'm no longer filial to my parents, or I neglect my duty as a daughter to take care of them. Obedience should not be equated with filial piety, in my opinion, especially for children who have reached adulthood."
>
> 10J, Hotel Management (Diploma)

As for respondents with no clear ambition but are certain that the direction the parents have determined for them is not what they desire, they also believe that putting their foot down does not mean they are not filial to the parents.

> "My family runs a small business, and they hope one day I can take over the business (by pursuing an education in business), since I'm their only child. I think I've made it clear that I have no intention of taking over their business. Not sure what I want to do yet, but I'm quite sure I do not want to take over their business… I want to decide what I want for my life, but this doesn't mean I'm not being filial to them."
>
> 3C, business (diploma)

DISCUSSION

The cultural and contextual realities among Malaysian Chinese complicate their decisions in reaction to choosing a college or university major. The tension that lies in the cultural realities boils down to the fulfilment of the ethics of filial piety towards the parents, whereas the context realities reflect the desire of Malaysian Chinese youth to be independent and autonomous, as confirmed by Chua (2004).

Based on the current study, in order to be autonomous, one has to be financially independent. Parents being the financier for their children's studies disrupt the balance in the negotiation, causing a power shift to the former. What continues to cause the power balance to be disrupted is the innate guilt that Malaysian Chinese youth would bear. Such guilt stems from the responsibility to satisfy the financiers, rather than a filial act towards their parents. Moreover, parents being the financier also give them greater negotiation power to create a sense of trustworthiness,

which their children would accept due to innate guilt. Thus, the concept of filial piety may not be accurately examined within the context of this study, as far as financial perspective is concerned, as it is the ultimate game changer.

Another form of innate guilt that Malaysian Chinese have to bear is the need to maintain family reputation by being 'obedient' and 'mature'. In other words, parents do not exert direct pressure on their children by forcing them to obey their decision. While Cheah et al. (2017) argue that the act of following their parents' decision is a moral obligation instead of a demonstration of love and respect, findings in this study suggest that the innate guilt of Malaysian Chinese youth stems from the ethics of filial piety. This innate guilt encompasses every aspect of behaviour that aims at moral obligation, love and respect towards their parents, causing the youth to lose negotiation power.

While the cultural and contextual realities do not seem to be in favour of Malaysian Chinese youth in negotiating the choice of a college or university major, one of the negotiation strategies that allows them to enhance a sense of resilence is their ambition, and the need for the parents to acknowledge the vision their children have as adults. This would not be a problem when the expectations of both parties are aligned, but when they are not, Malaysia Chinese youth have to consider fulfilling their filial responsibilities by heeding their parents' advice. At the same time, the youth spell out conditions for autonomy elusively, hoping their parents would understand and respect their decision.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that Malaysian Chinese youth do not hold much negotiation power in deciding their college or university major, not because of excessive pressure from their parents, but due to the innate guilt that leads the youth to exercise filial piety. Though open communication with their parents takes place during the process of discussion, they resort to a mild approach in voicing their thoughts. As such, they are willing to compromise to avoid conflict and confrontation with their parents in the negotiation process. Putting filial piety aside, Malaysian Chinese youth do not express dismay towards parental

decisions mostly because they themselves do not view the decision made by their parents as negative, and are willing to test the waters.

While this research focuses on filial piety and negotiation power in deciding college and university majors among freshmen, future research areas can target graduating students to identify the negotiation process in the career path. As the qualitative method is employed to discover the processes in this specific study, quantitative methods can be used by examining concepts that revolve around filial piety, ambition, obedience, and their relationships. Future research could explore the role of financial sponsorship in the decision-making process as one that is independent of filial piety. The two factors of financial sponsorship and filial piety are rather exclusive from each other at the point when the study is conducted, and it might be difficult to examine their interrelations.

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