

School Choice in Hong Kong: Peking Ducks or Rich Expats?

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It had been several months since Cindy and her husband Benny had met up with their friends for dinner, and she was looking forward to it. As usual, they were going to the cooked food market in their neighbourhood. While everything there was delicious, they also liked that it was traditional—so traditional that the waitstaff only spoke Cantonese. Actually, that’s probably why it had become their favourite place. While everyone in the group were Hong Kong residents, only Cindy and her colleague William could speak fluent Cantonese. Their colleague Puja, an Indian Hong Konger, could speak a bit, while her husband Mark, an Australian, only spoke English. Benny and William’s wife Iris were Chinese, but since they both grew up in North America, their Cantonese was not fluent. So it was a special treat for the group to enjoy the food together, while Cindy and William took care of ordering in Cantonese.

Plus, Cindy had news to share: She and Benny were expecting their first child. As their friends already had children, she was sure they would have good advice for her as she began planning for the baby.

When they arrived at the food market, Cindy and Benny did not see their friends anywhere, so they got a table. As they began rinsing their utensils and cups in hot water, Puja and Mark rushed over.

‘Sorry we’re late,’ Puja said breathlessly, as she plopped down across from Cindy. ‘We were trying to get the kids to bed, but it was a joke. They never want to go to sleep these days.’

‘They never sleep,’ Mark added. ‘I don’t know where they get their energy.’

Just then, William and Iris arrived. ‘Hello everyone, long-time no see, Cindy!’ William rolled his eyes. Cindy and William had just been in a boring meeting together that afternoon. ‘I hope you haven’t been waiting long,’ Iris added as they sat down.

‘Not at all,’ Cindy replied. ‘We haven’t even gotten the menu. Although we probably don’t need it!’

‘Yellow chicken, beef noodles, bok choi, ... seafood?’ William rattled off their usual orders.

‘Let’s get fried tofu and eggplant,’ Puja added.

‘Yes,’ Mark nodded. ‘And salt and pepper squid.’

‘I think it’s too much, but let’s see,’ William said as he waved the server over. After William listed the items in Cantonese, the server confirmed the order.

‘Let’s also get three rice,’ William added, ‘and one... two... three large beers.’ The server ran off, and immediately returned with the beer. As Iris collected everyone’s cups, William poured some beer into each and passed them around.

‘None for me today,’ Cindy said, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

‘Oh yes,’ Benny smiled. ‘Have you told them?’

‘Not yet,’ Cindy began...

‘You’re pregnant!’ Puja shouted. Cindy nodded as the table erupted in oohs and ahs and the clinking of small cups of beer.

‘Welcome to the club,’ Puja said.

‘Yes, now comes all the fun,’ Mark nodded. ‘Helpers and tutors, finding an apartment with two bedrooms that can fit beds in them...’

‘...and best of all, preparation for school interviews and exams,’ Puja added.

Mark rubbed his eyes and shook his head.

‘Yes, we have a lot to do,’ Benny smiled, taking his wife’s hand beneath the table. ‘First things first.’ Cindy felt relieved by this gesture.

Soon food began appearing: Bok choy, eggplant, and tofu. Everyone dived in to try each.

‘Just curious,’ Puja said as she filled her bowl with eggplant. ‘Do you know what type of school you want your child to go to – local, international, DSS?’

Cindy nodded. ‘We’ll go to a local school.¹ We just need to decide whether we want to move to another neighbourhood for better school choices in the coming years.’

Benny nodded rapidly. ‘I really want him or her to learn Chinese. My parents figured sending me to California for my education was best. But it’s embarrassing that my Cantonese is not that good. You know, I can’t really read or write. I want my child to fit in here.’

Puja gazed at Benny and Cindy with sympathy. ‘We wanted the same for Dev. But for us it hasn’t been easy. Even though I grew up here and went to local schools, I didn’t get to learn Cantonese. Today they still segregate ethnic minorities into English medium-of-instruction local schools, or English-medium classrooms. It’s really a problem. Not speaking Cantonese limited what I could study at university – I wanted to work in the health field, but the medical system and social work system are all in Chinese.’²

‘Yeah, that’s been the hardest thing,’ Mark agreed. ‘Our children will have to compete for jobs here with people who speak Chinese and English. But teaching Dev Cantonese, when we don’t speak it ourselves, is impossible. We tried a private tutor, but since Dev doesn’t use it socially, it’s really hard for him to learn it well.’

Puja interjected. ‘We want Dev to be 100% a Hong Kong person, but now I’m afraid he’ll be caught in-between worlds.’

‘Even for us, schooling has been a challenge,’ Iris added, nodding. ‘Kenneth was in a local school, but we recently decided to switch to an international school.’³

‘What happened?’ Cindy asked.

¹ Local schools include those fully organized and supported by the Hong Kong government, as well as ‘aided’ or ‘grant’ schools, which were originally founded by religious or charitable organizations, but also follow government curricula. Most local schools teach in Chinese, but some have options for English medium-of-instruction. Local schools charge tuition and have an admissions system. Some are elite and competitive, while others have poorer reputations and are relatively easy to join.

² For more information on the challenges ethnic minorities face related to school choice, language learning, and social mobility, see Loh, E. K. Y., & Tam, L. C. W. (2016). Struggling to thrive: The impact of Chinese language assessments on social mobility of Hong Kong ethnic minority youth, *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 25: 763-770; and Castle, J.-L. (2015, Oct. 7), Hong Kong minorities ‘marginalised’ in school, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-34444284>. Views of ethnic minority and international parents in Hong Kong discussed here are taken from Groves, J. M., & O’Connor, P. (2018). Negotiating global citizenship, protecting privilege: Western expatriates choosing local schools in Hong Kong, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39:3: 381-295.

³ International schools may teach in a variety of languages, including English, Japanese, and Korean. Non-local children can only apply to international schools; they are not eligible for local or DSS schools. Like all schools in Hong Kong, international schools charge tuition and have competitive admissions. For more, see Ng, V. (2012). The decision to send local children to international schools in Hong Kong: Local parents’ perspectives, *Asia Pacific Education Review* 13: 121-136.

William chimed in. 'I was not happy with what they were doing there. It's the stuffed Peking duck approach.'⁴

'I know what you mean,' Benny jumped in. 'The students here are so focused on memorizing information, that they don't really think about how to apply it. It's the opposite of what I'm trying to do with my students in my university classes – passive versus active learning.'

Iris nodded. 'Teachers are really focused on teaching students how to learn to succeed in exams—how to give exactly the answer the teacher is expecting. Every tiny difference from the "right" answer has to be corrected. If you spell one word wrong, you need to rewrite the whole sentence again three times and turn it in, in order to pass dictation.'

'I don't know how children here do it,' Mark shrugged. 'I was just average at school. I would not have survived here. In Australia it is much more laid back. Everyone is okay in the end.'⁵

'There was just no time, even for us as his parents,' Iris continued. 'One dictation for English and one for Chinese, every week. At least an hour, usually many more, of homework every night. On Fridays, Kenneth would have thirteen homework assignments. There's no time for sports or games or outside reading... In second grade, he was so stressed out about the tests. We were all miserable.' She sighed.

'The system-wide assessments are crazy,' William explained. 'These tests are not supposed to be evaluating the students. But the students and teachers worry so much about them that everything else gets ignored.'

'But test scores are important to get into university, right?' asked Cindy. 'If they don't teach students to work hard and do well on tests, in the long run it will be impossible for them to get into university. It's not a bad thing.'⁶

Iris nodded. 'We really debated it. In general, people here value hard work, and this is also reflected in the schools. I wish I had studied harder when I was growing up in Canada. In Canada, we didn't have a sense of dedication, to work hard in difficult subjects. But now we also like the western approach, where children have more freedom to just be children.'

William went on. 'The problem is that if we say, "no worries, you don't have to be perfect," that actually makes things worse for Kenneth. The school demands parent involvement and support to do all the homework perfectly every time. So the teachers disapprove of us, and Kenneth. And Kenneth felt anxious and ashamed. We didn't like that.'

The conversation briefly paused as the server returned with more food and beer. Cindy poked at her food and reflected on what had been said. She remembered feeling stressed out when she was at school, and pressure to do her best so she could go to university. But she had never dreamed of her

⁴ The 'stuffed Peking duck' approach refers to the notion of local education that is rigidly fixed with a teacher-centered orientation and a focus on memorization of content. More generally, some views of local people about local versus international schools which are discussed here come from Ng (2012). See also Ngan, M.-Y., & Chung, C. (2004). Parental choice of primary schools in Hong Kong, *Journal of Basic Education* 13:2: 79-105.

⁵ Dialogue that compares education from eastern versus western perspectives is informed by Layman, E. (2018), Mixed: Educational perspectives from families of mixed east and west educational background, *Global Education Review* 5:1: 52-72.

⁶ In recent years, less than half of students taking the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education met the criteria for university admission, so most had to seek alternative pathways to higher education, such as less desirable self-financed post-secondary programmes or study abroad. Meanwhile, Hong Kong universities also accept a variety of university entrance qualifications from students attending international schools in Hong Kong and schools around the world. See Pavlova, M. (2017), Aspirations of and realities for Hong Kong students: Is the 'formal' transition system effective? *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 16:1, 77-93.

children going to international schools. She shook her head. 'I'm not sure we can afford an international school. Aren't they really expensive?'

'Sooooo expensive!' Iris whined. 'ESF costs nearly \$150,000 per year. It's not even the most expensive. It's definitely not possible for most people.'⁷

William nodded. 'We knew another couple at the local school, westerners who wanted their children to integrate and learn Cantonese. They said that they can internationalise their children by taking them skiing in Hokkaido in the winter and to America every summer, with the money they are saving by going to the local school.'⁸

Iris looked doubtful. 'Right, but are you really going to choose a school just so you can go on holidays? It's your child's future you're talking about...''

'Another option is DSS,'⁹ Puja said.

'What's that?' asked Benny.

'Direct Subsidy Scheme,' Puja explained. 'They're for local students, and they take Hong Kong examinations, but they can also have international subjects and tests. They can be a little cheaper. Like an international school for local students who already speak Chinese.'¹⁰

'It's a nice idea,' Mark added. 'They also emphasize more traditional values about studying hard and have high standards. But they can also be really hard to get into.'

'But I heard some bad things about some religious DSS schools,' Iris interrupted. 'One of my friends has terrible stories of being caned at a Catholic school.'¹¹

Puja raised her eyebrows. 'I don't think that happens now, but maybe it happened in the past. In our case, we wanted Dev to feel like he belonged, and to have international exposure. Plus, we have to prepare him in case he wants to study or live outside Hong Kong when he's older.'

'That makes sense,' Benny replied. 'I think that some of my students at university would have a difficult time studying abroad.'

'That's one side of it,' William interrupted, 'but on the other hand, for Kenneth, now he's becoming too international. He hardly speaks Chinese at home anymore!'

'And some of Kenneth's school mates come from really wealthy families,' Iris added. 'Now Kenneth has this sense of class division. These expat kids,¹² they are completely focused on holidays, phones, and all the latest toys.'

⁷ 150,000 Hong Kong Dollars equals \$19,250 United States Dollars. See <https://www.esf.edu.hk/school-fees/>.

⁸ This example is taken from Groves & O'Connor, Negotiating global citizenship, protecting privilege.

⁹ DSS schools generally follow the local curricula, with classes taught in Chinese, but they are more independent than local schools in terms of curricula, staffing, and admissions. Like all schools in Hong Kong, DSS schools charge tuition and have competitive admissions.

¹⁰ In 2021/22, fees for DSS schools ranged from HK\$1,000-130,000 per year (USD\$130-16,700).

[https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/edu-system/primary-secondary/applicable-to-primary-secondary/direct-subsidy-scheme/schlist\(fees\)_e_c.pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/edu-system/primary-secondary/applicable-to-primary-secondary/direct-subsidy-scheme/schlist(fees)_e_c.pdf).

¹¹ For more on corporal punishment in Hong Kong schools, See Kuen, K. S. M. (2021, Sept. 27), Child abuse: How Hong Kong can ensure educational institutions are safe havens, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/3149902/child-abuse-how-hong-kong-can-ensure-educational-institutions-are>.

¹² While technically 'expatriate' or 'expat' refers to a person who moves abroad to work temporarily for their national government or a nationally-based corporation, as Groves and O'Connor describe, in Hong Kong they describe "'privileged migrants" from the Global North' rather than 'unskilled migrants from poorer countries,' although 'expatriates are, technically, migrants too' (p. 386). See Groves & O'Connor, Negotiating global citizenship, protecting privilege, for more analysis of the complicated treatment of the terms in Hong Kong.

Puja nodded and grimaced. 'There's also a sense that students in international schools "can't take it" in local schools—that they are coddled, because the international schools have a more western approach to academics.'

'There's no easy answer,' Mark said. 'But let's not upset Cindy now. They'll be fine. First, they have the baby, then they get started on kindergarten interviews.'

Puja laughed.

'And we haven't even mentioned names,' William added. 'Of course, I already know it will be William if it's a boy!'

The group broke out in laughter.

As the evening progressed, Cindy could not get the issue of schooling out of her head. After dinner, she and Benny walked through the neighbourhood, and she brought the conversation up again.

'What did you think about what they all said about the local schools?'

'I never thought about it that much before,' Benny admitted. 'I can see their point—the local system is not perfect. But I also don't want my child to be in the situation I am in now, not even fluent in Chinese.'

'No, me neither,' Cindy agreed. 'If William struggles with Kenneth's Chinese, we would be in the same position.'

Benny nodded. 'There's nothing wrong with western values, but there's nothing wrong with Hong Kong values, either. Sometimes international culture is treated as superior to the local system. I wish there was a way to have the best of both worlds: low stress, but also high commitment to excellence. But when I compare my experiences in school in California with Hong Kong, I don't think you can have both.'

'My only worry,' Cindy continued, 'is that what if our baby does want to go abroad when they grow up? Would we be depriving him or her of opportunities, like you said?'

'It's hard to say,' Benny frowned. 'But still, I would feel bad depriving them of opportunities to succeed in Hong Kong.'

Cindy gazed at the sidewalk in front of her. 'Now that I think of your experience compared to mine, I never realised that our parents made such a big difference to our future with these decisions. Your parents were sure California would be best, but here you are today. How do we decide on behalf of a baby that is not even born, about what is best?'

Cindy and Benny and their friends' struggles are not unique but are shared across many families, in Hong Kong and around the world. Beyond financial considerations, child well-being, cultural values, and academic achievement are all important aspects of education. An even more fundamental issue is whether it is appropriate for different parents to make different choices about their children's education, or whether there is one best answer regarding school options that is relevant to all members of society. What rights do parents have, if any, over their children's futures? If this is not only a personal choice for parents, what other considerations do you think should take priority?