As mainland China opens its doors again to strive for economic development, enormous demands for higher education have arisen. Many people choose to go abroad for higher education because the domestic higher education supply is still limited and less competitive than Western universities in some areas. The major destinations include more developed industrialized countries such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom (National Education Bureau of China, 2000). According to Altbach’s (1998) push and pull model of international student mobility, Chinese international students of earlier times, except for those who received financial assistance from employers or the Chinese government, were largely pushed by unfavorable conditions in mainland China and pulled by better opportunities in the more developed countries of the West.

However, in recent years, the patterns of mobility among Chinese students have changed significantly with the development of mainland China and globalization of the world market (Li, 2006). The total volume of mainland Chinese students’ movement has increased while the numbers applying to study in Western countries such as those in Europe, along with Canada and the USA, have decreased (Reisberg, 2004). The factors influencing the direction of mobility are multifaceted. They include the external push and pull forces of home and host countries or districts, government policies regulating international student recruitment in the host countries or districts, the recruiting strategies of host higher education institutions, and the personal characteristics and motives of the students (Altbach, 1998; Li, 2006; Reisberg, 2004; Tian, 2003).

Earlier this decade, based on a study of students at one of China’s largest international student-exporting universities, Tsinghua University, Tian (2003) found, from her evaluation of the push and pull factors associated with China and the USA, that the students gave significantly
higher value to some factors of their home country (China) than to the same factors in the USA. These factors were mainly social and cultural ones, for example, economic development potential, social position, social security, friendliness of the society, cultural identity, feeling of belonging emotionally, lifestyle, psychological adaptation, language and communication, and degree of ease at work and in life generally.

Hong Kong has emerged from the colonial era with “hybrid” features of both China and the West that appeal to mainland Chinese students (Li, 2006). Hong Kong provides sibling ethnic identity, amalgamation of Chinese and Western cultures, a bridge between China and the outside, and a strong higher education sector that emphasizes English as well as Chinese (Li, 2006).

Seven universities in Hong Kong—the University of Hong Kong (HKU), Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), City University of Hong Kong (CityU), Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), Polytechnic University of Hong Kong (PolyU), Lingnan University (LU), and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)—admit mainland Chinese research postgraduates (MRPs). The numbers of MRPs increased from virtually zero in 1990 to 6,732 in the 2007/2008 academic year (University Grants Committee, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008). The percentage of MRPs recruited from among all research students increased from 43% in 2004/2005 to 52% in 2007/2008. These students accounted for 92% of the total non-local research students enrolled from 2004 to 2008. Of the seven universities, HKU recruited the most MRPs, followed by CUHK and HKUST (see Table 15.1).

In this chapter, we report a series of studies on MRPs’ adaptation to the Hong Kong universities. These groups of students are of special interest in the adaptation research for two reasons. First, there is a special relationship between their mother culture and the host culture. The literature contains few studies on student adaptation to a sibling culture, even though cultural distance is considered one of the most important moderators in the process of acculturation (Church, 1982; Searle & Ward, 1990; Triandis, 1994; Ward & Chang, 1997; Ward & Searle, 1991). Second, the fact that these students are graduate students is particularly salient in terms of the study level in which they are involved because their adjustment to studying in Hong Kong may be different from that of undergraduate students studying at foreign universities, the students most frequently sampled in previous investigations.