

## **Behavior Patterns and Career Paths Differentiation Among Chinese International Students in Japan: Insights from Culture in Action Model**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigates how cultural tools shape the career paths differentiation of Chinese international students in Japan, with particular focus on the behavior patterns that emerge in this process. Drawing on the culture in action model, the research adopts a constructivist epistemology and a hermeneutic methodological approach to analyze in-depth interviews. Findings reveal that family background and early experiences significantly influence students' motivations and approaches to career planning. Moreover, the meaning of work, as constructed through individual values, plays a decisive role in guiding career choices. Two distinct behavior patterns are identified: a goal-driven pattern, in which students actively pursue predetermined objectives, and an opportunity-following pattern, in which students adapt to emerging prospects. These patterns explain how similar educational qualifications can lead to divergent career outcomes.*

**Keywords:** behavior patterns, career paths differentiation, Chinese international students, culture in action, employment

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## INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the critical issue of career paths differentiation among Chinese international students (CIS) with overseas study background, focusing on the aspects that enable some individuals to successfully secure stable and high-status occupations, while others struggle to find employment after graduation. By placing particular emphasis on CIS in Japan, this study aims to highlight the way students shape their career trajectories and invest their overseas education to achieve their professional goals. This study applies the cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986) as its conceptual framework to explore the behavior patterns that CIS construct through their internal reasoning and external reasoning and how different behavior patterns influence CIS' individual career paths.

### Research Background of the Study

According to historical records, between 1978 and 1985, approximately 30,000 Chinese students sought academic qualifications abroad, and upon their return, they were in high demand in the domestic job market, they could easily secure a prestigious occupation in different industries, including government-affiliated institutions, academic institutions, and nation-owned enterprises (MoE, n.d.). Therefore, the rationale behind CIS' initial decision to pursue their academic qualifications abroad was predicated on the perceived equivalency between achieving an educational qualification abroad and the prospect of securing a stable occupation.

According to Blau-Duncan's occupational status attainment model, an individual's occupational status is influenced by multiple factors, including their family background, achievement of educational qualifications, and the occupational status of their parents (Blau & Duncan, 1967). The model highlights how education serves as a key factor in upward social mobility, particularly in the context of occupational attainment. Therefore, students from privileged backgrounds with access to higher education abroad are more likely to secure higher-status occupations upon receiving academic qualifications overseas. However, this model primarily applies to elite students with limited access to higher education, and its applicability becomes limited in the context of educational expansion, where the direct link between academic qualification achievement and occupational attainment becomes less clear.

A report by the *2024 Chinese Returns Employment Blue Book* revealed that employers have become more selective, paying more attention to practical skills and work experience over academic qualifications alone (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security Information Center, 2025). Some occupations in the finance industry and technology set a high standard for students with overseas qualifications. Employers prefer to recruit new employees with at least one year of

working experience, including internship experience. Thereby, a successful candidate should possess relevant internship experience in the same area of industry prior to application. Except for the working experience, employers require students with overseas qualifications to demonstrate high proficiency in a foreign language and have developed some related professional skills associated with the job they applied for. This shift underscores the need to re-examine the relationship between overseas educational qualifications and career outcomes in the context of China's evolving economic landscape.

Thus, with the increasing number of Chinese students studying abroad, the Blau-Duncan occupational status attainment model cannot fully explain the relationship between academic qualifications and occupational attainment in the present day.

To address this research gap, this study tends to apply a theoretical view from culture-in-action perspective to explore how students exercise their internal reasoning in understanding career goal setting and external reasoning shape their career trajectories.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

From a sociological perspective, sociologists consider that any decision made by an individual should not only be considered by their personal desires, but also it should be understood in the context of the entire social system.

Ken Roberts (1968) developed opportunity structure theory as a response to both Eli Ginzberg (1951) and Donald E. Super's career development theory (1973), Roberts believes that individual decisions have been influenced by opportunity structure in the labor market. The opportunity structure is composed of industrial organizations, social policies, and social classes, which means that individuals make choices by comparing their own abilities, costs, and benefits. Therefore, when university students are faced with the need to make decisions, their social class background has a significant impact on their decision-making. Based on the rational choice theory proposed by Richard Breen and John H. Goldthorpe (1997), they also argued that family background is demonstrated with the phenomenon of second effects on educational choices.

Although the rational choice theory provides an explanation for students' rational choices, it places too much emphasis on structural determinism. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) introduced Bourdieu's theories of habitus and field to challenge the reductionist interpretation of individual rational choices proposed by rational choice theory. They proposed a *careership* decision model based on Bourdieu's habitus and social capital, suggesting that individuals make career decisions based on their subjective experiences within social networks and an individual's rational choices are subconscious reflections influenced by the social background and dispositions they inhabit (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). In

addition, the unequal distribution of resources within a field affects individual choices and interactions with others in that field, and decision-making is influenced by certain unexpected events in an individual's past, as well as their educational and social like experiences. Cultural sociologists argue that when university individuals make choices, their decisions are made based on how they utilize the information they have acquired. This information comes from their family backgrounds, cultural context, and life experiences (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997).

Although most people clarify their goals and achieve success through rational thinking to complete cultural reproduction, some individuals are unwilling to follow this instrumental calculation model. Instead, they opt for different approaches during the decision-making process (Li et al., 2021; Ruan, 2020; Salisbury et al., 2009). Raymond Boudon highlights the limitations of rational choice theory in his later works, arguing that it constrains human action within a meticulously calculated mathematical model, neglecting individuals' thoughts, desires, values, and cultural patterns of action (Boudon, 2001). Therefore, to understand how students make choices and navigate life in university, it is necessary to return to the original question: how does culture influence human action?

Max Weber proposed the theory of *Wertrationalität* (value-rationality) to explain how values influence individuals' actions. More specifically, it satisfies an axiom that individuals' actions must be supported by certain reasons, which serve as the motivation for those actions (Weber, 2013). Talcott Parsons inherited the opinion from the Weberian school, he proposed the theory of cultural tradition to further elaborate on this abstract idea (Parsons, 1991). The concept of this theory enhances the argument of value in the decision-making process and implies that individuals must adhere to certain norms and standards when making reflections and choices, and these standards are rooted in and influenced by the cultural traditions of the symbolic system (Greve, 2013; Parsons, 1968, 1970).

Ann Swidler (1986) questioned Weber-Parsons' theoretical tradition. She argued that culture acting as the value cannot explain the actions that people conduct in their daily lives. The influential power of culture has nothing to do with the value, culture acts as a repertoire or toolkit. People can employ toolkits to understand the meaning of the action and master the appropriate skills. People can also employ a proper tool from the toolkits to conduct their action strategy based on different situations.

In order to enhance this argument, Swidler proposed settled period and unsettled period as the model to explain the influential role of culture in individuals' actions. In settled periods, culture influences action by offering resources that enable people to develop various approaches. In contrast, in unsettled cultural periods, explicit ideologies directly and unconsciously influence actions, while the structural opportunities for action determine which competing ideologies endure

over time. Thereby, the relationship between culture and action seems to challenge the assumptions of the previously established rational choice theory and Weber's theories. Culture is no longer merely a constraint for individuals striving to achieve their goals. Instead, it transforms into a dynamic tool that individuals can reconstruct in response to the unsettled periods. Nevertheless, during the process of developing new cultural frameworks in the unsettled periods, individuals are constrained to create tools that align with the limits of their own capabilities.

Therefore, this study adopts culture in action as its main conceptual framework, viewing culture not as a fixed set of unified values, but as a flexible repertoire of tools that individuals selectively draw upon in different contexts. In the context of career development, culture plays a crucial role in two key aspects: first, the formation of action-oriented goals, in which internalized values help students construct clear directions for their future; and second, the strategic use of cultural tools, whereby students, as rational actors, employ personal values to make informed decisions during the transition from education to employment. Thus, this paper aims to answer two questions:

1. How did Chinese international students develop differentiated career paths during the transition from study to employment?
2. What kinds of behavior patterns do they construct through this process?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs constructivism as the epistemological foundation and hermeneutics as its research methodology. Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their own understanding. It is also an approach to learning in which individuals actively construct their knowledge through deep engagement (Elliott et al., 2000). In this study, constructivism facilitates the understanding of career paths differentiation, which is developed through both empirical exploration and theoretical construction (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, its aim is to explore the meaning behind human intentions, beliefs, and actions. Thus, the present study employs a case study approach, using in-depth interviews as the primary research instrument (Gomm et al., 2009).

### **Data Collection**

This study adopts a longitudinal approach, maintaining contact with the interviewees from the time of their enrollment until after their graduation and entry into the workforce. Interviewees were contacted on a bimonthly basis for brief conversations about their school life. In addition to conducting individual interviews, the study incorporated group interviews with the objective of capturing shared experiences and collective reflections among the interviewees. The group

interviews were conducted in the form of focus group discussions, held on a bi-monthly basis. Interviewees were divided into four groups (Groups A to D) based on the alphabetical order of their family names. Each group comprised five interviewees, with the exception of Group D, which contained six members. During the group interviews, interviewees were invited to share their experiences related to academic life, daily living, and challenges encountered during their studies. These sessions provided a forum for students to engage in collaborative reflection and the exchange of insights regarding prevalent issues and coping strategies. The combination of individual and group interviews facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of their university experiences and career planning processes.

A total of twenty-one interviewees of University M were observed over a brief yet intensive period, during which the interviewer was immersed in the daily lives of the interviewees, learning and working alongside each interviewee in their respective roles (see Appendix 1). These interviewees were drawn from the same class to ensure comparability in educational experience and institutional context. Besides, all interviewees were final-year students facing imminent career decisions, making them particularly vulnerable for examining transition-related decision-making processes.

This immersive approach was adopted to facilitate a nuanced understanding of the interviewees' experiences and decision-making processes. The study culminated in recorded interviews with everyone to ensure comprehensive interview data.

This study focuses on students who are pursuing Master's degrees rather than undergraduates, as undergraduates have the flexibility in choosing their career paths, whether to pursue further studies, enter the workforce, or return to academia after gaining work experience (Chen, 2011; Fu, 2024; Li, 2023). In contrast, enrolling in a Master's program is considerably more challenging, time-intensive, and financially demanding for postgraduate students. As a result, they are more likely to establish clear career goals before commencing their studies and making decisions based on a thorough evaluation process throughout their academic studies (Lin, 2020).

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic coding method was used as the analytical method. It is a widely used method for qualitative analysis that indicates data and identifies patterns and theories from the data, even with diverse subjects (Williams & Moser, 2019). There were three phases in data interpretation, the first phase of data analysis was open coding. In this initial stage, all transcripts were analyzed line by line, each line was labeled with an open code to describe the main idea of the transcript. The second phase was to categorize the open coding. During this procedure, all open

codes were categorized with similarities to generate the common pattern of hundreds of open codes. In the final phase, themes were extracted from different categories. The analysis aimed to align the interpretation as closely as possible with the interviewees' responses.

Therefore, constructivist grounded theory was used to elaborate on the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. This theory was developed by Kathy Charmaz (2017) who was a student of Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (Glaser et al., 1968; Strauss, 1987), constructivist grounded theory reshapes the interaction between the researcher and the participants during the research process, highlighting the idea of the researcher as a key creator of knowledge. Therefore, as the research plays a role in constructing the theory from the data, the researcher brings his or her idea or background theoretical knowledge to construct new theories or patterns from the data interpretation. To some extent, this process of data interpretation serves as an analytical method that repeatedly combines theoretical deduction and empirical induction, that is, constantly engaging with the vivid experience of the cases and relevant theories and gradually integrating the findings until a theoretical model with good explanatory power is formed.

The process of theory construction from the transcribed manuscripts in this study involves three steps. The first step entails a comprehensive examination of the text to gain a deep understanding of the interviewee's circumstances and viewpoints. The second and most challenging step is to conceptualize the themes or patterns that emerge from the data. While themes can be identified from the data, it is important to avoid merely enumerating them. Instead, the focus should be on conceptualizing and categorizing these themes within a broader theoretical background. The aim of this step is to develop a theoretical mechanism that can inform future research in the fields of international education and career decision-making.

## **RESULTS**

Two key themes that play an important role in influencing CIS' career outcomes emerged from qualitative data analysis: family influences and personal values. Family influences have different levels of importance to different interviewees, they reported that their parents' occupations and working experiences are two common factors that emerged from the data analysis. Personal values resonated with many interviewees, and they reported a variety of reasons including job stability, income, and personal interest as very influential in their career trajectory selection. Below presents the key themes that emerged from the analysis.

## Family Influences

Interviewees who participated in this study generally considered family influence is a major factor in influencing their career path selection. Interviewees reported that they chose their best career paths around their families. The interviewees' attitude of their families' influence on their decision to study abroad is described as: "good for future career development", "easy to find a job", and "promote employability". They consider studying abroad as a process to access the job market and have an opportunity to have a well-paying job in the future.

F2 is a girl from southern China with a cheerful personality. F2 expressed a desire for a stable and predictable life during the first interview. She described herself as rather ordinary and disliked the idea of a life filled with ups and downs. This outlook, she explained, was largely influenced by her parents, who were civil servants from a modest background.

F2 was raised in a family with parents working as civil servants. She became accustomed to this stable lifestyle and had a clear purpose for going abroad. She planned to obtain a Master's degree overseas and then return to her hometown to take the civil servant examination. F2 carefully examined the relationship between obtaining academic qualifications and occupational attainment. She mentioned, "Academic qualifications are not devalued, you just do not know how to connect academic qualifications and career paths." F2 emphasized that her family is not affluent, "My parents work as low-level civil servants. They would like to pay for my education and hope I will have a bright future. Maybe they also want me to work in a high-status job with better compensation, but I know it is a bit hard. You have to work smarter, and you need a bit of luck." F2 used the word "luck" to describe social mobility. In the following interview, she clarified that "luck" referred to the capital that students can accumulate through hard work and support from their parents. The linkage between academic qualifications and occupational decisions constituted the motivational aspect of F2's decision to study abroad. She followed the route of goal setting first and action-taking second. Additionally, F2 made an interesting statement regarding her parents' expectations: "Some Chinese parents are pushy, they expect their children to be dragons or phoenixes, but my parents prefer to advance one step at a time." The phrase "expecting one's son to be a dragon, and one's daughter to be a phoenix" is an adage in China, emphasizing Chinese parents' aspirations for their children's greatness and success. This adage also appeared in other interviewees' responses (i.e. F11, F4, and F6) when explaining their reasons for pursuing degrees overseas.

F11's parents have a relatively lower level of education background compared to F2's father, who holds a university diploma. F11's father is the sole breadwinner of the family. Although he did not have a high level of education himself, he places great importance on the transition from study to employment.

In the interview, F11 mentioned, “I just need a Master’s degree to increase my chances of getting a job in a big company. I do not want to waste my parents’ savings.” She views obtaining an academic qualification overseas as a means to improve her employment opportunities in a large company. F11’s steadfastness stems from her clear understanding of her family background and a strong sense of what she wants to achieve. She does not feel dissatisfied with her family or background because of her experience studying abroad. On the contrary, she has actively leveraged her abilities and her family’s support to improve her circumstances.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory of capital within his framework of social reproduction, the family serves as a key site for social reproduction, with one of its primary functions being the preservation of social privileges (Deer, 2003). One typical strategy to reproduce social privileges is parents’ involvement in their children’s education (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu et al., 2015).

F4 is a person who has working experiences after graduating from a Chinese university. She had obtained a Master’s degree in China before coming to Japan to study for a second Master’s degree. F4’s family background is similar to that of F2. F4’s father is a civil servant and her mother is a clerk. It is surprising that F4 mentioned many times in the interview that her parents wanted her to have a “stable” life. The word “stable” appeared twelve times in her interview, and this word belonged to the category she discussed when talking about the important decisions her father made for her. It is obvious that F4’s father hopes that his children can realize their life value according to the life plan he has designed, but F4 is obviously unwilling to cooperate with her father, she made the decision to go abroad.

In the follow-up interview with F4, the interviewer found that F4 did not have a clear idea of what to do after graduation. She mentioned in the interview, “I want to change my life. I think I will have a better life in Japan.”

F4’s parents did not interfere with her choice to go abroad because F4 has accumulated her own economic capital and can use her own money to complete the action of going abroad. However, she mentioned the words “do not want to work” as many as nine times in the interview, she literally avoided employment. According to the education-career development theory and life course theory (Blustein, 2001; Roberts, 1968), the transition from education to career development is an inevitable life stage, those who reject this trajectory risk occupying subordinate social positions. Thus, the role of family influence plays both positive roles and passive roles on students’ considerations for their future career.

## **Personal Values Shaped Through Studying Abroad**

The concept of work can be defined in various ways, and individuals with different experiences and educational backgrounds may hold different opinions on securing an occupation after completing their school education (Hao et al., 2016).

Chinese students studying abroad must consider two key factors in their decision-making process: the type of occupation to pursue and the location for their professional initiation (Huang & Turner, 2018). They face several possible options: they may choose to remain in Japan, return to China, or relocate to another country. While their international experience may appear to offer a more extensive array of possibilities in comparison to their peers who received their education domestically, these students also confront more intricate challenges when arriving at these decisions. These students must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of working overseas versus returning home. In doing so, they are required to evaluate the meaning of work and reflect on what they truly seek from their future occupations (Jackson, 2017; Tran et al., 2020). Drawing upon the insights gathered from twenty-one interviewees, this study identifies four values that CIS employ in defining the concept of work.

## **Material Needs**

According to the salary statistics from the Chinese working office, the average monthly salary of a graduate in China is from 6000 to 20,000 yuan (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security Information Center, 2025). The networking companies offer the highest salary to graduates, but one of the limitations of working in a networking company is that people have to work overtime and live under great pressure. Recent reports from China show that employees aged 35 and above often face the risk of layoffs (Meng & Sun, 2024; Zhou, 2024). Additionally, the ability to buy a house and live a harmonious life remains the common expectation for graduates in China (Zhang & Huang, 2023).

Interviewees M4 and F1 clearly stated that the ability to have a full-time employment contract with a big company is essential for them to develop their career and have a stable life. They noted that the primary purpose of securing employment after graduation is to achieve a stable life and maintain financial independence. They further emphasized that securing a good job in a company is more important than pursuing idealistic personal goals or dream jobs. In other words, they are willing to accept any job offers as long as the position offers a generous salary and provides an opportunity for a harmonious life. However, this does not mean that they would accept any kind of job without careful selection. Their job preferences are primarily influenced by the size and stability of the company. For instance, M4 mentioned that he prefers to work for a large company,

as he believes such companies offer better job security and lower the risk of unemployment due to bankruptcy.

M4 started working in real estate while he was a student at the university. When he was about to graduate, he did not have a clear goal for finding employment. He did not even really consider the meaning of work until his parents provided a definition for him that he could earn a lot of money while working for the company and be able to have a stable life. He accepted his parents’ ideas and considered the meaning of work as a way to earn money and live peacefully. He said in the interview that he had sent out more than 50 resumes to large Japanese companies during the job-hunting period and finally received an offer from a company in the catering industry.

F1 had the same opinion as M4 in the interview. F1 stated that her father suggested she find a job in Japan because her father told her that she could earn a higher salary as a graduate there. F1 had a discussion with her father before making the decision of whether to return home or stay in Japan to find a job. “My father learned from Liu (the son of F1’s father’s friend) that he earns about 200,000 yuan annually, which is higher than average graduate income in China.” In addition to the salary, F1 further stated that her father is concerned about the possibility of being laid off at the age of 35 in China.

F1: In fact, I do not have a strong desire to buy a house, but my father suggested that I should have one. It is probably the traditional concept for Chinese people that having a house means having roots.

F1 mentioned the word “house” five times in the interview. She chose to work in Japan because she could get a good salary, and she was likely to own her own house. She successfully got a job in a sporting goods company after she graduated from the university. Although she did not personally desire to buy a house or fully agree with her father’s belief that “one must own a house before getting married,” she still acknowledged his viewpoint. Her father’s notion that “a house gives one roots” is deeply grounded in traditional Chinese culture. This value system, influenced by Confucian familyism, reinforces expectations for adult children to prioritize stability, family responsibilities, and social legitimacy.

**Table 1: Two Behavior Pattern**

	Goal-driven Pattern	Opportunity-following Pattern
Interviewees	F2, F5, F6, F120, F11, M1, M3, M5, M6, M9	F1, F3, F4, F7, F8, F9, F12, M2, M4, M7, M8

## Family Responsibility

The education of the next generation is an important topic mentioned by the interviewees during the interview. In Chinese culture, filial piety is the most important component of the entire social morality, and having children has become an essential part of individual life development (Bislev & Li, 2014; Cimino, 2018). When discussing the meaning of work and the decision to stay abroad, the interviewees often referenced the importance of providing a better educational resource for the next generation.

F11: It costs a lot of money to raise a child. I am a woman, and I will definitely get married and have children in the future. One of the main reasons why I choose to work for an international company is to have sufficient financial resources to support my children's education expenses in the future.

F11's career decisions are not solely based on personal interests or capabilities, but are closely tied to a cultural vision of "what kind of mother I should become." Due to the fact that the enrolment rate and education quality of key schools<sup>1</sup> in China are higher than those of ordinary schools, some parents will probably buy apartments near key schools and obtain household registration in order to support their children to go to key schools and improve their university enrollment rate. The reason that parents will spend money on housing is that China has a special household registration system (*hukou*), and students can only enroll in such schools according to their *hukou*.

Although this system only affects students at the elementary school and junior high school, students are able to enroll in any high school as long as they meet the entrance requirements. However, China implements a nine-year compulsory education system, and this means that students are divided into two different schooling systems: they either follow the academic track to become university students or enter the vocational college to become blue-collar workers. M1s' parents consider that enrolling in the vocational school is a shame for the family, and they consider that having a university degree is a privilege and representation of social status.

Although M4 just started working and is not married, he starts to plan for the future at a very young age. He stated that his father instilled this kind of ideology of earning money and raising children in him when he turned 18. He also conveys an opinion that the higher the financial income, the more harmonious the family relationship and the better the future development of the children.

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<sup>1</sup> Key schools are state-selected elite institutions concentrating China's best educational resources, serving as gateways to prestigious universities.

## **Stable and Harmonious Life**

China experienced two big waves of layoffs from the 1990s until the present day. The first wave of layoffs began in the 1990s. At that time, state-owned enterprises accounted for a great proportion of China's economy. However, due to backward management, many state-owned enterprises faced a series of shocks brought about by the reform and opening up and had to carry out necessary reform measures after restructuring, which led to layoffs of employees (Ren, 1998). According to statistics, from 1998 to 2001, the total number of laid-off workers in state-owned enterprises nationwide reached 25.5 million (China Economic Weekly, 2008). In 2023, China experienced the second big wave of layoffs. With the influence of the pandemic outbreak, many businesses, such as catering industries, were forced to shut down and millions of people lost their jobs (Xu, 2023). In the framework of Bauman's "liquid modernity," these recurrent waves of layoffs reflect the growing instability and fluidity of the labor market. As companies and industries constantly evolve, workers increasingly become vulnerable to the unpredictable forces of economic change (Bauman, 2000).

Interviewees F2, F8, M3, and M4 mentioned that their parents suggested they find a job in the government to become a civil servant or work for a big company with a stable living condition. In addition, both F2 and F10 mentioned that the distance between the workplace and the place of residence should not be too far.

F2 considers that living with her family or her loved ones is the most important thing, and emotional ties account for an important proportion. This also reflects another traditional Chinese value: the pursuit of a harmonious life.

Harmonious life is the foundation of Chinese culture, and in the *Book of Rites*, it is said that "the body is the remains of the parents," which means that the body of children is given by their parents, and children are the continuation of their parents' lives (Dai, 2022). In the *Rules for Disciples*, there is also the saying that filial piety comes first, followed by sincerity and trustworthiness, which also strengthens the importance that Chinese people attach to family (Shi, 2006).

## **Individual Development: Personal Interest Development**

The value of work as a means of personal interest development is crucial for many interviewees. For some of them, a career is not only about securing financial stability or fulfilling societal expectations but also about pursuing passion and personal growth. They believe that work should provide a platform for continuous learning and self-improvement, where interests and skills evolve over time. F5 and F9 believe that it is essential to work in an industry that aligns with their personal interests, as they feel that sustaining long-term energy and passion in a career after graduation requires genuine enthusiasm. While they are eager to

explore different industries and secure positions within companies, they lack a clear understanding of the structures and dynamics of various sectors. In other words, they are searching for a job that aligns with their personal interests but do not have a well-defined strategy or sufficient knowledge to identify the most suitable opportunities. As a result, they feel somewhat directionless after obtaining their degree in Japan.

F5 likes playing games and watching entertainment news. In the first interview, she had just submitted her graduation thesis and was still looking for a job that interested her. Unlike F11, F2, and M4, who started to look for job opportunities before submitting their thesis, F5 has always focused on studying. As F11 once said in an interview, F5 has good academic performance and works hard on her studying. While F11, F2, and M4 have all found jobs in China or Japan, F5 has not yet determined which industry she wants to enter before returning to her hometown. "I know this sounds unrealistic. I think work is not only for making money. I want to find THE job that is not just for money, but that I am happy to do it."

The third follow-up interview was conducted months after F5 returned to her hometown. During this interview, F5 mentioned that she had submitted several job applications and was going to look for internships in some game and entertainment companies. She also mentioned that she is considering working as a part-time language teacher if she cannot find any other job.

F5's mother teaches at a college, and she knows that her mother works overtime every day, preparing teaching materials for classes, grading homeworks, and writing papers. Her mother was always busy with schoolwork and academic research. Therefore, F5 does not want to have a career in this field. However, she soon realized that she could not live independently without having financial support, she decided to work as a language teacher to earn some money to support her daily expenses. However, F5 also emphasized that she would not take teaching as a career goal, and she will continue to look for a job in which she feels interested.

F5's internal reasoning centers on a value of orientation grounded in personal interest. This self-driven motivation reflects a subjective construction of career meaning, contrasting with traditional Chinese values that prioritize stability, status, and income. However, despite expressing a strong preference for interest-based work, she had yet to formulate clear career goals or a concrete execution strategy. This suggests that her ability to translate intrinsic values into actionable choices remains constrained by external structural factors, such as limited job market knowledge and industry entry barriers.

M1 shares a similar viewpoint to F5 when he discusses the purpose of working in the interview. M1 and F5 did not have a personal connection with each other during seminars, and they did not even talk to each other outside of the class before graduation. However, when they were interviewed separately, M1 said exactly the same statement as F5.

M1 outlined multiple possibilities for his future career. On the one hand, he considered working in a relative's company, reflecting the influence of social relations and the significance of family expectations and networks. On the other hand, he expressed a strong desire to explore his personal interests through job searching, entrepreneurship, studying abroad, language training, or working in the nonprofit sector. This demonstrated his commitment to independent choice, which reflected his internal reasoning. Rather than presenting a direct conflict, the tension in M1's narrative reflects a strategic negotiation between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. While the opportunity provided by his relatives offers a stable and socially accepted path, he also seeks to affirm his self-worth through diverse, interest-driven exploration.

### **THEORETICAL FINDING: TWO BEHAVIOR PATTERNS**

The decision to choose a career is indeed a complex process influenced by various factors. Previous studies have typically analyzed these reasons from an objective perspective employing different theoretical frameworks such as the push-pull model, Bourdieu's theory, and self-determination theory to explore the influence of family background and other elements in decision-making. In contrast, this study adopts an inductive approach, using interviews with CIS in Japan to explore their attitudes from their own perspectives. Through this qualitative analysis, two distinct behavior patterns emerged, offering deeper insight into the cultural influences shaping students' actions. These findings align with the core theoretical framework of cultural toolkits, highlighting how cultural tools inform CIS' study abroad decisions.

Following scholars like Alma Gottlieb (2004) and Roy G. D'Andrade (2004), this study emphasizes that cultures are structured systems rather than random assortments of customs, beliefs, and values. These systems shape behavior by providing individuals with a framework for evaluating appropriate actions in social contexts. Parents, as primary transmitters of culture, reinforce these frameworks by guiding their children's approaches to daily challenges (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Gottlieb, 2004).

Moreover, this study highlights the role of internal reasoning, making influenced by personal experiences and external conditions. Understanding this internal reasoning is crucial to interpreting the two identified behavior patterns, as it reflects how individuals selectively employ tools from their cultural toolkits in making decisions and shaping their career attitudes.

The first behavior pattern is the "goal-driven pattern," exemplified by F2 and F11 (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). This pattern is characterized by a clear understanding of family capabilities, a careful evaluation of personal strengths, and future planning based on both individual experiences and the economic and cultural capital available from their families. These individuals set

goals and take deliberate actions to achieve them, relying on their own efforts to reach their desired outcomes.

The second pattern is the “opportunity-following pattern,” represented by M8 and F4 (see Table 1). Interviewees in this category acknowledge their family background and recognize their parents’ role in the decision-making process, but their responses to parental influence vary. Some are more inclined to follow their parents’ advice but lack a clear goal for their time abroad. Others resist their parents’ guidance, viewing studying abroad as an opportunity for personal transformation. However, those in this group often lack a structured plan for career development post-graduation, reflecting a more passive approach to career planning.

Although these two behavior patterns were developed through interviews and observations, their conceptualization is formed by two theoretical perspectives. The first is family background (Bourdieu et al., 2015; Deer, 2003). Family background influences individuals’ perceptions of academic achievement, personal values, and career development. Researchers used to argue that parents from different social backgrounds shape their children’s aspirations by providing them with a sense of what feels natural or attainable. Additionally, the resources children inherit, whether cultural, social, or economic, significantly shape their behaviors and life choices.

The second theoretical perspective is the concept of “cultural toolkits,” proposed by Ann Swidler. Swidler conceptualizes culture not as a coherent system of values but as toolkits that individuals can strategically utilize when needed. She further distinguishes between settled and unsettled periods. In settled periods, individuals rely on established cultural tools to formulate strategies for achieving their goals. In unsettled periods, they must acquire new cultural tools and adapt their actions to navigate unfamiliar circumstances, often becoming more susceptible to external ideologies and influences. In the context of this study, the pre-departure phase of Chinese students can be viewed as a “settled” period. Some students, particularly those with strong academic aspirations and long-term career planning, perceive studying abroad as a useful tool and intentionally incorporate it into their cultural toolkits. For these goal-driven pattern students, the decision to study abroad is guided by a purposeful selection and combination of cultural tools. In contrast, opportunity-following pattern students do not undergo such a process. They tend to make decisions without clearly evaluating how studying abroad might function as a strategic tool for future advancement. Based on these differences in intentionality and tool selection, this study develops two behavior patterns to explain the mechanism behind Chinese students’ career decision: opportunity-following pattern and goal-driven pattern.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed that family backgrounds play a crucial role in influencing students' decisions to study abroad and future career choice. Two contrasting family patterns emerged after the analysis. At one end of the spectrum were families that led harmonious, stable lives and place relatively low expectations on their children, simply hoping they live well and become decent, respectable individuals. These families tended to align with traditional Chinese values that emphasize harmony and a balanced life over competition or ambition.

On the opposite end were families in which parents took a highly interventionist approach, designing the future paths for their children with great detail and strategic planning. In the Chinese cultural context, parents often continue to worry and plan for their children's lives well into adulthood (Liang, 2005). For instance, F4's father hoped she would study law and work in the courts, and F4's father strategically applied various strategies to shape this path. Therefore, the factor of family influence identified in this study help to explain the process of decision-making regarding career-decision making. This finding deepens the understanding of how individuals draw on their cultural toolkits and adopt different strategies when making such decisions.

Additionally, personal internal reasoning also plays a significant role in shaping values regarding work. While international students may be able to maximize their subjective initiative in their career choices post-graduation, they must also consider two factors when making what is often referred to as the 'choice': (1) the establishment of values that are conducive to their career development and (2) the utilization of cultural tools to achieve their objectives. The findings of this study demonstrate that the capacity to utilize cultural tools in the pursuit of one's objectives is systematically associated with the motivations behind studying abroad and the family background of each student.

This study adopted the model of culture in action to investigate how CIS develop differentiated career paths through the interpretation and transformation of personal background and values. Building on this theoretical lens, the study identified two behavior patterns: the goal-driven pattern and the opportunity-following pattern.

Although these two patterns explained why students have different career paths, the process of cultural adaptation and value realignment remains only partially understood. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal design that traces how value orientations shift over time, both during and after students' international education experience.

In sum, while this study contributes to understanding how cultural tools and value systems shape career outcomes for CIS, it also opens up a space for future research to further explore the moral dimension of cultural action, the limits

and possibilities of internal reasoning under structural constraints, and the diverse institutional settings that shape international education experiences.

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