

Career Considerations When Working with Chinese International Students

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Abstract: The number of international students in the United States is on the rise. China is the largest home country of international students in the United States. However, there was little research that pertains to Chinese international students' experiences in the U.S. with career counseling services. Using a Contextual Action Theory model of culturally sensitive career practice (Young et al., 2007), this article aimed to address the unique career development needs and challenges faced by Chinese international students. As a global crisis, the COVID-19 has also brought extra challenges for Chinese international students. This article provided applications for career counselors and professionals to help this population navigate career choice and decision-making. Implications for research, career counseling, and career services professionals were addressed as well.

In the United States, the number of international students has increased every year except 2019/20 (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). There were 1,075, 496 international students in the United States in 2019/2020, combining those in Optional Practical Training (OPT) and academic programs, according to the IIE (2020). More than half of international students come from China (35%) and India (18%; IIE, 2020). China is the largest host country of international students in the United States (IIE, 2020) and one of the leading sources of STEM students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2019). Higher education institutions obtain financial benefits through recruiting international students since they pay a significantly higher tuition fee. International students usually pay twice the tuition fees compared to domestic students. They contributed over \$45 billion dollars to the United State economy in 2018 (Admissionsly, 2021). Recruiting international students strengthens the culturally diverse learning environment and contributes to the economic benefits of the institutions (Arthur &

Flynn, 2013). Consistent with the increasing number of Chinese international students, there is a growth in providing effective career counseling to Chinese international students (Balin et al., 2016; Luo, 2013; Shen & Herr, 2004).

Unique Career Development Needs of Chinese International Students

In line with the enrollment growth of Chinese international students in universities, the demand for career services is also increasing. However, the Work Education Services (WES) reported that more than half (51%) of current East Asian international students had not used career services, and correspondingly, only 41% of all international students utilize career services (Loo et al., 2017). Similarly, 64% of Asian international students' participants show their needs for academic and career help but never use the career counseling services in their universities (Singaravelu et al., 2005). Only 53.5% (46 out of 86) of Chinese international students from two British universities have considered their future occupations, and compared with British

students (83.5%), they have much less consideration for future careers (Zhou & Santo, 2007). Crockett and Hays (2011) found three themes of unique career needs for international students: career placement, seeking help, and individual factors as the mediating factor between career needs and barriers. Lertora and Sullivan (2019) demonstrated that Chinese international students preparing for the university-to-work transition have five main themes, including hard-working, family connections, stress, the importance of social support, and uncertainty about the transition. Chinese international students also expressed the need to receive multicultural competent career counseling services (Li et al., 2021). Indeed, career services are in high demand for Chinese international students.

Chinese international students would seek career counseling when they suffered a realistic setback, such as unemployment and struggles with finance (Li et al., 2021). They would be more motivated if the career counseling produces positive outcomes, in other words, outcome-driven activities are important to them (Li et al., 2021). Yang et al. (2002) demonstrated different ways for career practitioners to meet the unique needs of international students, including placing career services within the cultural background, knowledge of professional literature, and ongoing training. However, Shen and Herr (2004) indicated that international graduate students tend to get help from their academic field rather than taking advantage of career services in universities, because of their negative perceptions of limited services provided by career services. This is consistent with Chinese international students' negative attitudes and expectations toward career services (Li et al., 2021). Unfamiliarity with career services also leads to the low utilization of career services (Loo et al., 2017).

A gap exists in culturally sensitive career counseling with Chinese international students. This article aims to use the six steps of

Contextual Action Theory (Young et al., 2007) to recognize the unique challenges and needs of Chinese international students, and meanwhile, to provide culturally sensitive career counseling for this population. First, this paper provides knowledge about the unique challenges and needs of Chinese international students. Second, the application of Contextual Action Theory as a method is outlined to help this population in career counseling. Third, implications for practitioners, counselor educators, and future research are addressed.

Unique Career Development Challenges Faced by Chinese International Students

With the increase in the number of Chinese international students, the need of providing effective career services to them is also increasing. There is a growing demand for understanding their challenges and meeting their needs as well. The unique challenges faced by international students including the influence of the pandemic (Chirikov & Soria, 2020), adjustment problems (Kim et al., 2001; Kronholz, 2014; Linkeš et al., 2018), language barriers (Balin et al., 2016; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007), lack of supports (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011), discrimination (Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Wu et al., 2015), and work restrictions.

As of the end of May 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected over 169 million people worldwide, with more than 3.5 million people dying (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine [JHU], 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has become a global crisis, which has a destructive influence on the job market. Over sixty percent of undergraduate and graduate international students reported concerns about travel restrictions and managing visa status (Chirikov & Soria, 2020). Besides, they were also concerned about the financial support to obtain health services for COVID-19. Twenty-five percent of international students worried about personal safety, meanwhile, some international students experienced intimidating, hostile, and

offensive behaviors during the pandemic, which is higher among East Asian international students (Chirikov & Soria, 2020).

Gati et al. (1996) proposed a career decision making difficulty framework, consisting of three categories: lack of readiness, lack of information, and inconsistent information. This three-group classification system is supported by the data from a Chinese version by Tien (2001). She specifically considered the cultural context based on the original framework.

Chinese international students are different from some other international students according to their cultural and collectivistic backgrounds. Chinese culture is collectivistic oriented. Chinese culture, values, and beliefs may have an impact on the career choices of Chinese international students. Family structure is very clear and strict in China, and people respect authority (Kim et al., 2001). There are also Confucian values, filial piety, which prefer individuals to be humble and behaving well, which explains the negative attitude towards counseling (Kim et al., 2001). Because of the suppression of full expression of emotions, educational and occupational achievement, Chinese international students hold back from seeking help from both mental health counseling and career counseling (Castillo & Phoummarath, 2006; Singaravelu et al., 2005).

Cultural adjustment is considered a significant influencing factor for international students' experience. Reynolds and Constantine (2007) indicated that greater cross-cultural concerns are the predictors of lower career aspirations and career outcome expectations. International students may encounter various difficulties, such as cultural shock, homesickness, isolation, loneliness, and a confusion between family expectations and role expectations in the United States (Dao et al., 2007; Kronholz, 2014; Linkeš et al., 2018). These difficulties become manifest in several academic, social-cultural, and personal

concerns (Yan & Berliner, 2011). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the status of Chinese international students has changed after they move to the United States. Most Chinese international students belong to the majority group in China. However, they have to transfer from the majority group to the minority group in the United States (Ota, 2013), which may create adjustment and mental health issues. Those factors significantly represent lack of readiness in the career decision difficulty model (Gati et al., 1996).

Lack of information includes three subcategories: lack of information about self, lack of information about occupations, and lack of information about ways of obtaining additional information (Gati et al., 1996). It summarizes the significant difficulties faced by Chinese international students. English proficiency is a significant variable of studies on mental health and career services (Li et al., 2016). Language proficiency is a significant barrier for international students in their career development (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Balin et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2015). Particularly, Chinese international students are more likely to struggle with English in the United States (Loo et al., 2017). Furthermore, international students may feel inconsistency between English-speaking capacity and confidence to speak English (Linkeš et al., 2018). Reynolds and Constantine (2007) found that some non-native English-speaking international students may pursue careers that have low requirements in English proficiency, such as jobs in STEM fields. Besides, international students experience discrimination in the United States. Non-native English speakers with a strong accent may experience an increase in the rates of discrimination and prejudice (Linkeš et al., 2018). American students showed negative attitudes towards international students because they worried that international students threaten their economic, educational, social status, etc. (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). International students were

marginalized in class and in social events since they noted prejudice and discrimination in academic and social lives (Wu et al., 2015).

Usually, Chinese international students who study abroad by themselves are challenged without a key relationship to support them. International students did not know how to find the important resources related to international hiring (Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011). Bertram et al. (2014) found that Chinese international students tend to get support from their families and friends when facing challenges and difficulties; however, social support is limited in the United States. It seemed that the most common support resource for Chinese international students is peers from their country (Cao et al., 2021). So, it may be a potential barrier for them when looking for jobs without strong networking. Popadiuk and Arthur (2014) identified six themes for key relationships to help international students to reach out and get support in their research: building strong friendships to get support, group effort on career decisions, career opportunities expanded by supervisors/mentors, establishing relational networks to find jobs, starting connections early, and international alumni as role models. These themes particularly apply to Chinese international students who usually had high academic stress and employment pressure.

The primary career concern of international students is in successfully finding jobs (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Singaravelu et al., 2005). However, international students have limited opportunities to work in the United States compared to American students, which demonstrates difficulties caused by inconsistent information. They only have one year to work in the United States after graduation through optional practical training (OPT). Students in STEM majors have a two-year OPT extension (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020). If they could not get a work visa (H1-B) during this period, they would have to leave the United States. The

limited working opportunities create extra challenges for Chinese international students' career development. International students may face the stress to limit their career choices due to visa restrictions. Students may be confused about how these policies affect their career development (Luo, 2013). Concurrently, all international students, employers, and career services providers have expressed a lack of knowledge of work authorization (Balin et al., 2016).

Although research had demonstrated that the unique career development challenges of international students (Arthur & Flynn, 2013; Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Linkeš et al., 2018; Singaravelu et al., 2005), only a few articles addressed the career development issues of Chinese international students (Lertora & Sullivan, 2019; Li et al., 2021). Chinese culture is particularly different from Western culture, so providing culturally sensitive career counseling to Chinese international students is an essential and immediate necessity.

Implementing effective career counseling to intercultural individuals is different from providing services from the majority population (Pope, 2011). Yang et al. (2002) discussed twelve points to meet the needs of international students when developing and providing career services. These important points emphasized addressing the unique needs of international students and placing career counseling within the cultural context (Yang et al., 2002). Several culturally sensitive career models are proposed to provide effective counseling for minority populations and international students. Pope (2011) developed a Career Counseling with Underserved Population (CCUSP) model to help underserved populations communicate their important issues in career counseling based on his previous research and special interventions. Arthur and Popadiuk (2010) proposed using a cultural formulation approach as the theoretical framework for career counselors to consider the role of cultural influence in career

counseling. The cultural formulation approach is modified for career counseling based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* fourth edition (*DSM-IV*) (American Psychiatric Association, 2004) guidelines, which consists of four aspects: (a) self and cultural identity; (b) self and cultural conception of career problems; (c) self in cultural context; and (d) cultural dynamic in the therapeutic relationship (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Although limited approaches exist to provide effective career counseling for international students, research shows Chinese international students' expectations towards career counseling may explain the disconnection between career needs and service utilization among Chinese international students (Li et al., 2021). Researchers found that Chinese international students as delayed help-seekers held inaccurate negative expectations, desired to participate in outcome-driven activities, and receive culturally competent career counseling (Li et al., 2021). This article will use six steps of Contextual Action Theory as a tool for career counselors when working with Chinese international students.

Contextual Action Theory

Career counselors need to provide effective career counseling services to meet Chinese international students' unique career needs. Contextual Action Theory believes that individuals construct their lives through human actions that focus on joint action (Young & Domene, 2012; Young & Valach, 1996; Young et al., 2002). Young et al. (2007) proposed six actual steps to develop local and particular career theories that are more culturally sensitive based on the contextual explanation of career development and counseling. Using these six steps of Contextual Action Theory provides counselors with a more intentional and contextual perspective when working with Chinese international students in career counseling.

Contextual Action Theory conceptualizes career development as a goal-directed and intentional process where people create meanings through actions that are taken together with others (Young & Domene, 2012, 2018; Young et al., 2002). The theory also highlights the importance of attending to meaningful aspects of people's life in order to give contexts in understanding and facilitating their career development (Domene et al., 2019). This intentional, goal-oriented, and contextual explanation of career development emphasizes joint action, which integrates the cultural context and current underlying career concerns including plans, goals, and agency (Domene et al., 2019; Young et al., 2002). This explanation also moves beyond the notion of environmental and structural career context to an understanding of context that emphasizes the meanings that people attribute to their circumstances. (Young et al., 2002). In career counseling, clients and counselors can use these contextual explanations and intentional, goal-directed actions, to facilitate the client's career developments.

According to the Contextual Action Theory, the six steps help develop local or particular career theories that are more culturally sensitive, which could be applied broadly (Young et al., 2007). The six steps of the Contextual Action Theory (Young et al., 2007) include:

1. *Understanding the culture: Understanding the ongoing shared and common process of actions, projects, and careers between generations.*
2. *Establishing links between culture and career: Constructing actions and giving meanings to individual's linked career and culture. Career refers to managed lifelong actions by creating meaning and directions in lives.*
3. *Beginning with narrative and folk explanations: Recognizing the explanations of actions and the order of actions.*

4. *Using naive observations in local communities:* Observing actions is to conceptualize theories about actions and careers in particular cultures.
5. *Recognizing ongoing process:* Identifying the ongoing processes involved in these actions based on the last step.
6. *Systematically analyzing naive observations and ongoing processes:* Submitting people's observations and reports about career-related actions and ongoing processes to systematic analysis. Systematic analysis moves the theory building from only narrative descriptions of participants to detailed descriptions of action and projects, which is consistent with evidence and conceptualization (Young et al., 2001). This step is an explanatory process between the observation and the framework of intentional, goal-directed action (Young et al., 2001).

Understanding culture is consistent with two key elements of the Pope’s CCUSP model (Pope, 2011). Pope (2011) proposes that knowing the process of cultural identity development and the special issues of special cultures reflects the understanding and response to culture. Establishing links between culture and career, beginning with narrative and folk explanations, and using naive

observations in local communities to explain the observation and recognition of self and cultural conceptions are congruent with the recent research of Arthur and Popadiuk (2010). They integrate the cultural formation approach to career counseling that emphasizes self/cultural identity, and self/cultural conceptions of career problems (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010). Recognizing the ongoing process and subjecting native observations and reports of the ongoing process of systematic analysis stress on giving meaning to the ongoing career development process within a contextual environment (Young et al., 2007). The self in cultural text and cultural dynamics in therapeutic relationships, which recognizes the ongoing process and outcomes of cross-cultural counseling (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010).

Considering the growing number of Chinese international students in the United States, implementing the Contextual Action Theory in career counseling increases understanding and allows counselors to work with their clients more effectively. Using this framework in career counseling for Chinese international students has the potential to better serve these students and increase service-seeking behavior. When working with Chinese international students, I suggest translating the six steps to the following:

Table 1
The Contextual Theory for Chinese International Students

Steps	Chinese international student specific
Understanding the culture	Learning the Chinese culture from an ongoing perspective
Establishing links between culture and career	Understanding the influence of Chinese culture on career choices; connecting culture with personal career development
Beginning with narrative and folk explanations	Fully understanding the nature of Chinese folk explanation and how it contributes to the cultural meaning of career
Using naïve observations in local communities	Uncovering the intentions of Chinese international students within the cultural context

Recognizing ongoing process	Identifying the continuous process of Chinese international students' career development instead of a stand-alone event
Systematically analyzing naive observations and ongoing processes	Making meanings and systematically analyzing career problems between the collected information and intentional, goal-oriented actions.

Counselors need to consider one's identity within the cultural background when working with Chinese international students. Understanding the Chinese culture involves the individuals' identity within their dominant culture. Yang et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of understanding cultural context, which contributes to providing better career services for Asian international students. Establishing links between culture and career involves knowledge about the cultural influence on the career development of Chinese international students. International students have different needs from American students, and a higher need for career counseling than domestic peers (Crockett & Hays, 2011). Therefore, counselors need to consider one's identity within the cultural background when working with Chinese international students. These two steps help career professionals to connect Chinese international students with their unique career needs, which are distinguished from other groups.

One must begin with Chinese cultural explanation, narratives, and observation within the local culture. As previously mentioned, the collectivistic culture has a significant influence on the career development of Chinese international students (Lee et al., 2018). However, their identities may be shaped by the current environment in the United States. The career needs and difficulties are different for every student, which is mediated by familial and community obligations and acculturation levels (Crockett & Hays, 2011). The adjustment problems, cross-cultural transitions, visas, legal issues, and academic stress may greatly shape their conception of career problems (Arthur &

Popadiuk, 2010; Li et al., 2021; Linkeš et al., 2018). For example, Nadermann and Eissenstat (2018) indicated that acculturation and networking predict career decision-making self-efficacy. Career counselors need to understand the cultural background of Chinese international students; meanwhile, their personal experience and acculturation level contribute to multiculturally competent career counseling.

One must also recognize the ongoing process of career development for Chinese international students by identifying the continuous process rather than a stand-alone event. Career development is a complex process that includes numerous career-related actions taken over time to achieve goals (Domene et al., 2019; Young & Domene, 2018; Young et al., 2007). The perception of the career development of Chinese international students is an ongoing process within different contexts. The intentional actions may be shaped by the environment and structural factors, such as acculturation and family environment. Besides, the negative expectation and misconception of international students towards counseling disconnect their demands from career services (Li et al., 2021; Shen & Herr, 2004). The professionals need to recognize the process of Chinese international students' career development in and outside counseling sessions.

When working with Chinese international students, counseling professionals can view their problems from an ongoing and systematic perspective. The Contextual Action Theory not only considers feedback from participants who have contributed to the projects but also systematically analyzes the actions via different tools, such as social meaning and internal

processes (Young et al., 2007). Career services have the responsibility to link academic and social systems and to help international students adapt themselves to the outside world (Luo, 2013). Personal and environmental factors are inseparable. The career theory that facilitates the career development of Chinese international students is not just the actions or narratives of the participants. It is a sophisticated description of action and conceptualization through systematic analysis. So, it is essential to keep a systematic perspective in career counseling.

Conclusion

Providing culturally sensitive career counseling to Chinese international students is important to meet their unique needs according to their challenges and demands (Lertora & Sullivan, 2019), especially during the pandemic. Applying the six steps of the Contextual Action Theory (Young et al., 2007) proposes a new framework for career counselors to provide effective career services. This theory is a systematic approach to investigate internal, goal-directed action. Practitioners who work with Chinese international students can use the six steps of the Career Action Theory to gain a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and how to provide culturally sensitive career counseling. Chinese international students can benefit from working with career counselors who have the knowledge and awareness of their unique challenges and needs. Also, effective counseling promotes the career development of Chinese international students. It enables counselor educators to incorporate the knowledge about the Chinese context into their training process, which increases the multicultural competencies of counsel-in-training through clinical practice in their programs.

Although the Contextual Action Theory was used to investigate career development in other groups (Young et al., 2003), it has not been applied to Chinese international students yet. Future research is called for to examine the

effectiveness of the six steps based on the Career Action Theory applying to Chinese international students. Qualitative research designs are recommended to understand the cultural impact on Chinese international students. They also provide a narrative way to understand the family influence on the career development of Chinese international students. Furthermore, psychometric research on career instruments was used to check the effectiveness of this model. Chinese international students could benefit more from career counseling from a culturally competent counselor, who is aware of and understands their challenges. The culturally sensitive career theory potentially provides a positive impact on their lived experience of career counseling.

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