

# Bridging Cultures in Career Guidance: Toward a Contextualized Coaching Model for Chinese University Students

Wanlu Yin

Jiangxi Institute of Applied Science and Technology, China  
PhD Candidate, Royal Roads University, Canada  
Lu.lyin@royalroads.ca

**Abstract:** In recent years, growing confusion among Chinese university<sup>1</sup> graduates about how to plan their career paths has drawn considerable public attention. As a result, more career coaching models and tools have been adopted in practice. However, as such career coaching models rooted in Western paradigms continue to expand globally, their direct application in non-Western contexts often leads to cultural misalignment. This study explores the development of a culturally grounded coaching model tailored to Chinese university students, whose career development is shaped by distinct sociocultural, relational, and philosophical influences.

## Introduction

In a complex environment where individuals, families, society, culture, and historical backgrounds are intertwined, Chinese undergraduate students often feel lost and confused (Jin, 2025). First, China's rapid economic transformation has expanded career opportunities while intensifying competition, leaving many undergraduates without clear plans and vulnerable to anxiety. Second, misconceptions such as underestimating the importance of career planning, neglecting self-analysis, and setting unrealistic expectations further contribute to their confusion (Han, 2011). Concurrently, the combined influences of individual aspirations, family expectations, societal pressures, cultural values, and historical legacies create tensions, such as balancing individual agency with collective harmony, that complicate students' career decisions. According to the 2024 College Student Employment Survey Report released by the

Information Center of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (2024) of China, 19.1% of recent graduates experienced delays in securing employment. The same report also indicated that 36.2% of graduates attributed their lack of job offers to personal reasons, stating that they were "too confused," which represented the highest proportion.

University students are typically in the preparation stage of career development. At this stage, they require professionals to provide targeted and systematic guidance that facilitates their progression from cognition and exploration to preparation and eventual choice (Shi, 2010). Career coaching offers one potential solution. The integration of coaching techniques into college students' employment guidance and career education practices can effectively promote job matching for college students (Ye, 2014). However, career coaching efforts often remain superficial in practice, lacking specificity and personalization. Consequently, they are unable to support the development of

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term *Chinese university students* refers specifically to students who were raised and educated in mainland China.

long-term career plans, and their effects are difficult to sustain (Ye, 2014). This review aims to explore more in-depth and effective career coaching models that align with the actual needs of Chinese undergraduate students in an ever-changing era.

### **History of Career Coaching**

Career coaching has gained increasing attention in the 21st century, particularly in the context of college student employment. Nevertheless, it remains a relatively new field. While research on career guidance and coaching has been conducted since 1909 and the 1960s, respectively, career coaching as an academic discipline has only emerged recently. To date, relatively few high-quality studies or extensive datasets focused specifically on career coaching have been published. However, considerable overlaps are evident with other disciplines, and when the available evidence is synthesized, the overall picture is compelling (Yates, 2022). Research on career coaching remains limited, particularly regarding its application in different cultural contexts. The concept, understanding, and application of coaching are constantly evolving, as coaching remains a relatively “young” profession (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020).

Among all existing definitions of career coaching, this study uses the version proposed by Bachkirova (2014): coaching is a human development process involving structured, focused interaction using appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques for desirable, sustainable change. Career coaching supports intrinsic value exploration, enhances students’ motivation, and facilitates result-oriented action (Double Knot, 2024). These characteristics suggest that such an approach may help address the challenges faced by Chinese university students, including unclear career directions, limited intrinsic motivation, and uncertainty about how to proceed. However, in practice, fully adopting the coaching role as defined by the International Coach Federation (ICF) may not be feasible. The ICF defines coaching as partnering with

clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020). One key aspect of the coaching role is that coaches do not provide advice or solutions directly. As practitioners, they often take on multiple roles when supporting clients in finding and keeping a job, as well as making their next career decisions. Therefore, career coaching represents the act of providing career-related support (Maietta, 2022), such as planning and guidance, rather than merely applying coaching techniques. In other words, when engaging in career coaching, it is not feasible to separate coaching from career-related support; coaching techniques are instead integrated throughout the communication process and the pursuit of outcomes.

### **Culturally Appropriate Career Coaching in China**

If career theories and interventions are to be used effectively by counselors, they must reflect the complexity and specificity of the cultural environment (Young et al., 2007). Stead (2004) criticized most existing career theories, arguing that many reflect extreme Western ethnocentric views. He believed that theoretical concepts in the career field must be meaningful and important within the specific culture in which they are formed. In other words, career theory must be based on an understanding of a culture’s specific features.

Chinese culture has a profound historical background and is a fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Confucius (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, as cited in Wang, 2015) emphasized that personal cultivation is the foundation of family, state, and societal governance. The humanism aspect of Confucianism emphasizes that the goal of personal practice is to extend care from society inward to the self. We must consider the harmony and stability of the family, as well as of social and cultural systems, to realize our career dreams (Jin & Huang, 2020). Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties

inculcated Chinese Buddhist and Taoist philosophies and emphasized the Confucian concept of establishing one's destiny. Zhang Zai (11<sup>th</sup> century, as cited in Wang, 2005) proposed the idea of "establishing the mind for heaven and earth, securing life for the people, continuing the teachings of the past sages, and bringing peace to all generations," highlighting the social responsibility embedded in Confucianism. During this period, as Confucianism continued to flourish and Neo-Confucianism developed in the Song and Ming dynasties, Yangming's Philosophy of Mind emerged. Philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529) emphasized "heart is reason," "unity of knowledge and action," and "cultivating conscience." He advocated that a person's inner conscience serves as a moral compass, that cognition and practice should be unified, and that both self-improvement and social responsibility can be attained through inner cultivation. According to Wang Yangming, "The way of the sages is inherently comprehensible through one's own intuition." This aligns with modern coaching's emphasis on raising clients' self-awareness. The coaching task defined by the ICF involves partnering with clients in a structured, ethical, and goal-focused manner to elicit insight, promote self-directed growth, and achieve meaningful outcomes (Passmore, 2020). Coaching engagements typically last a few months (Passmore, 2020). Practitioners should remain mindful of avoiding prolonged dependency while helping clients gradually discover their own strengths. From this perspective, Wang Yangming may be seen as a pioneer of Eastern coaching, advocating the unity of knowledge and action and the belief that individuals can act as their own coaches. Therefore, I believe that Confucius and Wang Yangming laid the philosophical foundations for Chinese career development and coaching, respectively, which are approaches that are more culturally resonant for Chinese individuals.

Hofstede's cultural dimension theory provides a useful framework for understanding Chinese culture (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede

proposed that China is characterized by high power distance, collectivism, high tolerance for uncertainty, long-term orientation, and restraint. In a collectivistic culture such as that of China, individual actions are influenced by social factors, and career decisions are shaped by attitudes that favor interdependence, personalized relationships, and harmony (Hofstede, 2001). In the context of maintaining social harmony, the teachings of Confucius clearly articulate the relationship between individuals and society and emphasize that personal pride lies in contributing to societal well-being: cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and maintaining peace and happiness for all (修身 齐家 治国 平天下) (Confucius, 4th century BCE, as cited in Wang, 2015). Rooted in this Confucian wisdom, the Chinese approach to career development follows a unique and clear path.

In conclusion, traditional Confucianism maintains a strong foothold across various Chinese societies and must be considered in career development practices. Given that most extant career theories have been developed in Western contexts, career research and practice in Chinese contexts should be culturally adapted to ensure local relevance (Fan, 2016).

### **Challenges and Emerging Local Frameworks**

In terms of tools and methods, coaching is relatively more action-oriented. It fosters self-reliance and self-responsibility and promotes optimism and hope. The Hope Action Theory (Niles et al., 2011) was translated and published in China in 2023 and has since drawn the attention of professionals in colleges and universities, who have begun integrating it into practice. The theory encourages individuals to pursue the "flow experience" and engage in "self-clarification" to develop a personalized career vision. When setting career goals based on the Hope Action Theory, clients can make career decisions in a positive, confident, and hopeful manner (Double Knot, 2024). As a

recent advancement in the context of career development frameworks in the United States and Canada, this theory offers a clear methodology for progressing from hope to action. It also serves as an important reference for my research.

In practice, career coaching interventions often follow a staged approach. However, the order in which various career considerations should be addressed (e.g., self-clarity, career-goal clarity) remains unclear, indicating uncertainty regarding which client resources are most relevant at different stages (Ebner, 2021). To address this, Ebner (2021) suggests using the Career Resources Model as a process framework for career coaching. She highlights that psychological and identity resources, in particular, can be developed during career coaching interventions. These resources differ from human capital resources (e.g., education) and social resources (e.g., networks), which are less amenable to change within a single intervention. While it is challenging to build human capital and social resources in a short time, the more pressing issue is clients' limited awareness of their existence. For example, most college students in China do not link their academic projects to practical experience, nor do they view their friends and family as social resources. With appropriate guidance in these two areas, students can quickly develop better cognitive skills and self-confidence.

Although some frameworks and theories about career coaching have been proposed globally, indigenous theoretical models and assessment instruments within the Chinese context remain limited.

Existing literature on the career development of Asian and Chinese individuals suggests that their career decisions are often shaped by family and parental expectations (Young et al., 2003; Leung et al., 2010; Hu, 2018). Thus, a relational perspective encompassing the influence of family on career development is critical in Chinese communities. In many Asian and Chinese communities, career choices and work-

related issues can seldom be separated from relationship dynamics. Family-related considerations and expectations can create conflicts and dilemmas while also providing vital meaning and support for the individual (Young et al., 2003). For example, Fouad et al. (2008) found that the families of Asian American participants influenced their career decisions and shaped the values that they assigned to work and career. Their study identified several qualitative themes on family influences, including family expectations, support, family obligations, family as a safe in-group, familial expectations about the role of work, and cultural friction between family and American values. Another study by Leung et al. (2010), conducted with university student groups in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Wuhan, similarly found that parental expectations affected career decision-making. This study suggested that it is important for counselors to help students communicate with their parents so that they can discuss, understand, and shape parental expectations. The primary goal of career counseling interventions should be to assist students in responding to various forms of social expectations while also pursuing career and educational paths that meet their individual needs (Leung et al. 2010). Although this study focuses on career counseling, it is also applicable to career coaching. Therefore, my research hypothesizes that university students' career decision-making in China is strongly influenced by parental expectations.

Modernization in the 20th century and economic globalization in the 21st century have led to numerous conflicts, integrations, and reconstructions of the Chinese concepts of "family" and "self," resulting in a dual-cultural phenomenon in which Chinese and Western cultures intermingle and traditional and modern values coexist (Yang, 2006). This phenomenon is rooted in the tension between individualism and collectivism, which has made adaptation challenging for many Chinese individuals across all aspects of life. One prominent expression of

this bicultural dilemma is the intergenerational conflict over career choices within families. This conflict involves opposing behaviors and emotional tensions between children and their parents or grandparents during the career decision-making process (Hu, 2018). In response, Mr. Jin Shuren, a leading figure in Chinese career development, pioneered the Chinese Moderate Career Model. This dialectical model emphasizes communication and coordination in relationships, aiming to create satisfactory and harmonious living through moderate thinking, decision-making, and behavioral patterns (Jin, 2025). It comprises three stages: the consciousness stage, which involves rational analysis and exploration; the unconsciousness stage, which incorporates intuitive or unconscious information into the decision-making process; and the coordination stage, which integrates both conscious and unconscious elements to seek a balanced resolution. This model is referred to as the C-U-C mode. It represents an innovation from the perspective of Chinese career development culture. However, career decisions are not always about balancing collectivism and individualism; social relationships, particularly those shaped by family expectations, also serve as important influencing factors. Other career resources, including human capital resources, psychological resources, and career identity resources, should also be considered using systems thinking when making career decisions.

I propose that career coaches working with Chinese individuals should not only consider how they establish themselves in careers but also support the activation and practice of their core values. This calls for a new theoretical model to support career coaching in China, grounded in postmodern social constructionism. A common theme in postmodern career theory is the emphasis on how environmental context shapes individual responses to change. The career construction theory was developed by Savickas in 2002, drawing on over 40 years of consulting experience, to address the complexity and

variability of life in the 21st century. It explores career development and career counseling through the lenses of social constructivism and narrative psychology (Savickas, 2015). "Practice leads theory, not the other way around" (Savickas, 2015). When initiating a special discussion on "career adaptation," Savickas encouraged global career researchers to conduct cross-cultural testing and apply career construction theory.

Under a postmodern paradigm, integrating local and original methodologies makes innovative practices more feasible. Responsibility Dynamics (Fang, 2017) is a discipline that examines Chinese interpersonal relationships (guanxi) drawn from workplace settings. Jiangxi University of Applied Science and Technology has introduced it as a school-based course for undergraduates to support their participation in social activities and preparation for the workplace (Huang & Fang, 2022). Responsibility Dynamics is a cognitive training model that uses accessible Chinese discourse to classify and interpret social relationships. Drawing on the reenactment of authentic workplace cases, it guides students to look beyond surface phenomena and understand the underlying nature of social evaluations. Through this process, students cultivate and refine a sense of responsibility, developing into mature young professionals who embody the core values of Chinese tradition and maintain a strong awareness of legal norms. Notably, Responsibility Dynamics adopts the paradigm of Western taxonomy in designing its responsibility-character assessment, while its conceptual expressions and situational applications remain firmly rooted in Chinese culture. This methodological integration across cultural frameworks enables Responsibility Dynamics to achieve both theoretical universality and distinctive local relevance. This method reframes career planning from the perception that "society wants me to roll up my sleeves" to "I have to be responsible for myself." I argue that it provides a set of paradigms that

allow students to gradually shift from personal to social responsibility, in alignment with China's mainstream values.

Following China's reform and opening up, along with the gradual integration of individualistic values, the career needs and cultural orientations of university students have become increasingly diverse. Notable differences exist among urban and rural students, first-generation college students, and those with greater exposure to Western influences. These variations indicate that career coaching should not rely on a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, more targeted communication and differentiated coaching strategies are required to address the specific needs of individual students. Such an approach not only acknowledges the heterogeneity within the Chinese student population but also strengthens the cultural sensitivity and practical relevance of career coaching practices.

### **Gaps and Opportunities: Toward a Chinese Cultural Career Coaching Framework**

In modern times, Western career guidance, with its well-established theories, methods, and tools, serves as the primary framework guiding career counseling practice in China (Li Shu, 2022). However, institutional studies assessing whether these approaches are truly suited to the characteristics of Chinese university students remain limited. First, there is a shortage of effective tools for career exploration. At present, China lacks a career information database suitable for counseling purposes, as well as foundational research such as national occupational classifications based on Holland codes (Li Shu, 2022). Second, the field of career coaching lacks a national-level official organization to guide and regulate its development. Training practitioners in cross-cultural sensitivity, Chinese culture and philosophies, and relational trust-building would better equip them to understand and apply the proposed strategies. Finally, Western career development emphasizes self-awareness and

self-actualization, framing career growth around the individual and aligning talents with suitable paths. In contrast, traditional Chinese perspectives situate career development within the broader social and familial context, prioritizing adaptation to external circumstances. This contrast between the Western inside-out perspective and the Eastern outside-in perspective highlights a fundamental cultural difference in career orientation.

In the future, specialized institutions and teams must undertake localized research and program development. Currently, career and ideological guidance for Chinese university students is primarily provided by university counselors. I suggest that universities organize programs for training counselors in coaching techniques, integrating Chinese cultural values alongside the specific contexts of the institution, academic disciplines, and student populations. Through such practice-based research, universities could develop a career guidance model that reflects local cultural characteristics. Understanding students' cultural backgrounds would enable coaches to identify their unique needs and challenges in career choice and development. For instance, Chinese students may be influenced by family expectations and cultural norms, which can affect their career decisions. Under the influence of traditional culture, Chinese individuals tend to live within a collective framework shaped by their relationships with family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and mentors. They are often concerned with how others and society perceive them and consciously or unconsciously seek alignment with others to minimize differences. Respecting and understanding students' cultural backgrounds helps build trust. Students' trust in coaches notably impacts the effectiveness of coaching. When students perceive the coach's sensitivity and inclusiveness, they are more willing to openly share their thoughts and feelings.

In the context of Chinese culture, the ultimate coaching model may be Wang Yangming's

concept of innate knowing and the unity of knowledge and action, which reflects a self-coaching approach rooted in moral intuition and inner cultivation. However, university students are still in the early stages of acquiring social experiences and often lack sufficient self-awareness. In their career development, they require external guidance and support from a coach, as well as the development of trust and emotional resonance. Through coaching interactions, students are guided to "see themselves," engage in inner reflection, gain self-awareness, and initiate meaningful change, ultimately progressing toward the unity of knowing and doing. As they gradually internalize this model and build confidence, they may eventually become their own coach. This process reflects a culturally embedded cognitive path centered on "relationality and heart–mind cultivation" in Chinese culture, which contrasts with the structuralist logic commonly emphasized in Western coaching: goal setting, action planning, and feedback loops.

In summary, overall awareness of career development among Chinese university students remains relatively limited, and the career coaching industry has considerable potential to guide students in enhancing self-awareness, setting career goals, and taking actionable steps. It is also essential to consider the cultural backgrounds of Chinese students when applying career theories and tools. In the process of localizing career coaching, there is a growing need to establish a Chinese philosophical framework and professional organizations.

### Conclusions and Future Directions

This review focuses on examining existing career guidance frameworks, their suitability for the Chinese context, and the cultural factors that must be considered in implementing career coaching in China. It aims to help create a meaningful, culturally aligned career coaching model that addresses the unique needs of Chinese university students and serves as a resource for university educators and career

coaches. Further exploration into a framework grounded in the Chinese context, one that integrates Eastern philosophy, will support the development of a practical model tailored to modern Chinese career coaches, thereby addressing the gap in localized career development approaches. This model will not only enhance coaches' cultural sensitivity and help build trust with students and parents but also offer practical tools to guide students in balancing personal needs and navigating employment challenges.

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