

# Between Aspiration and Reality: Career Trajectories and Cross-Cultural Challenges of Chinese Doctoral Candidates in Malaysian Universities

Qiang Zhao <sup>1</sup>, Zuraidah Binti Abdullah <sup>2,\*</sup> and Muhammad Danial Bin Azman <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Advanced Studies, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Educational Management, Planning and Policy, Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> International Institute of Public Policy & Management (inpuma), Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

\* Correspondence author: zuraidahab@um.edu.my

**Abstract:** This study focuses on Chinese doctoral students in Malaysian universities, exploring the formation and adjustment mechanisms of career aspirations and actual career trajectories. Using a qualitative case study approach, three-stage in-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants in the final stages of or recently graduated from their doctoral programs. The study found that 62.5% of participants ultimately chose to return to China for career development. Visa policy uncertainties, local hiring preferences, and degree recognition concerns constitute multidimensional structural constraints, while filial piety ethics, cultural belonging, and geographic embeddedness of social networks reinforce return migration trends from a cultural dimension. The study proposes the concept of "relational autonomy" to elucidate career agency within collectivist cultures and identifies the "similarity trap" mechanism to explain the misleading role of cultural proximity, providing empirical evidence for the design of career support systems for international doctoral students and the optimization of immigration policies.

**Keywords:** international PhD students; employment outcomes; South-South mobility; visa restrictions; structural barriers; self-leadership strategies; personal development planning; cultural identity negotiation

## 1. Introduction

International mobility of doctoral students has been identified as a vital channel for knowledge creation worldwide. With the greatest number of outgoing doctoral students, China annually sends over 50,000 students abroad for postgraduate studies [1]. Conventional studies have long emphasized European and American destinations, but the South-East Asian region, especially Malaysia, is quickly becoming the new educational hub, which lures a large number of Chinese doctoral students [2]. This South-South educational mobility disrupts the Western-normative research paradigmatic frameworks [3]. Nevertheless, the academic community is yet to have a systematic comprehension of the career development of Chinese doctoral students in the non-Western destination context, especially concerning the reconstruction of career aspirations, cross-cultural adaptability, and the role of individual agency during the graduation transition phase—which is a pressing topic for research [4]. The process of doctoral career development is anything but a straightforward planning activity, as it is replete with contradictions and negotiations. Chinese doctoral students have varied career aspirations, but the reality they face is one of structural barriers. The structural barriers of visa policy ambiguity, regionalized labor market preference, degree recognition differentials, and the lack of institutional support systematically constrict the ideal space of the Chinese doctoral students [5]. The "aspiration-reality gap" is the micro-level manifestation of the deep-seated gap between the globalization of education and the localization of employment [6].



---

Cross-cultural adaptation brings with it intricate elements in career dilemmas. Malaysian and Chinese academic and organizational cultures are very distinct; even with the superficial familiarity offered by the Chinese in Malaysia, there are value conflicts at the deep-level dimension [7]. Doctoral students face the challenge of reconstructing their cultural identity [8] and the dilemma of "double marginality" since they are perceived as "outsiders" in Malaysian culture and their experience abroad is even questioned when they go back to China, adding to the complexity in making career decisions [9].

There exist a variety of research gaps in the current literature. Studies mainly concentrate on the enrollment and learning phases, and the doctoral transition phase, which is a period of uncertainty and crucial decision-making, is inadequately studied [10]. The application process and cultural adaptability of the personal development planning process for cross-cultural doctoral education have been systematically ignored, and the applicability of the career tools developed for Western individuals to those raised in a collectivist cultural context is even doubtful [11]. The use of self-leadership practices for doctoral students to deal with uncertainty, the reconciliation of family and personal expectations, and the design of a career path under conditions of meager institutional support—such micro-level agency practices have been inadequately represented [12]. As a novel form of educational mobility, South-South educational mobility may be subject to different logics of career development than the "center-periphery" form of mobility, and the special case of Malaysia challenges the applicability of the current theoretical frameworks [13]. At the same time, the effectiveness of employability development and career services for international students in non-Western destinations of education has been neither confirmed nor refuted [14].

On the basis of the aforementioned research gaps, the research in this paper explores the process of career development of Chinese graduate students pursuing their doctoral degrees in Malaysia. With three-stage in-depth interviews of eight participants in the final stages of their doctoral studies or recently graduated from their doctoral degrees in Malaysia, the research traces the process of forming, adjusting, and achieving their aspirations in their careers, the use of self-leadership strategies in dealing with the uncertainties of the transition period, the process of forming and adjusting their plans for personal development in the context of structural and cultural constraints, and the process of how the interplay of internal and external factors affects their actual career paths. Combining the theories of career construction theory, social cognitive career theory, self-determination theory, and self-leadership theory, this research work attempts to demonstrate the dynamic process of negotiation between aspiration and reality, the impact of cross-cultural adaptation on the process of decision-making in their careers, and the cultural mediation role of personal development plans in the context of cross-cultural adaptation.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1. The Necessity of Multi-Theory Integration*

The career development of transnational doctoral students is a complicated and multi-dimensional, multi-level phenomenon, and cannot be completely described from the perspective of dynamics, culture, and structure through any individual theoretical framework. Career construction theory has very useful methods of constructing narratives, and gives little attention to structure, whereas social cognitive career theory gives prominent attention to environment-person interaction, and gives little attention to culture and values, whereas self-determination theory highlights internal motivation, and needs to investigate basic need satisfaction processes from the perspective of cross-cultural studies, whereas self-leadership theory gives a micro-level focus on self-regulation, and has never been used to study doctoral education. Combining these four major theories to develop a comprehensive framework helps to focus on both individual psychological dynamics and structure-related culture at the same time.

### *2.2. Career Construction Theory*

Based on the theory, the construction of a career story becomes a key approach for understanding the development of a cross-cultural career. The theory is built upon the concepts of career adaptability, life themes, and narrative identity [15], which describe how people construct their career stories in an attempt to endow their work lives with meaning. The transnational doctorate students' career development involves the process of narrative negotiation among various cultural expectations and identity locations, and the construction of the career story proceeds with dynamic adjustments throughout the graduation transition phase. Research in career construction counseling demonstrates that improving the capability for career storytelling can improve the resilience of a career [16]. In the critical decision-making process for "whether to stay in Malaysia" for the Chinese transnational doctorate students, they are, in fact, rewriting their career stories by assimilating the "Malaysian

---

experience" into their life stories, which is deeply affected by the value system, the expectations of their families, and social validation. Research in the Career Design Laboratory verifies the effectiveness of the narrative approach for career counseling in the pandemic in helping university students manage their futures' anxiety [17]. Career storytelling capability not only involves career decision-making but also refers to how people make sense of their role in the globalized world and how they make their various cultural identity locations cohere [18]. Dynamic social contexts constantly influence the construction of career visions, and uncertainty may present a challenge for the construction of a new career story [19].

### *2.3. Social Cognitive Career Theory*

The Social Cognitive Career Theory interprets career decision-making within structural constraints through the following three components: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting. Such cognitive variables are shaped by personal experience and are very much embedded within the context of socioculture [20]. Studies on STEM students clearly identify the existence of a vast gap within career self-efficacy and outcome expectations at different levels of learning, where the doctoral level of education might undergo a life-altering transformation within the context of career cognition as the date of graduation nears [20]. While faced with the challenges of job rejection letters, visa requirements, and local preferences within the labor market, the impact on career self-efficacy turns negative, where the originally optimistic outcome expectations turn pessimistic, and there arises a systematic reduction within career goals. Social Cognitive Career Theory-based interventions clearly identify the efficiency of supportive structures within career adaptation capabilities within the context of barrier situations [21]. The career intentions of doctoral-level education are influenced by the supportive context of the surroundings, the cognitive assessment of the situation, and the behavioral approaches—this interaction of the last three factors determines the career paths [22]. Cross-cultural situations make this interaction complex; the situation of cultural incongruence might affect the self-efficacy as well as the efficiency of the supportive structures within a dual-vulnerable state of cognition.

### *2.4. Self-Determination Theory*

Self-determination theory proposes a theory of intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being based on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness [23]. Findings from research on international students suggest that expectancy-value and self-determination theory are jointly important motivators of study-abroad choice, and satisfaction with these motivations, as experienced in foreign countries, is an important influence on career planning [24]. Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia are systematically deprived of these three psychological needs because autonomy is undermined by visa and job restrictions, degree recognition is uncertain and threatens competence, and relatedness is disrupted by cultural factors. Deprivation of psychological needs over a prolonged period of time could lead to demotivation and psychological exhaustion [25]. More nuanced is that "autonomy" is a construct with special meaning in collectivist cultural milieus; Chinese doctoral students could be engaged with "relational autonomy" conceptualized from frameworks of familial expectations, and this calls for adaptation of self-determination theory with cultural sensitivity.

### *2.5. Self-Leadership Theory*

The Self-leadership Theory shows how people actively design and plan their career paths by themselves without much assistance. The Self-leadership Theory highlights how people manage to become self-directed and self-driven by goal-setting, self-monitoring, self-reward, and constructive thinking [26]. The Self-leadership Theory was originally developed based on the field of business and psychology. The main idea is that by applying self-leadership practices, people are able to improve their personal control and management [27]. Research on higher education shows that EMBA students are able to manage two pressures effectively by applying health-promoting self-leadership practices, implying that doctoral students are also able to manage career transition anxiety by applying self-leadership practices [28]. Chinese doctoral students in Malaysian universities lack much support and guidance, and career services are minimal, so they highly depend on self-leadership practices to overcome career-related issues. Personal Development Planning as an application of self-leadership practices represents the proactive planning awareness and adaptive skills of doctoral students during the whole process of constructing, applying, and modifying personal development planning. The localization of the application of the Personal Development Planning instrument and its reinterpretation within the collectivist culture is the main focus of the research.

## 2.6. Theoretical Integration Framework

As depicted in Figure 1, the integrated framework of the four theories is presented in an "input-process-mediation-output" logical sequence. Career aspirations are identified as the input component, containing ideal visions and internalized cultural expectations, with the theory of career construction and self-determination theory accounting for their generation and motivation. The process component involves the application of self-leadership approaches, personal development plan construction, and cross-cultural negotiation processes, with micro-explanation provided by self-leadership theory. The mediation component includes the role of two important variables: cultural values and structural constraints, with collectivist-individualist value conflicts and institutional constraints of visa regulations and work restrictions together influencing career choices, with social cognitive theory providing the explanatory role. The output component displays varied actual career path processes of remaining in Malaysia, repatriating in China, and immigrating to third countries, with the theory of career construction accounting for their meaning generation through narrative processes.

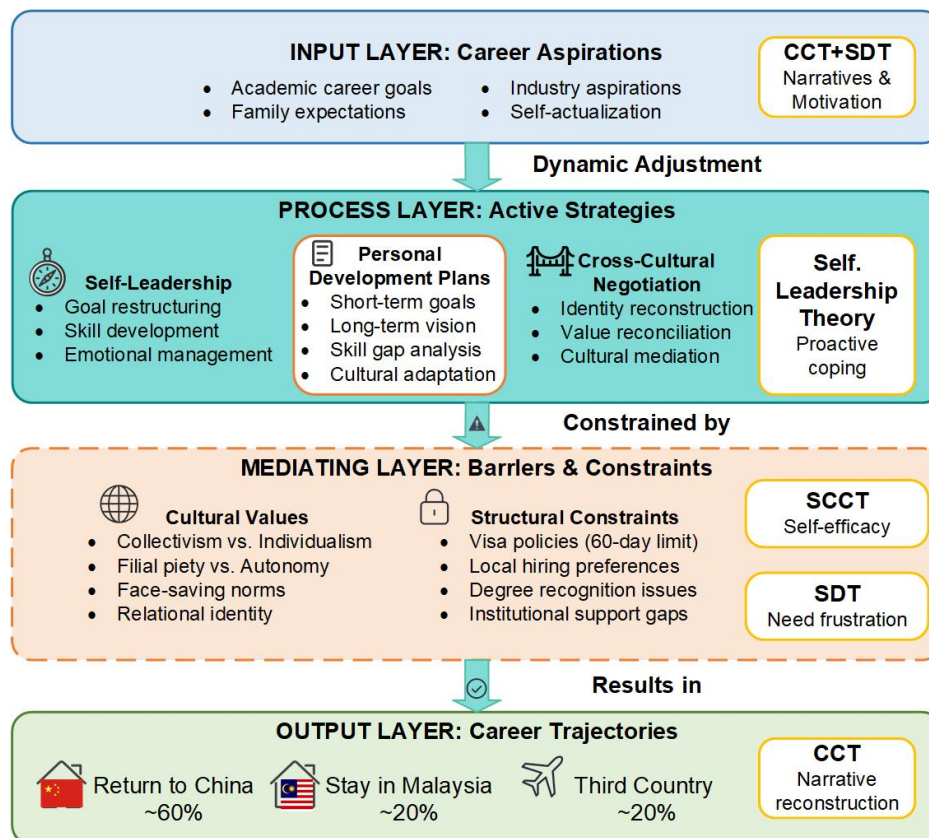


Figure 1. Theoretical Integration Framework for Cross-Cultural Doctoral Career Development

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

The research uses a case study methodology with a qualitative research paradigm to thoroughly examine the career development of Chinese doctoral students within the distinct context of the country of Malaysia. This region has emerged as a hub of education within the region, and the diverse characteristics of the university structures within the country increase the transferability of the research findings.

### 3.2. Participant Selection

Stratified purposive sampling and Snowball sampling techniques were used to promote diversity in the sample. Criteria for participant selection include Chinese Ph.D. students in their final year or having completed their Ph.D.  $\leq 6$  months ago, representing both STEM and Humanities/Social Sciences disciplines, and able to be interviewed in English or Mandarin. Sample target of 8-10 participants; 8 participants were finally recruited. This is sufficient to reach saturation in qualitative studies, even if

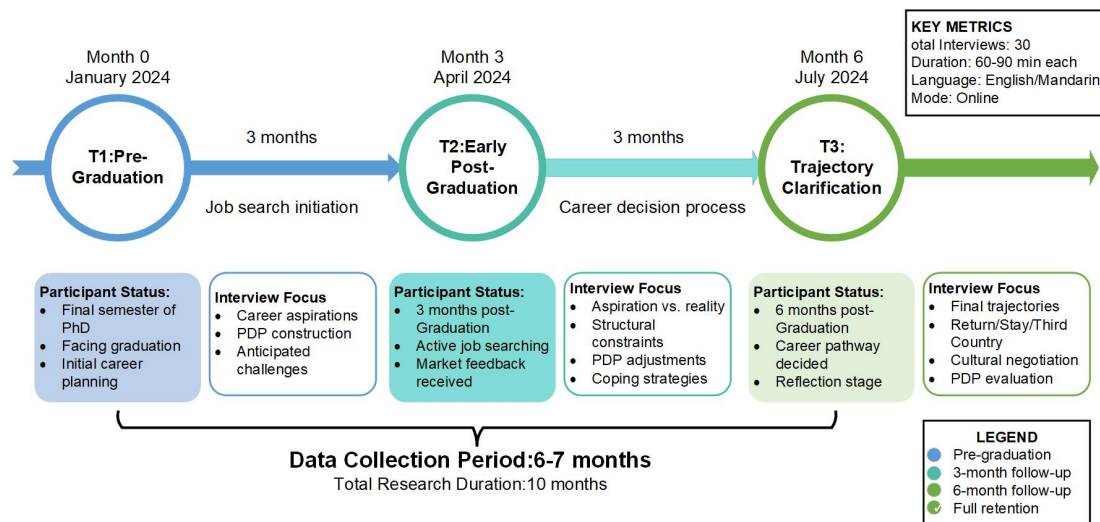
representativeness is not sought in the sample. Table 1 shows that the 8 participants ultimately recruited demonstrate good distribution across gender, age, discipline, institutional type, and doctoral status.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographic Characteristics and Sampling Profile

| Participant ID | Gender | Age Range | Discipline                                | Institution Type   | PhD Status at T1                   | Interview Completion |
|----------------|--------|-----------|---|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| P01            | Male   | 28-32     | Engineering (STEM)                        | Public University  | Final year                         | T1/T2/T3             |
| P02            | Female | 25-29     | Education (Social Sciences)               | Private University | Recent graduate ( $\leq 6$ months) | T1/T2/T3             |
| P03            | Male   | 30-34     | Computer Science (STEM)                   | Public University  | Final year                         | T1/T2/T3             |
| P04            | Female | 26-30     | International Relations (Humanities)      | Public University  | Final year                         | T1/T2/T3             |
| P05            | Male   | 29-33     | Business Administration (Social Sciences) | Private University | Recent graduate ( $\leq 6$ months) | T1/T2/T3             |
| P06            | Female | 27-31     | Chemistry (STEM)                          | Public University  | Final year                         | T1/T2/T3             |
| P07            | Male   | 31-35     | Linguistics (Humanities)                  | Private University | Recent graduate ( $\leq 6$ months) | T1/T2/T3             |
| P08            | Female | 28-32     | Economics (Social Sciences)               | Public University  | Final year                         | T1/T2/T3             |

### 3.3. Data Collection

The data collection method used was the conducting of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which traced the process of career development in a three-point longitudinal manner. The conducting of the interviews was planned taking into consideration the critical points within the doctorate transition phase, which were T1 conducted during the final semester (co-existence of hopes and fears), T2 conducted 3 months post-graduation (feedback from reality commences the process of modifying hopes and fears), and T3 conducted 6 months post-graduation (careers are tentatively identified). Figure 2 indicates that the overall data collection process was conducted between January and October 2024, which is a total of 10 months. In regard to the duration of the data collection process for each individual, from the commencement of the interview process (T1, pre-graduation) to the end of the interview process (T3, 6 months post-graduation), it was 6-7 months, which depended upon the graduation dates of the individuals.



**Figure 2.** Three-Phase Data Collection Timeline

---

Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. The languages used were determined based on each participant's preference for English or Mandarin. This allowed participants to fully articulate their emotions and experiences. The interviews were done online using Zoom/Teams. The interviews were recorded. The recordings were transcribed. The transcription considered non-verbal cues like pauses and tone shifts. The transcription also considered non-verbal cues like emotions. The field notes recorded observations of the interview environment and emotions. The observations informed data analysis.

### *3.4. Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was conducted using the Braun & Clarke framework [29] in six stages. The first stage is the familiarization stage where the transcripts have been repeatedly analyzed through readings. The initial coding stage used both deductive and inductive coding. The coding was deductive because it relied on concepts generated through the theoretical framework (career adaptability, self-efficacy, basic psychological needs, self-leadership strategies), as opposed to inductive coding which relied on data [30]. By constant comparison and re-coding, the themes emerged as: dynamic evolution of career aspirations, multifaceted appearance of structural constraints, profound tensions in cross-cultural challenges, diversity in self-leadership strategies, cultural adaptive transformation in personal development planning, and typological features of career trajectories. The coding and theming processes have been supported using ATLAS.ti software.

### *3.5. Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness was established on the criteria of qualitative inquiry outlined by Lincoln & Guba. Credibility was ensured through data triangulation (three-stage interviews), member checking (interviewees checked the summaries and interpretations), prolonged engagement (the 10-month study cycle), and use of rich quotes. Transferability was ensured through thick descriptions of culture, institutions, and contexts, allowing the reader to apply it. Dependability was ensured through the use of extensive audit trails (all data from selection to evolution of themes), peer debriefing (regular discussions with the team to check assumptions), and documentation of the study process. Confirmability was ensured through the use of reflexive journaling (impact of researcher background, assumptions, and emotions), bracketing (setting aside pre-existing knowledge to hear the voice of the participants), and use of data to support interpretive statements, where traces of data can be followed to the raw data and checked against both members and peers.

### *3.6. Ethical Considerations*

Approval was sought from the Ethics Committee of the University of Malaya, in accordance with BERA, APA, and Malaysian PDPA guidelines. Informed consents used double confirmation, with participants fully aware of the research goals, processes, potential risks, and withdrawal entitlements. Confidentiality was ensured using pseudonym schemes (P01-P08), encrypted files, and deidentification, with access limited to principal research team members. Withdrawal, data destruction, and non-response to particular questions remained participants' entitlements. In terms of cultural sensitivity, Chinese face concepts, filial piety ethics, and collectivism remained sensitive, with no sensitive questions posed. Flexible language selection indicated respect for cultures. Contact information of psychological counseling in Malaysia and China was provided. The data will be destroyed after five years of storage.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1. Evolution Trajectory of Career Aspirations*

In terms of career plans, there was great variability among participants in their final semester of doctoral studies. The idealism in academia was prevalent in STEM, with most people targeting faculty jobs in universities as their top career goal. They were all actively submitting papers and engaging in academic conferences to improve their competitiveness. Nonetheless, not all were targeting academia; those from humanities and social sciences had pragmatic attitudes towards their career plans, as illustrated by P05: "Pursuing a PhD is to enhance educational competitiveness, but the goal has always been to enter enterprises for management consulting or strategic planning." Family expectations also mattered significantly, as illustrated by P04: "My parents want me to become a university professor, which brings much face in my hometown."

The T2 level (3 months after graduation) reflected a pragmatic change in their ideas on staying in their country of choice due to the accumulated negative response from the job market. Most of the participants experienced the local preference in hiring after they submitted their applications (P02: "Applied to eight universities, only two replied that prefer local candidates, started considering returning to China"). There was also an implicit form of discrimination in the origin of their degrees (P06: "Research background is strong, but policy prefers recruiting local or Western PhD graduates"), which severely dented their confidence in the idea of staying in Malaysia. The uncertainties in visa policies further worsened their situations; they were given social visit visas valid for only 60 days after graduation and did not have any work visa status in the country either; they needed the sponsorship of their employers if they were given a job in the country, but the universities were not willing to go through the hassle of the process either. The participants were forced to shift their idea of "staying in Malaysia" from a primary goal to a backup goal due to these circumstances. The participants' families also increased their influence during this level (P08: "Parents ask almost every day when I'm returning to China").

The T3 level (six months after graduation) saw further differentiation and consolidation in the choice of a career, with most participants having reached critical decision points. Figure 3 illustrates the dynamics of the participants' trajectory development from T1 to T3, where out of the eight participants determined to remain in Malaysia for their academic pursuits, only two were determined to do so and followed through in T3, while the other six shifted their attention towards a return to China, and possibly a third country, a development ratio of 75%. This "strategic withdrawal" mentality was very common (P02: "Already decided to return to China, though not what I originally wanted, but rather than continuing to hit roadblocks, better to return and use overseas credentials to get decent jobs"), not withdrawing from academic pursuits altogether, but simply moving the realization field from the Malaysian to the Chinese context. There were participants showing creative pathway development (P05, in creating an "academic + industry" hybrid model that meets their parents' expectations for an academic identity and higher economic rewards). The development in the participants' aspirations showed a transition process, whereby "reality shocks" were encountered at critical points, for example, rejection letters, visa woes, and pressure from their families, which served as a catalyst for the construction of a new career biography.

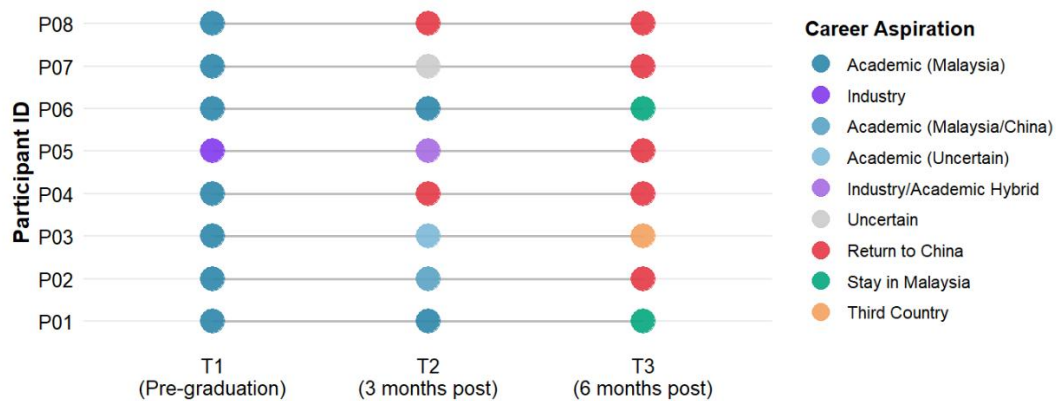


Figure 3. Dynamic Trajectory of Career Aspirations Across Three Time Points

#### 4.2. Multidimensional Manifestation of Structural Barriers

Table 2 shows the multi-dimensional Structural Constraints. These structural barriers mutually condition each other in a three-dimensional space of levels that are simultaneously policy-institutional, organizational, and market-industrial. Visa uncertainties were also highlighted by all participants as the most direct institutional barrier. Malaysia offers a social visit pass of only 60 days to international students after graduation (P03: "Don't know why after cultivating doctoral students for a few years, such a short stay period is required when they can actually produce value"). This is practically a signal of "welcome to study, but not to work." Even to work, there are uncertainties in obtaining a work permit, as evident in cases where the application was delayed for four months without approval and was eventually abandoned. This institutional inefficiency and process opacity greatly increase the risk costs of staying in Malaysia.

**Table 2.** Multi-dimensional Structural Constraints

| Constraint Type     | Specific Manifestation                                     | Frequency (n=8) | Representative Quote   |
|---------------------|--|-----------------|--|
| Visa Policy         | 60-day post-graduation limit, work permit uncertainty      | 8/8             | "Only 60 days social visit pass, no work authorization" (P02)                  |
| Hiring Preference   | Local/Western PhD graduates prioritized                    | 6/8             | "They prefer local candidates" (P02)   |
| Career Services     | Lack of support for international PhD students             | 8/8             | "No career center specifically helps foreign PhD students" (P01)               |
| Supervisor Guidance | Limited advice on non-academic careers                     | 7/8             | "My supervisor only knows academic path, cannot advise on industry jobs" (P05) |
| Academic Job Market | Malaysian universities rarely hire non-citizens as faculty | 8/8             | "Universities rarely hire non-citizens as permanent faculty" (P06)             |
| Degree Recognition  | Malaysian PhD quality questioned by Chinese employers      | 6/8             | "Chinese employers question quality of Malaysian doctorate" (P04)              |

Lack of support on an institutional level is the second type of barrier. All participants reported the lack of career centers catering to international doctoral students. The career center is only for undergrads and domestic students, and there is a lack of resources for international doctoral students regarding visa and cross-country job hunting. The supervisors offered full academic support. The lack of knowledge regarding non-academic career options was pointed out by seven participants. The supervisor had spent the whole career life in the university and lacked knowledge of the corporate consulting field. The lack of an effective network on the inside was due to the fact that most Chinese senior students had returned to China, and there were very few left in Malaysia.

The most visible restrictions existed at the market level. Exclusion of foreign nationals at the substantive level of academia was seen as the most significant constraint (P06: "Although job ads say 'open to all,' there are actually unwritten rules favoring or even shortlisting only local citizens or PhDs from elite Western universities"), even with high-quality academic performance unable to gain equal opportunities. While planning a return to China, they were confronted with the challenges of recognizing their foreign degree (P04: "Our local HR asks 'How is the quality of Malaysian PhDs? We favor European and American PhDs'"), thus a double bind situation. Disparities between expected and offered wages (P02: private university monthly salary of 4,500 ringgit "after deducting rent and living expenses, very little remains; considering visa uncertainties, cost-effectiveness is too low") and linguistic difficulties further restricted the prospects of remaining in Malaysia.

### 4.3. Challenges and Negotiations in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Cultural-level issues impacted career choice in a hidden yet significant manner, entailing fundamental cultural conflicts of value clashes, identity confusion, and issues of social integration. The clash between individual aspirations and societal demands represented fundamental value clashes, with almost all individuals experiencing a clash between "wanting to stay and explore" and "family expectations to return" (P04: "Want to stay in Malaysia a few more years to try different opportunities, but parents urge daily to return saying 'should settle down and establish career, can't keep drifting outside'"). This is because of the ethics of filial piety and intergenerational obligations (P08: "Pursuing PhD already 'delayed' entering marriage market; not returning after graduation makes parents feel I'm evading responsibility"). Career exploration is transformed into "irresponsible procrastination," placing individuals under an obligation of morality.

Face-gravity and direct communication patterns often clashed. Misinterpretations of indirect messages about academic performance (P02: "supervisor said you may want to consider revising, I thought it was a suggestion, but it was polite criticism you must revise") also appeared. Incongruities in cultural scripts for employment interviews included the Chinese trait of modesty, where research weaknesses appeared to be a lack of confidence. Guanxi business networks had different rules in China and Malaysia (P05: "In China, it's normal social capital to use relationship referrals, but too much stress on relationship referrals in Malaysia may be considered nepotism").

The confusion of identity presented profound psychological issues. The "in-between" situation, marked directly as "Chinese" in Malaysia, presented different treatment in institutional settings, while in assessing return to China, their abroad experience resulted in being marked as "too Westernized" or "no longer connected with the reality on the ground" (P03: "Visa and job hunts here, 'Chinese' identity

remains primary; returning to China, 'can you still keep up with the pace back home?' since no longer fully 'Chinese'). This doubly marginalized group found it hard to maintain cultural identity. The impostor syndrome was further exacerbated in cross-cultural settings (P06: "Always feel that Malaysian PhDs are no match for European and American ones").

The barriers to social integration were always there. Linguistic diversity resulted in social exclusion (P07: "Academic English is fine, but local students chat in Malay dialects, often can't understand the jokes, gradually stopped participating in social activities"). Emotional isolation was very deep (P08: "Miss home but can't return, want to take root but can't settle, in a suspended state, don't completely belong anywhere"). The long-term consumption of cultural adaptation was reflected in the T2/T3 phases (P04: "Switching between different cultural logics every day, feel very tired"), and ultimately became one of the motivations to return—because return was not only an issue of career development but was an emotional necessity to look for cultural comfort zones and identity certainty.

#### 4.4. Self-Leadership and Personal Development Planning Practices

Under both sets of pressures, participants actively employed various self-leadership techniques. Goal reconstruction occurred most commonly, not merely "lowing expectations" but reframing "success" standards within limits (P02: "Plan A was Top 3 public universities, now adjusted to 'any academic/research institution that can provide work permit support,' location and ranking no longer primary"). P06 employed a "multi-path parallel" risk diversification approach, pursuing openings in Malaysia, China, Singapore, and Europe at the same time. Skill compensation strategies demonstrated a down-to-earth acknowledgment of competitive disadvantages; P01 actively offered teaching assistance for teaching experiences, P05 self-taught Python and Tableau skills to better market industry-wise. Emotion regulation strategies had psychological protective functions; cognitive reappraisal techniques were used (P02: "It's not that I'm not good enough, the timing is wrong"), and social support structures were actively built (P07: "Joined Chinese doctoral student help each other WeChat group 'knowing I'm not alone in this struggle is consolatory'").

Personal Development Planning showed distinct cultural negotiation roles, acting as a planning process and a display of cultural performance in terms of "planning capability" and "responsibility" to families. Table 3 illustrates core PDP development from T1 to T3. Overall aims changed from "Malaysian tenure-track position" to "lecturer in Chinese universities," with triggering circumstances ranging from "visa problems, failed job interviews, and parental pressure." Geographical location changed from "remain in Malaysia (first choice)" to "return to China (first choice)." Skills development priorities expanded from "publication in academic journals" to "industry expertise and preparation for Chinese job market." Contingency plans changed from "single-country application in Singapore" to "simultaneous application in multiple countries." Most importantly, there was a shift in "family integration" aspects, from T1 stage "minimal reference to family expectations" to T3 stage "explicit reference to how personal decisions satisfy family demands," using expressions such as "take care of aging parents" to integrate personal decisions with filial duties (P08: "I translated PDP into Chinese so that parents understand, and they are relieved to know that I am not 'messing around,' that I am serious and not wasting time"). Some participants maintained "two different PDPs" (P05: "One genuine PDP for myself, and another 'optimized PDP' for parents to understand, to convince them that I am not going astray"). This reflects how individual autonomy was mediated through collectivist societal norms.

**Table 3.** Evolution of Personal Development Plans (T1 vs T3)

| PDP Component       | T1 Content   | T3 Content   | Key Triggers for Change                               |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Primary Goal        | Tenure-track position in Malaysian public university | University lecturer position in China  | Visa barriers + repeated rejections + family pressure |
| Location Preference | Stay in Malaysia (preferred) or consider Singapore   | Return to China (primary) or third country if opportunity arises                 | Visa limitations + weak alumni network                |
| Skill Development   | Focus on publication record and research proposals   | Add: industry networking, Chinese job market research, Mandarin interview skills | Market feedback showing inadequate preparation        |
| Backup Plan         | "Apply to Singapore if Malaysia doesn't work"        | "Multiple simultaneous applications across countries and sectors"                | Learned from peers' failures                          |
| Family Integration  | Minimal mention of family expectations               | Explicitly addressed how career choice meets family needs                        | Increased family pressure post-graduation             |

Attitudes towards the actual use value of PDP remained ambivalent. On the positive side, there was emphasis on the psychological level (P06: "PDP gives me a sense of direction in the chaos, at least I know I'm responding rather than drifting"). On the negative side, there was acknowledgment of its inadequacies (P07: "Planners never keep up with the changes, have to revise monthly, sometimes feel it's just self-comfort, an illusion of 'I'm still in control'"). P04 highlighted the fact that PDP was completely impotent against structural constraints such as visa restrictions, more useful in structuring the non-controllable aspects.

#### 4.5. Differentiation of Actual Career Paths

Professional trajectories began to appear in the T3 level, consisting of three alternative routes: returning to China, staying in Malaysia, and third countries. Based on Table 4, out of 8 respondents, 5 (62.5%) chose to return to China, which is a much higher percentage of returnees to China than that of staying Chinese doctoral students in the United States (approximately 25% return to China), indicating that Malaysia is relatively less advantageous in talent retention. This is because a variety of factors contributed to the dominant route of returning to China, of which the most direct push was the pressure from one's family (P04: "Parents' health is poor, as an only daughter I can't keep staying away"); a desire for cultural belonging (P02: "Always feel lacking a sense of roots, more accustomed to Chinese cultural environment, that ease of not having to constantly explain yourself"); and a comparative view of market opportunity (P07: "Although China's academic market is also very competitive, at least there's guanxi to leverage, here I'm a complete outsider").

**Table 4.** Distribution of Actual Career Pathways and Key Influencing Factors

| Career Pathway          | Number (n/8) | Percentage | Primary Reasons (Ranked)  | Main Challenges Encountered  | Typical Decision Timeline   |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------|---|--|---|
| Return to China         | 5            | 62.5%      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family pressure &amp; filial duty</li> <li>2. Cultural belonging &amp; comfort</li> <li>3. Familiar job market &amp; guanxi networks</li> <li>4. Visa/work permit frustrations in Malaysia</li> </ol> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree recognition concerns from Chinese employers</li> <li>• Adjustment to faster pace &amp; intense competition</li> </ul>                  | <p>60% decided by T2<br/>40% finalized at T3</p> <p>Average: 4.5 months post-graduation</p> |
| Stay in Malaysia        | 2            | 25%        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spouse employment in Malaysia</li> <li>2. Lifestyle preference &amp; lower pressure</li> <li>3. Secured job offer with visa sponsorship</li> </ol>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing visa uncertainty</li> <li>• Career advancement ceiling as foreigner</li> <li>• Limited long-term settlement options</li> </ul>        | <p>Both decided at T1 &amp; persisted</p> <p>Had pre-existing ties to Malaysia</p>          |
| Third Country Migration | 1            | 12.5%      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Postdoc opportunity in Europe</li> <li>2. Academic network connections</li> <li>3. Desire for "global career" experience</li> </ol>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple visa application processes</li> <li>• Re-adaptation to new cultural context</li> <li>• Uncertainty of long-term prospects</li> </ul> | <p>Emerged at T2<br/>Finalized at T3</p> <p>Opportunistic rather than planned</p>           |

The two participants choosing to stay in Malaysia (P06 and P01) had different situational characteristics. The presence of the spouse was an important variable (P06: "Husband works at a multinational company in Malaysia with stable income, considering husband's career decided to stay a few more years"), while the management of the career of dual-earner families made the decision to stay in Malaysia reasonable. The desire for lifestyle choices took an important role (P01: "Enjoy the relatively relaxed pace, domestic academic environment is too competitive, not sure if I can adapt"),

thinking of the competitive academic atmosphere in China. Both strongly declared the intention to stay at the T1 stage and remained consistent, implying "path dependence" on career choices—a "commitment effect" is present between the initial decision and the subsequent behavior. The 1 participant moving to the third country (P03) was the embodiment of the opportunistic decision-maker, having been invited to a postdoc position in Germany through an international conference and explaining it as the "necessary accumulation for the global academic career" (P03: "Going directly from Malaysia back to China might be questioned for insufficient research internationality, but if I do a two-year postdoc in Europe before returning, my CV will look much better"), and simultaneously stating "the floating feeling sometimes makes me envy classmates who have already settled."

Based on cross-case analysis of aspiration adjustment approaches and levels of agency expression, four career trajectory types were found, which are summarized in Figure 4: Conformer - high adjustment and passive response, P07/P08 exhibited this type by quickly reducing their aspirations and adapting to the return-to-China trajectory; Innovator - high adjustment and proactive search, P05 exhibited this type by creating an "academic + industry hybrid" trajectory; Persister - low adjustment and high agency, P06/P01 showed consistent aspirations of remaining in Malaysia from T1 to T3 and actively struggled for them; Drifter - low adjustment and passive response, although none of the cases completely belonged to this type, P04 temporarily exhibited this type at the T2 stage.

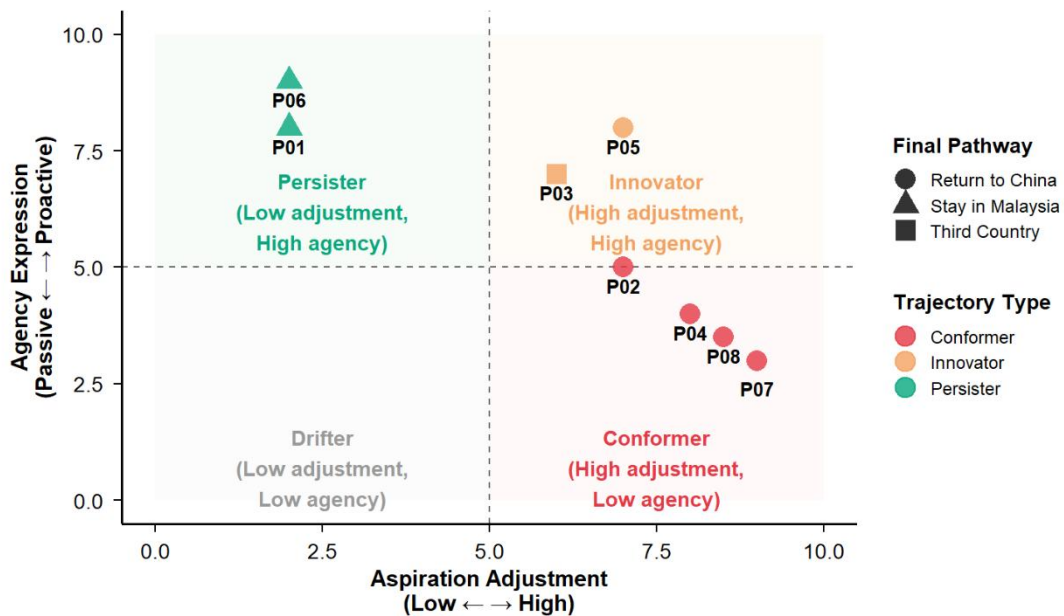


Figure 4. Typology of Career Trajectory Patterns

## 5. Discussion

This paper shows that the "aspiration-reality" conflict in the career path formation of Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia is a micro-expression of the mismatch between globalized education and localized employment. 75% of the participants had changed their original plans from T1 to T3, which reflects the dramatic changes in the transition phase and the structural mismatch in Malaysia's non-traditional destination in absorbing talent and the situation-specificity in the transnational doctoral students' career choice. 62.5% returned to China at the end, which is driven by both the systemically generated effects of structural barriers such as visa policies, employment preferences, and recognition policies, as well as the constantly reinforced effects of deep culture such as filial piety ethics. The dynamic transition in career ascription from idealism to pragmatism is strategic adaptation rather than compromise, and the planning-for-personal-growth phase reflects the special cultural mediation role in which it functions as both planning aid and identity negotiation text, and even as symbolic act expressing "responsibility" to different cultural demands.

The deep challenges in cross-cultural adaptation give rise to explanations of differentiated career path choice from a cultural psychological perspective. While experiences in prior cross-cultural exposure help to facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, in this study, participants are still confronted with aggravated value contradictions and identity confusion during the transition phase of their career, which implies that in academic and professional contexts, respectively, cross-cultural adaptations are

---

subject to different logics—while in academic contexts, it pertains to the acquisition of academic norms, in professional contexts, it involves deep-level value systems. Cultural intelligence has a paradoxical function in relation to career choice, which, through high-level cultural intelligence, enables individuals to better understand the depth of differences in their respective cultures, and although it has a strategic function in cognitive adaptations, it may simultaneously strengthen the identity positioning of being a “permanent outsider,” which in turn reduces long-term retention intentions. The “in-between” situation again verifies the mediating function of ethnic identity, in which psychological exhaustion from double marginality ultimately becomes a hidden driving force of “escape from fatigue” in terms of career choice.

Another view on cross-cultural career development can be offered by looking into the complex link between cultural intelligence and confidence in language skills. The subjects were highly competent in academic English, but marginal in local social language use, and this kind of split linguistic competence profile made them strong in the academic market but faced challenges in professional environments that demand strong local integration. The complex role of social media in cushioning adaptation pressure can be viewed as a double-edged sword, which acts as a source of emotional support (peer mutual aid in WeChat groups) and also as a medium for transferring cultural pressures (parental pressure in WeChat).

The predictive factors of career adaptability exhibit distinct patterns across different cultures. Self-efficacy, social support, and career knowledge are all fragile when confronted with systematic structural discrimination—specifically, self-efficacy's fragility when confronted with structural barriers such as visa restrictions and local priority rules, the limited effectiveness of social support when faced with network territoriality and cultural relevance, and the impediments of information asymmetry within the transnational labor market for the accumulation of career knowledge. Career adaptability may itself vary across cultures—specifically, the Western-defined dimensions of "control" and "concern" having to be contrasted with the dimensions of "relationship coordination" and "family obligation" within collectivist cultures. The discovery of PDP as a cultural negotiation tool rather than a planning tool exactly captures the cultural embeddedness of career adaptability. Career decision-making self-efficacy fluctuates dynamically within the context of cross-cultural studies, where the potential systematic depletion of psychological resources due to the constant structural frustrations may occur. While the implementation of self-leadership practices serves as a psychological buffer within the short term, it does not affect the trajectory directions of most participants, implying the validity of self-leadership theory as a theory of the coping process but its inadequacy as a sole predictive model of career outcome and the requirement of its combination with the analysis of structural factors.

The contributions to existing theories in the study appear in three ways. At the theoretical integration level, the organic integration of the career construction theory, social cognitive career theory, self-determination theory, and self-leadership theory together presents a comprehensive approach which can accommodate the narrative, cognitive, motivational, and strategic aspects in a balanced and well-rounded manner, overcoming the limitation and one-sidedness of the application of any one theory, and showing the multi-layered and multi-dimensional role of various theoretical mechanisms in the various stages of career development—the application of the career construction theory for the explanation of aspiration formation and narrative reconstruction, the application of the social cognitive career theory for the explanation of dynamic self-efficacy development, the application of the self-determination theory for the explanation of the psychological mechanisms for the transformation in the level and state of the self-motivation, and the application of the self-leadership theory for the explanation of the micro-coping mechanisms. At the conceptual expansion level, the theoretical concept "relational autonomy" bridges the application gap in the self-determination theory in the context of the collectivist cultures, and suggests the autonomy which is not personal autonomy and not passive hetero-direction, but agency in search for acceptable space in the relationship networks, and presents a new theoretical approach for the explanation of the career decision-making in the non-Western cultures. At the context-specific findings level, the identification of the "similarity trap" mechanism shows that the surface-level similarity in the cultures in question (the presence of the Chinese communities in the Chinese culture in the case of the Chinese in Malaysia, and the presence of the Confucian legacy in the case of the Malays in Malaysia) may lead to the misleading formation in the level of the expectations, and may show a non-linear relationship in the level of the reality gap and the degree of the difficulty in the cross-cultural adaptation.

Research limitations must be cautiously examined to identify boundaries of applicability of research results. The sample size is 8 individuals, which is too small for generalization, yet sufficient for a high level of understanding in a research study, with results appropriate for "theoretical generalization" rather than "statistical generalization." Time period is 6-7 months, which encompasses a critical phase

---

of transition, yet does not follow career development over a prolonged period of time, with a question of whether "pragmatic turn" is a temporary adjustment or a permanent transformation remaining uncertain. Geographic particularism is a limitation with respect to generalization over various contexts; a specific location of Malaysia, which is a Southeast Asian regional educational hub, a Muslim majority with an ethnically diverse society, and an economically intermediate position between developing and developed countries, renders direct applicability of research results rather difficult for non-Western educational destinations. Discipline-wise, STEM areas are marginally more represented, with a possible underrepresentation of difficulties of employment in humanities. Research methodology is a limitation with respect to research objectives; research relies on self-report data with an intrinsic bias, since there is neither observation of behavior nor analysis of documents for verification purposes.

Despite these shortcomings, in examining neglected South-South education mobility, it is found that the "aspiration-reality" contradiction is a microcosm of the structural contradiction in the global higher education system—between education globalization and job localization, talent development and immigration policies, as well as between higher education orientation and various market requirements. This structural contradiction is manifested in terms of individual anxiety, career setback, and aspiration disillusionment. The identification of personal development planning as a cultural mediation instrument in cross-cultural settings enhances the scope of career development instruments—beyond a rational planning method, it is also a process of negotiation of self and a symbolic act of performing "responsibility" to various cultural demands.

## 6. Conclusions

In following the career development of eight Chinese Ph.D. students in Malaysia, the "dynamic negotiation between aspiration and reality" was uncovered. 62.5% of the subjects returned to China, which was neither a failed retreat nor proactive planning, but rather a strategic act of adaptation in search of viable space under the twin forces of structural constraints and cultural demands. The development of career aspirations from idealism to pragmatism was the micro-manifestation of the structural contradiction between the globalization of higher education and the localization of the labor market. Personal development planning had the distinctive cultural mediating roles of being a means of rational planning and cultural performance of "responsibility" to the family.

From a theoretical perspective, this study has incorporated four prominent theories and developed an overall analytical framework, used "relational autonomy" as a theoretical construct to bridge the application of self-determination theory in collectivist cultures, and pinpointed "similarity trap" as a mechanism to counter cultural distance theories. From a practical perspective, Malaysian higher educational institutions must develop an organized career service network for international Ph.D. students; policymakers must increase post-study stay durations (from 60 days to 12 months) and facilitate work visa requirements; and international Ph.D. students must separate their dreams from reality and work towards developing alternative careers.

The limitation in research could be considered in terms of the sample, which has a limited number of participants (n=8), and its focus on one context. Future research could examine the long-term process of returnee doctoral students, compare different contexts across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa, and explore further the adaptability of self-leadership strategies to different cultures. The question of whether the gap between aspiration and reality could be bridged has implications for the future of global HE internationalization and South-South cooperation in education.

## References

1. Liu, D., Xu, Y., Zhao, T., & Che, S. (2022). Academic Career Development of Chinese Returnees With Overseas Ph.D. Degrees: A Bioecological Development Perspective [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 13 - 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.859240>
2. Koh, S. Y., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2025). Post-2020 mainland Chinese student mobility to Malaysia: trends and drivers. *Asian Population Studies*, 21(1), 33-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2024.2421587>
3. Sukjairungwattana, P., Hu, H., Liu, R., & Huang, J. (2025). From local to global: systematically reviewing higher education internationalization in Asia [Systematic Review]. *Frontiers in Education*, Volume 9 - 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1473820>
4. Nguyen, C. H. (2024). The expectancy and value of international education among Vietnamese doctoral students in Malaysia. *Cogent Education*, 11(1), 2381870. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2381870>

- 
5. Picker-Roesch, C., & Lang, J. (2024). Stress and career aspirations: a longitudinal study with medical students [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 15 - 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1449111>
  6. Smirnov, N., & Tarasova, E. (2025). Motivation matters: How enrollment motives shape doctoral experiences and career aspirations. *PLOS ONE*, 20(9), e0330679. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0330679>
  7. Bethel, A., Ward, C., & Fetvadjev, V. H. (2020). Cross-Cultural Transition and Psychological Adaptation of International Students: The Mediating Role of Host National Connectedness [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Education*, Volume 5 - 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.539950>
  8. Gebregergis, W. T., & Csukonyi, C. (2025). Unveiling psychological and sociocultural adaptation patterns of international students in Hungary. *Journal of International Students*, 15(4), 97-118. <https://doi.org/10.32674/21yqse06>
  9. Xu, X. (2024). A Sociomaterial Investigation into Chinese International Students' Navigation of a Doctoral Trajectory During COVID-19. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 28(2), 147-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153221126247>
  10. Li, H., & Horta, H. (2024). Exploring the identity development of PhD graduates transitioning to non-researcher roles. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 78(2), 421-435. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12452>
  11. Lee, M. C., McMahon, M., & Watson, M. (2018). Career decisions of international Chinese doctoral students: The influence of the self in the environment. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 27(1), 29-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416217743023>
  12. Hou, Y. (2025). International Doctoral Students' Career Decision-Making During COVID-19: A Narrative Review Informed by Prospect Theory. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 20, 014. <https://doi.org/10.28945/5622>
  13. Xu, X., Tran, L. T., & Xie, X. (2024). Between decolonization and recolonization: investigating Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia as a case of global South-South student mobility. *Higher Education*, 87(5), 1193-1209. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01060-6>
  14. Amzat, I. H., Mohd Ali, H., Ibrahim, M. B., Othman, A., Bin Salleh, M. J., & Alade Najimdeen, A. H. (2023). Internationalization of Higher Education, University Quality Service, and International Students' Loyalty in Malaysia. *Sage Open*, 13(4), 21582440231210498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210498>
  15. Wang, D., & Li, Y. (2024). Career construction theory: tools, interventions, and future trends [Mini Review]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 15 - 2024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1381233>
  16. Cadaret, M. C., & Hartung, P. J. (2021). Efficacy of a group career construction intervention with urban youth of colour. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 49(2), 187-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2020.1782347>
  17. Camussi, E., Meneghetti, D., Sbarra, M. L., Rella, R., Grigis, P., & Annovazzi, C. (2023). What future are you talking about? Efficacy of Life Design Psy-Lab, as career guidance intervention, to support university students' needs during COVID-19 emergency [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 13 - 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1023738>
  18. Maree, J. G. (2020). Career construction counselling aimed at enhancing the narratability and career resilience of a young girl with a poor sense of self-worth. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(16), 2646-2662. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1622536>
  19. Guo, L. (2025). Navigating the Future: Factors Influencing Adolescents' Career Expectation Uncertainty in a Dynamic World. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 73(1), 2-15. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12372>

- 
20. Hsieh, T.-L. (2025). Comparative analysis of career aspirations among STEM college students: social-cognitive model across college years. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 30(1), 2460604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2025.2460604>
  21. Damodar, P., Shetty, A., Dsouza, M. P., Prakash, A., & Gudi, N. (2024). Crafting careers through theory-driven interventions: a scoping review of the utility of social cognitive career theory and career maturity inventory. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 29(1), 2308081. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2308081>
  22. Li, W., & Jiang, X. (2025). How Environment, Cognition, and Behavior Shape Doctoral Students' Academic Career Intentions: Insights from a Comprehensive Study. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(7), 990. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/15/7/990>
  23. Yang, Y., Chen, J., & Zhuang, X. (2025). Self-determination theory and the influence of social support, self-regulated learning, and flow experience on student learning engagement in self-directed e-learning [Hypothesis and Theory]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 16 - 2025. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1545980>
  24. Yue, Y., & Lu, J. (2022). International Students' Motivation to Study Abroad: An Empirical Study Based on Expectancy-Value Theory and Self-Determination Theory [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 13 - 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.841122>
  25. González-Arias, M., Dibona, P., Soto-Flores, B., Rojas-Puelles, A., Amato, M., Álvarez-Trigo, D., & Castillo, R. (2025). Academic performance, self-reported motivation, and affect in higher education: the role of basic psychological need satisfaction [Original Research]. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Volume 16 - 2025. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1519454>
  26. Manz, C. C. (1986). Self-Leadership: Toward an Expanded Theory of Self-Influence Processes in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(3), 585-600. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1986.4306232>
  27. Neck, C. P., & Houghton, J. D. (2006). Two decades of self-leadership theory and research: Past developments, present trends, and future possibilities. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(4), 270-295. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940610663097>
  28. Bjerke, R. (2024). The Multiple Advantages of Self-Leadership in Higher Education: The Role of Health-Promoting Self-Leadership among Executive MBA Students. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(9), 211. <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-3387/14/9/211>
  29. Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), 846-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>
  30. Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22, 16094069231205789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>

#### **About the Author**

**Qiang Zhao** is PhD candidate at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Universiti Malaya. His research focuses on career development and post-PhD career trajectories of Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia, adopting qualitative and interpretivist research approaches. He has extensive practical experience in career education and international higher education collaboration.

**Zuraidah Binti Abdullah** is a senior academic in the Faculty of Education at Universiti Malaya, specialising in educational leadership, Associate Professor, professional learning communities, inclusive education and student resilience. She began her career as a secondary school teacher before joining UM, and has held academic leadership roles including Deputy Director at the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue. Her research and consultancy work spans educational policy, school improvement and community engagement, with involvement in national and international projects.

---

**Muhammad Danial Bin Azman** is the Deputy Executive Director of Academic & Student Affairs at the International Institute of Public Policy and Management (INPUMA), Universiti Malaya, where he also teaches in the Master of Public Policy programme. He has extensive experience in public policy teaching and lectures at national institutions, and has served in academic leadership and international research roles. His interests include comparative public policy and global South relations within international and strategic studies.