

# An Exploration of Career Values and Their Cultivation among Chinese College Students

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**Abstract:** Career values serve to guide individuals' occupational trajectories, yet research on the values shaping contemporary Chinese college students' career development remains limited despite implications for supporting this population. This study surveyed 237 Chinese undergraduates from 17 provinces using the multidimensional Career Values Questionnaire for College Students to assess differences across areas like achievement, interests, ethics, and status. Results revealed students expressed highest concern for normative ethics and lowest for salary and prestige. Gender comparisons found females scored significantly higher on valuing status pursuit, perhaps reflective of sociocultural workplace barriers or pressures facing women. Rural students also outpaced urban students on ethics and benefits, congruent with previous national surveys. These findings underscore key areas where Chinese colleges can further enrich career guidance programming to nurture values congruent with national development directions. Comprehensive support across curricular, co-curricular, and early career domains can empower Chinese students to realize flourishing professional values aligned with human dignity and the common good. The present work helps pave an actionable path toward establishing values-driven vocational frameworks as part of holistic development within Chinese higher education contexts to promote graduates' personal and societal thriving.

**Keywords:** career values, college students, career development, Values Cultivation

## 1. Introduction

Occupational values refer to the principles, standards, and beliefs that individuals hold regarding the meaning and fulfillment derived from work<sup>[1,2]</sup>. These values shape people's attitudes and goals toward their careers, guiding them toward occupations they deem most important. Key career values include intrinsic interest, which involves finding enjoyable careers that align with one's talents, passions, and interests. Individuals with strong intrinsic values gain fulfillment from their work itself<sup>[3]</sup>. Another important value is work-life balance - the ability to make time for family, relationships, hobbies, and other personal activities in addition to work<sup>[4]</sup>. Some derive meaning from occupations that positively impact society, a value reflecting the rewarding nature of community service. Others prioritize financial security and income. These individuals highly value the financial rewards of their work<sup>[5]</sup>. Some prefer careers offering promotion opportunities and expect to take on more responsibility and advance over time. For these people, upward mobility provides strong appeal<sup>[6]</sup>. Additional values include creativity - the desire to innovatively solve problems, which provides intrinsic rewards through originality and self-direction; independence - the preference for autonomy with minimal supervision; and prestige - the attraction to respected careers conferring higher social status, which generate feelings of pride<sup>[7]</sup>. By identifying their most salient career values, individuals can better focus their options toward environments enabling long-term fulfillment and satisfaction<sup>[8]</sup>. For college students, career values are shaped and developed as they gain new educational experiences and are exposed to potential career paths<sup>[9]</sup>. During college, coursework and extracurricular internships provide students with a window into possible career fields, and these learning and work experiences help shape students' perceptions of the importance of creativity, social impact, promotion potential, or other potential career values, enabling them to assess whether their career values are compatible with their potential career choices<sup>[10]</sup>. In addition, as college students continue to develop and mature in their sense of self, they continue to revise and refine their personal priorities and preferences related to their future careers. Therefore, college students' career values are not only the result of individual self-growth and development, but

also an inevitable requirement for college students to adapt to social life.

Recent research reveals that current college students most value careers offering inner fulfillment, the ability to integrate their passions with work-life balance, and positive societal impact. In a large-scale study, over two-thirds of college students surveyed believed that "work will be one of the most important parts of my life" [2]. This suggests students aspire toward intrinsically meaningful and fulfilling careers. Parallel research found 87% of students ranked interest as the top factor in career choices, reflecting a tendency to integrate work with personal passions [10]. Additionally, work-life balance has become a priority, with students valuing personal time outside of work [11]. Studies also show that helping others through careers has become increasingly important, while earning potential and status hold less appeal [2,6]. Nearly two-thirds of students hope to find socially useful work after graduation [12]. Financial rewards are moderately important compared to interests and relationships [5,13]. Research on the value students place on prestige varies, with some desiring status and others not [7,13]. Studies also reveal gender differences, with females tending to prefer socially-oriented careers [14]. In summary, college represents a pivotal time for students to shape career values guiding them toward fulfilling paths.

Additional insight into college students' career values comes from Chinese researchers. Using a sample of 774 students, Zhao Tong explored the impact of various factors on career values, finding development was valued more highly than health, followed by prestige [15]. Wang [16] found students' overall vocational values ranked at a medium-high level. Further analysis by Wang [16] across intrinsic, extrinsic, and compensation dimensions revealed areas where students' values deviate. Intrinsically, students showed low creative thinking, high self-focus, and weak social responsibility. Extrinsically, they prioritized workplace comfort over relationships. For compensation, students had excessive expectations around returns and stability, overemphasizing reputation. Aligning with Western findings, Chinese researchers found females valued prestige more than males [15,17]. In summary, Chinese studies supplement understanding of contemporary college students' evolving career priorities.

While Chinese researchers have increasingly examined college students' career values, some issues remain. Much of this work has utilized self-report surveys without sufficient reliability or validity testing [15, 16]. Additionally, samples typically come from specific regional colleges, limiting generalizability of findings [17]. Finally, little research has investigated how to cultivate students' career values [16]. Importantly, the career values developed during college have been shown to directly influence students' subsequent career decision-making capacities, choices of initial jobs, and career persistence over time [8]. The present study aims to address these gaps by assessing the current state of college students' values using psychometrically- validated measures across a representative, nationwide sample. Furthermore, cultivation of career values is explored to provide actionable guidance enriching this critical developmental period. Examining the central topic of values from these multidimensional perspectives promises to significantly expand current understanding to better support students' career development journeys.

## **2. Methods**

### ***2.1 Career Values Questionnaire***

The Career Values Questionnaire for College Students, developed by Jin and Li [18], was utilized. This 34-item instrument employs a 5-point rating scale assessing the importance of various career values across two subscales - end-values and means-values. Ten dimensions are covered: family preservation, status pursuit, achievement realization, social promotion, ease/stability, interest/character, normative ethics, salary/prestige, career development, and welfare benefits.

Demographic questions on factors like gender and place of origin were also included.

### ***2.2 Participants***

A convenience sample of undergraduate students from 17 provinces in China completed the online questionnaire. After excluding invalid responses, the analytic sample comprised 237 students - 41 males and 196 females.

### 3. Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for career values (Table 1). Students expressed highest concern about normative ethics and lowest for salary/prestige. A gender comparison found a significant difference only for status pursuit, with higher scores among females (Table 1). The groups did not differ across other dimensions.

*Table 1: Mean scores for genders and differences between genders on the dimensions of the Career Values Questionnaire.*

	Family Preservation	Status Pursuit	Achievement Realization	Social Promotion	Ease/Stability	Interests /Character	Normative Ethics	Salary/Prestige	Career	Welfare Benefits
Male	3.9(0.8)	3.8(0.8)	3.8(0.91)	3.5(0.9)	3.6(0.7)	3.85(0.7)	4.0(0.8)	3.3(0.7)	3.98(0.7)	3.5(0.7)
Female	3.8(0.7)	3.6(0.7)	3.9(0.73)	3.4(0.9)	3.6(0.8)	3.9(0.7)	4.2(0.7)	3.2(0.7)	4.1(0.62)	3.7(0.8)
<i>t</i>	0.61	2.05*	-0.81	0.74	-0.40	-0.68	-1.81	1.30	-0.98	-1.01

Note: Standard deviations are shown in the parentheses. Numbers with \* represent significance.

Moreover, analyses by place of origin revealed students from rural towns scored higher than urban city residents on normative ethics and welfare benefits (Table 2).

*Table 2: Mean scores for origins and differences between origins on the dimensions of the Career Values Questionnaire.*

	Rural Towns	Urban Cities	<i>t</i>
Family Preservation	3.93(0.71)	3.89(0.82)	-0.40
Status Pursuit	3.65(0.66)	3.65(0.71)	-0.04
Achievement Realization	4.00(0.64)	3.81(0.82)	1.90
Social Promotion	3.56(0.86)	3.32(0.95)	1.95
Ease/Stability	3.61(0.61)	3.63(0.82)	-2.02
Interests /Character	4.01(0.60)	3.85(0.73)	1.76
Normative Ethics	4.31(0.62)	4.11(0.73)	2.23*
Salary/Prestige	3.23(0.67)	3.20(0.76)	0.29
Career Development	4.06(0.61)	4.08(0.69)	-1.19
Welfare Benefits	3.80(0.80)	3.56(0.76)	2.36*

Note: Standard deviations are shown in the parentheses. Numbers with \* represent significance.

### 4. Discussion

This study examined contemporary college students' career values using a multidimensional questionnaire. Aligning with prior research, students expressed heightened concern for normative ethics, career development, personal interests, family welfare, achievement goals, and benefits provision compared to status pursuit [15, 16].

A key finding was females scored significantly higher than males on valuing status in career selection. This gender difference may stem from women facing more workplace barriers, causing them to seek respected positions signaling competence and advancement potential to overcome inequality. The pressure on women to concurrently succeed in home and professional realms may also breed attraction to prestigious careers representing the ability to "have it all". Today's female students demonstrate heightened professional aspirations compared to past generations, possibly manifesting as stronger preferences for high-status careers [19]. Women entering male-dominated fields like business and STEM may particularly value the leverage offered by prestigious roles in leveling gender imbalance. Some research proposes women weigh more factors in career decisions, affording greater priority to status [15]. Further investigation is required to delineate which forces contribute to contemporary undergraduate women valuing status more highly compared to men. Nonetheless, this aligns with evolving sociocultural gender dynamics and workforce expectations [20]. This study also found that college students from villages and towns scored higher on two dimensions of occupational values, normative ethics and benefits, than did those from counties and cities. Close-knit rural communities promote strong moral values and norms of ethical behavior that are deeply ingrained in adolescents in these areas [11]. The interdependence of rural life requires cooperation and responsibility for others. The economic uncertainty of rural areas, along with fewer local employment opportunities, may increase the vocational value students in these areas place on securing a stable, reliable income through a career [13].

Individual values realization occurs in a collective context. Fostering contemporary students' achievement drive, social advancement, ethical orientation, and professional growth aligns with

broader development directions <sup>[15,16]</sup>. Universities play a vital role in shaping vocational values and career trajectories. To promote meaningful values among Chinese students, multidimensional initiatives could be implemented. Self-assessment tools offered through career services, like values clarification, personality, and strengths exercises, can help students identify intrinsically motivating careers matching their talents and passions. Reflective writing assignments also catalyze self-discovery. Mentor-ships with fulfilled professionals allow students to witness purposeful goal pursuit firsthand. Experiential learning via service, projects, and internships enables students to apply skills addressing real community needs, illuminating socially impactful career paths. Conversations nurturing life purpose seed visions beyond status and wealth. Multidisciplinary research, speakers, organizational involvement, and study abroad further widen perspectives. Importantly, showcasing graduates achieving work-life balance, creativity, and altruism provides inspiration. University-employer partnerships can pave practical routes for actualizing meaningful careers. Through comprehensive curricular, co-curricular, and vocational support, universities can empower Chinese students to cultivate flourishing professional values. This strengths-based approach underscores students' agency in proactively selecting career values, while situating their personal growth within a supportive ecosystem. Additional research assessing interventions' effectiveness would further enrich this scholarship. But the promising channels identified here for guiding students toward ethical, contributory, and self-actualizing legacies highlights higher education's unique capacity to shape society's future.

Colleges hold profound influence in shaping students' career perspectives and motivations. To cultivate values focused on social impact, universities should immerse students in diverse real-world experiences revealing societal needs and inspiring engaged citizenship. Integrating service learning across the curriculum enables hands-on volunteerism with underserved communities while connecting these experiences to academic goals. Dedicated campus centers provide hubs for community service and incubating socially conscious solutions. Mentorships help students share their skills and knowledge with disadvantaged youth and older adults, forging meaningful connections and understanding. Courses, competitions and incubators in social entrepreneurship and innovation foster careers aimed at positive change.

The broader campus culture also molds professional values. Lectures, conferences, and events featuring social issues expose students to the challenges facing society and diverse ways to create impact. Recognizing socially responsible faculty, staff and alumni provides inspiration. Study abroad and international exchanges build global awareness and the desire to contribute across cultures. Interdisciplinary capstones, consulting projects and non-profit collaborations enable students to apply their evolving skills to real-world problems. This multidimensional immersion in social innovation equips students with the professional values, mindsets and competencies to tackle pressing societal needs through purposeful careers. Additional assessment of these interventions' effectiveness would further enrich this research area. But the promising channels identified underscore higher education's potential to develop our next generation of socially conscious leaders.

Colleges play a vital role in instilling ethical principles to guide students' future career and life choices. Comprehensive ethics integration across the student experience can reinforce professional values. Academically, ethical case studies, dialogues, and moral reasoning development should permeate curricula beyond just philosophy electives, with assignments applying ethical analysis to real-world situations. Interdisciplinary ethics centers can promote rich scholarship and programming on ethical issues. Student life policies clearly convey expectations through integrity codes and honor systems. Awards highlighting ethical student leaders provide reinforcement. Lectures, seminars and organizations addressing human rights, sustainability, anti-corruption and justice expand perspectives.

For career development, profiling alumni demonstrations of moral courage and principle-centered leadership spotlights post-graduation possibilities. Community service-learning instills ethical practice. By fully engaging students in ethics scholarship, policies, discussion, and application, campuses can cultivate graduates with enduring ethical integrity to guide their professional and civic roles. Further research assessing interventions can enrich this vital area. But the channels identified promise to imbue students with ethical vocational values for facing complex societal challenges.

Colleges may engage students in a multidimensional career development process focused on preparation, exploration, and visioning to instill strong professional values and competencies. Specialized programs concentrate on value clarification, strengths assessments, and skill-building to bolster self-awareness and goal setting. Work-study, internships, and cooperative education provide direct professional experience to solidify interests and competencies. Mentor networks and alumni engagement allow students to learn from seasoned professionals' journeys while gaining advice. Career fairs, employer events, and site visits expose students to diverse roles and sectors. Academically,

project-based learning, case studies and practice interviews bridge classrooms with real-world applications. Robust career centers offer personalized counseling for planning and networking. Technology systems match students to mentors, coaches, internships and jobs based on interests. By emphasizing experiential learning, self-assessment, mentoring and career knowledge across campus, universities can provide students with resources and experiences enabling them to thrive in meaningful careers. Additional research on intervention effectiveness could supplement these best practices. But the combination of curricular, co-curricular and exposure channels highlighted equips students with the values, skills and connections for lifetime professional fulfillment.

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