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# Analysis of Chinese Higher Education from the Perspective of Career Anchor of Undergraduates

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This article presents the outcome of a questionnaire study of career anchor among Chinese undergraduates. The order of career anchor of Chinese undergraduates is presented along with a thorough study of contemporary education in China. Some ideas are introduced and the career anchors are considered concerned the “engines” when educating undergraduates. More attention on this topic is suggested for future studies. Namely, we hope that we can not only educate undergraduates according to their individual career anchors, but also find an effective means to bring their career anchors to better levels in future education.

**Keywords:** Career Anchor, Chinese Undergraduates, Education

## Introduction

It is well known that people are motivated by some thoughts and then make actions based on those thoughts. But why people are engaged in different things? Is there an invisible hand which guides them? The answer to this question is “yes”. The so-called career anchor, which comes from a person's intrinsic nature of congenital inheritance and acquired education, decides one's expectations and demands for his career. In a series of publications during the 1970s and 1980s, Edgar Schein proposed a construct called “career anchor” (Schein, 1975, 1978, 1987). In his early work on career anchor (Schein, 1975, 1978), he posited the existence of five career anchors: (1) technical/functional competence; (2) managerial competence; (3) security and stability; (4) autonomy and independence; and (5) entrepreneurial creativity. In his later work on career anchors, Schein (1987, 1990) proposed three additional career anchors: (6) service and dedication to a cause; (7) pure challenge; and (8) life-style.

Namely, people may behave in different manners with others owing to their special career anchors throughout their entire careers. For example,

- (1) When a person takes technical/functional competence as his career anchor and applies for a job, he is primarily excited by the content of the work itself and prefers advancement only in his technical or functional area of competence.
- (2) When a person takes managerial competence as his

career anchor and applies for a job, he is primarily excited about the opportunity to analyze and solve problems under conditions of incomplete information and uncertainty. He likes harnessing people together to achieve common goals and is always stimulated by crisis situations.

- (3) When a person takes security and stability as his career anchor and applies for a job, whether or not the job can bring him a feeling of security and stability would become his criterion of choice. When this feeling is not strong enough, he will often change his job without hesitation.
- (4) When a person takes entrepreneurial creativity as his career anchor, he is primarily motivated by the need to build or create something that is entirely his own project. Likewise, he is easily bored and likes to move from project to project. He is more interested in initiating new enterprises than in managing established ones.
- (5) When a person takes autonomy and independence as his career anchor and applies for a job, he is primarily motivated to seek work situations which are the most free of organizational constraints. He also wants to set his own schedule and workspace. In sum, he hopes to have much more freedom than others who don't take autonomy and independence as their career anchor.
- (6) When a person takes service and dedication to a cause as his career anchor and applies for a job, he is primarily motivated to improve the world in some fashion and wants to align work activities with personal values

related to helping society.

- (7) When a person takes pure challenge as his career anchor and applies for a job, he might spend all of his time solving almost unsolvable problems through overcoming major obstacles, or win out over extremely tough opponents. He will define his career in terms of daily combat or competition in which winning is everything.
- (8) When a person takes lifestyle as his career anchor and applies for a job, he is primarily motivated to balance career with lifestyle and is highly concerned with such issues as paternity/maternity leaves, day-care options, etc.. He looks for organizations that have strong pro-family values and programs.

From these examples, it can be seen that everyone spares no pains in realizing their career anchors. If one didn't accomplish his goal, he would be incurred by feelings of frustration. On the other hand, one's career anchor is like a blasting fuse, and different blasting fuses will play different roles in promoting and developing one's undertaking.

Many people have been inspired by the results of Edgar Schein's studies. In this study, we want to know about the career anchors of Chinese undergraduates. We made a survey of career anchor distribution and differences among Chinese undergraduates

## Method

### The Subject

In order to survey the distribution of the career anchors among contemporary Chinese undergraduates, we randomly selected samples ( $n=2871$ , Table 1) from a Chinese university in Nov, 2000. Among samples, there are 1815 men and 1056 women.

### Questionnaire

Due to not being able to find the questionnaire used in Edgar Schein's studies, we used the version made by Wang which was translated into Chinese by Wang (1998).

In the Wang questionnaire, there are 72 items. For exam-

ple, "I hope to become a leader in an organization." "I would be very happy if I can be called as an expert." "I can't feel safe unless I am in a stable organization environment." "I want to create something which wasn't created by other people." "I can be satisfied with the situation under which the working schedule is decided by myself." and so on. Objects are demanded to answer these questions as soon as possible without hesitation.

In the questionnaire, there are nine factors of "Speciality" (Specialized in a certain field of science), "Power" (Taking charge of people, material and affairs), "Independence" (Making significant decisions on one's own), "Material reward" (Seeking wealth and high living standard), "Security" (Seeking a stable and forecasted future), "Significance" (An idealist, pondering the value of objects), "Affinity" (To be on good terms with other people), "Status" (Admired and respected by society), and "Originality" (Seeking invention, seeking principle). Each factor includes 8 items.

### Data Collection

We decided to use the Wang questionnaire to develop our study. The reasons are as follows: Firstly, the types of career anchors it describes are very similar to those in Edgar Schein's studies. Secondly, undergraduates are not investigated in the past studies.

We let all subjects answer the questionnaire of career anchor (Wang, 1998). All subjects were arranged in 30 classrooms. All questionnaire were collected. Undergraduates are asked to answer each item. Because each item can get a grade from 0 to 3, 24 are the highest scores of each factor in contrary that 0 are the lowest scores. According to their answers, we summarized their major career anchors.

## Result

Undergraduates thought different factor as their own main career anchor. We calculated the numbers of different factors which was selected as the first career anchor. To each student, the highest score of 9 factors is defined as his first career anchor (Table 2). From the table, it can be seen that "speciality", "power", and "independence" are the top three items. By contrast, "originality" is the last item. The data are as follows (Table 2, frequency as an index):

When we talked with undergraduates about their choices, we found positive responses by most undergraduates and negative responses by only a small number of undergraduates.

One undergraduate noted: "I think highly of the saying

**Table 1**  
**Samples, means and standard deviations**

Gender	Number	Means (age)	Standard deviations
Man	1815	19.398	1.169
Woman	1056	19.423	1.149

**Table 2**  
**The order of the career anchor questionnaire**

Item	Number	Percentage	Sequence
Speciality Specialized in a certain field of science	672	22%	1
Power Taking charge of people, material and affairs	399	13%	2
Independence Making significant decisions on one's own	378	13%	3
Material reward Seeking wealth and high living standard	315	10%	4
Security Seeking a stable and forecasted future	287	10%	5
Significance An idealist, pondering the value of objects	267	9%	6
Affinity To be on good terms with other people	266	9%	7
Status Admired and respected by society	238	8%	8
Originality Seeking invention, seeking principle	49	6%	9

'Take your own road, and pay no attention to what others say'. I dislike restrictions of all sorts. As long as I want to do something, I will break all restrictions. In other words, I like to do things with without worrying about limitations. And if it is impossible now, I will wait for the day when I can do it to come. In sum, I embrace my absolute independence.

Another undergraduate said: "My father is a person of figure. As a child, I used to see many people who continued to pay visit to my father. They flattered my father through reverent and respectful pose. Although I knew all of these were not true, I still wished I could also embrace "power". In order to be a VIP(very important person), I am prepared to pay any price because I have been accustomed to such a way of life."

Another student said: "I can't be satisfied with the existing state of affairs. Born in a family living on salary, many of my desires did not come true. So I wish to become materially wealthy in my future job. Especially in our society, the more I look around, the better I know the importance of money. It could be said that the value of social position and significance are all judged by money on many occasions. In the meantime, material wealth is a very important guarantee for a person like me who wants to live a stable life."

When asked why "originality" lower on the list, many

of the undergraduates failed to answer and were even surprised, because as members of high-qualified circles, they were not willing to believe that they would neglect and even refuse such an important career anchor in the era of the knowledge economy.

## Discussion

Facing such data, we therefore wonder what the "engine" is when educating undergraduates. Looking back on Chinese education, we can see that china has made great progress in "understanding undergraduates, leading undergraduates, and molding undergraduates". We can see this from the result of the questionnaire: undergraduates regard book knowledge as important and they are convinced by their ability to make decisions and enhance their independence. However, we also found problems from the results of this questionnaire. For example, undergraduates neglect the cultivation of "affinity", while even "refuting" the pursuit for "originality". Of course, it can't be said that educators and undergraduates, intentionally give these up in the course of education and receiving education. The likeliest reason may be that we haven't simply handled all of the contradictions existing in education. Therefore, we would like to point out two views

and hope that we can not only educate undergraduates according to their individual career anchors, but also find an effective means for bringing their career anchors to better levels in the future.

1) When we cultivate undergraduates' consciousness of independence, we should also cultivate their spirit of cooperation.

According to the trends of social development, it is not right to only say that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an era full of competition, because it is also an era of cooperation; however, many undergraduates neglect to understand this point. Likewise, Chinese education fails to give first priority to the cultivation of undergraduates' ability to work together with others. Many undergraduates thus think that everything can be done by one's own effort. They fail to see that cooperation is more important than competition in the future. Compared with individual strength, the strength of the collective is even greater. A competitive atmosphere, designed for undergraduates, doesn't reflect true society. In other words, the educational atmosphere, especially the atmosphere of quality education, needs to be a two-way relationship, in which both the qualities of independent competition and team work through collectivism are instructed. The practice of an "examination system without supervision" in Northwest College of Political Science and Law is a good example: one of the rules is that if any student cheats in an examination, the scores of all the undergraduates would be nullified, and therefore all undergraduates must take the examination again. The rule is not so much an exam rule as a good measure of instruction, as an undergraduate said: "We, the younger generation, should recognize the value of team work during our growth. We used to be misled by a one-sided view of competition and thought that a person can accomplish much by himself when he begins his career. So we paid less attention to others. We even ignored the fact that we have to support others at the expense of our own interests on occasion."

2) In the era of a knowledge economy, it is more important for undergraduates to study originally than to apply knowledge mechanically.

From the questionnaire, we find that undergraduates tend to regard "speciality" as their career anchor in study. But when we notice that undergraduates also tend to ignore the importance of "originality", we become aware that the lack of original thinking perplexes not only our scholars, but also our undergraduates. Such a phenomenon is related to the "warehouse theory" popular in the area of education, which claims that "brains are warehouses which are used to store facts." Teaching means to fill up the warehouse and learning

means to acquire knowledge. The more facts one knows and the more knowledge one collects, the more learned one is and the sooner one can become a specialist. However, in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with high rhythm, technology, risk, competition, and stress, the rapid growth of knowledge is an undeniable fact. "Warehouse talents" (those who only know how to store knowledge, but don't know how to use it) who only store knowledge don't have the ability to tackle the situation using constantly changing and accumulating knowledge in such a social environment. If a person only stores knowledge and doesn't apply it in a creative way, he will be cast off by society. From this viewpoint, the current method of training talent is not suitable to the needs of the knowledge economy. This situation is caused by the current unchangeable theory regarding the educational system. As a result, undergraduates think in a single set way and have a narrow sphere of thinking. They are unable to bring forth new ideas on the basis of old knowledge. As some scholars (Ye., J, 1986) have pointed out: "At present, the regular education fails to teach undergraduates to construct something significant by themselves; on the contrary, educators impose something significant on the undergraduates. Thus, what obedient children should do is just mechanically memorize facts. An effective education is only considered as imbuing undergraduates with rigid rules, similar to an assembly line". As one guiding principle, it is right for us to strengthen our "speciality"; however, it is more important for us to cultivate our "original" talents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Originality", which brings along "speciality", is the sustained resource for the achievement and development of undergraduates. At present, it is undeniable that the "Challenge Cup" competition which is popular on campuses provides fertile soil for cultivating the originality of undergraduates. Through these activities, undergraduates can realize that they should be the ones that bring forth the new ideas of the future. They must learn to use new ideas to replace the current unchangeable ideas that have existed from time immemorial down to the present day in education. Although thinking like this may seem somewhat absurd, Newton would not have invented the law of universal gravitation if he only had had the mode of thinking that states that apples are to be eaten.

Thus, we suggest that when teachers impart knowledge, perhaps they should adopt a slower pace and spend more time inducing the consciousness of thinking in their students at various angles. If schools could provide enough flexibility for training undergraduates in this way, undergraduates could be subconsciously encouraged by their own "originality", and originality would then become the momentum that promotes

the development of their careers.

In sum, this paper presents the argument that "career anchor" is an important engine which should be given much more attention by educators. There needs to be a new perspective toward quality education, and we believe that research on this topic will increase in the future.

3) The guarantee of the realization of career anchor-giving the right of finding one's career anchor to undergraduates

If undergraduates have only their career anchors, this will not be enough to sufficiently help them achieve success in their careers. For example, if undergraduates want to directly pursue their own career anchors, they will encounter many obstacles. Their parents, friends, and others will throw obstacles in their way. This is because these people will use their measures of value to judge whether the undergraduates' chosen career anchors are right or not. They don't care about the true career anchors of undergraduates. On the contrary, they will tend to inhibit undergraduates from beginning to pursue their cause according to their inner motivation, because such people often unconsciously think that they have much more experience than undergraduates and know what is better for them. This results in undergraduates that fall into a pattern too early and too firmly. When this pattern does not suit undergraduates' own inner motivation, the result will be a trend of unstable characteristics, lack of persistence, blaming god and man, and of not wanting to continue to work toward their cause. In order to solve this problem, we think that the best solution is to give the right of finding one's own career anchor to the undergraduate. The task of the university is then to help undergraduates but not to confine them. At the same time, educators should help undergraduates to cultivate a correct standard for summing up their experience and stimulating their higher levels of achievement motivation. Thus, undergraduates will be able to pursue their dreams in accordance with their own career anchors and learn through their personal experience whether or not the experience is successful. Through all of these experiences, undergraduates will develop a positive mode for being able to summarize the cause and effect relationships of success and defeat. This is the process that can become a guarantee of the realization of individual career anchors. From this discussion, it is not difficult to make the following conclusion: a good awareness about the importance of realizing career anchors has been established. We think that such awareness is also the key to the future of education in Chinese universities.

In sum, it is time for us to make a serious some analysis of Chinese higher education from the perspective of the career anchor of undergraduates.

## Future studies

This study is only a survey among Chinese undergraduates. We found much important information through the analysis of the career anchors of Chinese undergraduates. Due to time restrictions, however, we haven't made any deeper comparisons, such as between genders, districts, etc.. At the same time, we found that there are many worries caused by career anchors among Chinese undergraduates. In the future, we hope to continue this study and develop a system through which we can gain a better understanding of their psychology as well as assist undergraduates in finding their career anchors and adjusting them to a degree that which is suitable to both their personalities and social demands.

On the other hand, the questionnaire we used was translated from English to Chinese by Wang Z. (1998). In order to better consider cultural factors, we should develop a questionnaire which is more suitable to Chinese undergraduates. This would allow us to obtain even more valuable and convincing data which would reflect the true distribution of career anchors among Chinese undergraduates.

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