

*Individuals' Motivations for Selecting a Liberal Arts Major:  
Evidence From a Transnational University in China*

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The Asian Conference on Education 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

In the Chinese context, there is a tendency to divide college majors into two broad categories: STEM—or those with direct vocational implications in their titles, such as Engineering and Computer Science—and Liberal Arts, which are seen as being less directly linked to a certain job position, such as disciplines in the Arts, Humanities and many of the Social Sciences. In this paper, the rationales for individuals to have selected a liberal arts major at a transnational university are unraveled. This study strives to capture the mental journey of these young adults before their embarkation on their educational experiences, namely how they mapped their anticipated future blueprints into immediate major choices within limited time period. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with students and graduates who enrolled in two non-applied, non-vocational first-degree programs: International Relations and Communications, at a transnational campus. Empirical data collection and analysis suggest that: (1) Students' major decisions are often intertwined with their choice of university, particularly regarding the characteristics of Sino-foreign institutions; (2) The majority of students were excluded from their initially desired majors due to their scores on the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao); (3) Some students exhibited a rational understanding of their strengths, preferences, and career plans, while others acknowledged making decisions without sufficient information; (4) A small group of students is intrinsically motivated by the liberal arts, and possesses unique perceptions and expectations that align with the principles of a liberal arts education.

Keywords: Liberal Arts, College Major, Transnational University

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## Introduction

Since the expansion of higher education in China, an increasing number of Chinese students have been admitted to colleges and universities, providing broader access to tertiary education for the general population (Li & Xing, 2010). Notably, the choice of a college major has become a crucial decision for many individuals, as it significantly impacts their future career paths and personal development. In the Chinese context, there is a tendency to divide college majors into two broad categories: STEM—or those with direct vocational implications in their titles, such as Engineering and Computer Science—and Liberal Arts, which are seen as being less directly linked to a certain job position, such as disciplines in the Arts, Humanities and many of the Social Sciences. While liberal arts majors are popular among students seeking a well-rounded and interdisciplinary education, they also encounter complex issues influenced by employment concerns, a perceived lack of practicality, and social and cultural pressures (Zhang et al., 2024).

Recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in liberal arts education in China, particularly within transnational higher education settings (Postiglione, 2016). TNHE institutions often position themselves as incubators of critical thinking, creativity, and global competencies, attracting numerous students searching for alternative pathways to traditional education (Montgomery, 2016). However, little is known about the motivations that drive these students to pursue liberal arts majors over more vocationally oriented programs. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the motivations of individuals who select a liberal arts major at a transnational university in China. It sheds light on the factors influencing their decisions, and explores the implications for the development of higher education in the broader context of global educational trends and societal transformations.

## Literature Review

### Concepts and Terminology

Diverse interpretations have been made of the concept of “liberal arts”, and it lacks a consistently applied definition. In Chinese literature, terms such as “liberal arts education” (literally translated as profound and elegant education) and “general education” (common knowledge education) refer to various manifestations of holistic or whole-person education, and can be used interchangeably (Jiang, 2014). Some Chinese universities have established liberal arts colleges or programs, which further complicates the meaning of this concept in China and potentially beyond. To avoid misunderstandings, the study reported in this paper adheres to the use of “liberal arts” to primarily denote the non-applied, non-vocational disciplines of study that do not lead to a specific job position, such as those in the Arts, Humanities, and many of the Social Sciences. This paper also discusses liberal arts as a general educational philosophy that “*empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility*” (AAC&U, 2002, p. 25). As mentioned, this philosophy is adopted by many universities in offering their respective curricula and educational experiences, which are expected to be accessible to all students.

### Contemporary LA Practices in China

From the 1950s onward, the Soviet model was adopted as an effective means of promoting the development of a socialist economy. The liberal arts were inevitably neglected due to social changes and practical demands of the time. Before the early 1990s, “specialization”

was a characteristic of the Chinese undergraduate curriculum, resulting in scarce connections among different institutions and disciplines (Wang & Li, 2001). While the positive influence of the Soviet model on education is acknowledged, Li (2001, p. 112) argues that the omission of the humanities and social sciences has led to the emergence of individuals who are “*lopsidedly-developed*”. This consequence was gradually recognized and addressed in Chinese education policy, especially after the 1990s, when efforts were made to revive the philosophy of liberal education with Chinese characteristics, culminating in the adoption of Suzhi Education (Pang et al., 2020). The backdrop to China’s Suzhi Education was the country’s reform and opening-up period, during which policymakers acknowledged that the strength of the nation had to depend on the quality of its people.

Moreover, Wang (2004) asserts that with the rapid expansion of higher education, today’s college students are in need of an education that not only imparts specialized knowledge, but also fosters their social responsibility, critical thinking, and creativity. In other words, Chinese students are expected to acquire both knowledge and skills, while simultaneously developing into responsible citizens with a range of comprehensive qualities, such as independent thinking and sound judgment. As some universities have implemented a liberal arts curriculum as part of their culturally-oriented quality education, others have introduced “common courses” that are available to all students within the university (Li & Cao, 2024). These practices reflect the belief that undergraduate students should receive a well-rounded education alongside their professional studies.

## **Major Decisions and Choices**

As the knowledge-based economy diversifies, the decision regarding a major and career is likely to become increasingly difficult. Factors such as job availability, income potential, gender suitability, and personal passion significantly affect students’ choices of majors (Kuhail et al., 2022). While college majors yield varying economic outcomes, these differences do not diminish the overall value of a university education (Atuahene, 2021). In countries like the United States, the top three factors influencing a college student’s choice of an academic major are personal interest, parental guidance, and potential income (Stock & Stock, 2019). In fact, many incoming college freshmen remain undecided about their majors, and their decisions to change majors stem from various reasons, including the challenges associated with their initial majors, the influence of their college instructors, and parental expectations (Jaradat, 2017). It is important to note that intrinsic motivations and internal extrinsic motivations are positively correlated with college students’ satisfaction and sense of belonging, and vice versa (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Furthermore, Soria and Stebleton (2013) conducted a conceptual examination of students’ motivations for selecting their majors through the lens of self-determination theory, which differentiates between intrinsic motivation and various extrinsic sources of motivation, leading to different outcomes. For Chinese students, however, the impact of social values and family is often profound, making the choice of a college major a careful balance of risks, costs, benefits, values, and social conditions (Zhao, 2022).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Context**

The Gaokao, or the National College Entrance Examination, plays a crucial role in determining the universities and majors that Chinese students can pursue. Outstanding results

open doors to prestigious institutions regardless of a student's socio-economic background. University A, one of the leading branch campuses in China, is a first-tier institution established in 2004 through a partnership between a Chinese entity and a British university. It claims to offer all courses in English or other foreign languages and follows a curriculum framework identical to that of the host university (Lu, 2018). Although University A is transitioning towards a liberal arts program, its curriculum still places a stronger emphasis on Business and Engineering, with a comparatively minor focus on Humanities and Social Sciences, which bridges those two faculties.

## **Research Design**

The purpose of this research is to uncover the underlying motivations behind students' choices, and to capture the mental journey of these young adults before they embark on their educational experiences. Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm is deemed the most appropriate and effective approach for providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the topic under investigation. The author used qualitative research methods to gather data suitable for in-depth analysis embedded within a case study.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who were well-suited to address the core research question. The participants included senior undergraduate students, recent graduates with a liberal arts degree, and faculty members who teach liberal arts courses at University A. This study involved individuals from two majors in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at University A. The first major allows students to explore topics such as international relations, global history, and political science (hereafter abbreviated as IR). The second major focuses on communication, culture, languages, and emerging forms of media (hereafter abbreviated as CC). Additionally, individuals who self-identified as "special" or "unusual", such as those who transferred from other majors back to liberal arts, were particularly encouraged to participate and share their experiences.

A deeper analysis of the data commenced once all semi-structured interviews were completed. The author acted as both the interviewer and the transcriber, effectively managing the extensive data generated from the case study. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain their authenticity in relation to the originals. Given the nature and purpose of this study, an inductive approach was utilized to develop the analytical framework from the data. After managing and preparing the transcripts, coding was carried out to identify sections of the text that corresponded to relevant categories and subcategories pertinent to the research (Creswell, 2014). Then, a grounded thematic approach to analysis was used to identify the underlying patterns and themes that "*capture something important*" across the data related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). To ensure the quality of the research, the author emphasized a rigorous methodology and careful interpretation of the findings. Ethical considerations were also taken into account at different stages, including the preparation for conducting the study, accessing research samples, data collection, data analysis, and post-processing of data.

## Findings

### “Choosing” the University

#### 1. Restriction of Gaokao Score

When asked about their reasons for attending University A, several participants recounted their challenging experiences with the Gaokao admission system. After completing the Gaokao, students intending to enroll in domestic tertiary education must fill out an application form, indicating their preferred institutions and majors. Those who achieve higher scores have a greater chance of being admitted to their desired institutions and fields of study. However, one student expressed the opinion that University A was usually not the first choice for Chinese students:

*“If you ask this question to most students at [University A], their responses would likely be, ‘I failed the Gaokao exam’. Many of them aspired to go to a prestigious 985 university, but their scores only qualified them for an average 985 or a reputable 211 university. So they came here to explore the possibility of pursuing postgraduate studies abroad.”* (Yu, F, Year 3)

“Project 985” and “Project 211” are initiatives implemented by the Ministry of Education to enhance the quality of higher education in China. Launched in 1998, Project 985 aims to establish first-class, high-level universities that rank among the world’s best and can support China’s modernization efforts. Project 211, initiated in 1995, focuses on strengthening key disciplines which were essential for China’s socio-economic development in the twenty-first century (Lin & Wang, 2022). Chinese students predominantly favor the universities selected by the government for these projects. Those who aspire to excel and leverage their high scores for admission to prestigious universities may perceive the admission standards of University A as low and, therefore, choose not to apply:

*“I think it largely depends on your Gaokao score. You should then consider the universities that correspond with it. At that time, the entry score for [University A] was slightly higher than the minimum cut-off for Tier 1.”* (Ann, F, working)

However, for those whose performance was unexpectedly unsatisfactory, it was necessary to prepare a “fallback” option that would lead them to an alternative destination. For instance, another student, Jin (F, Year 4), recalled that she was initially unable to gain admission to her target institution, which was both a Project 985 and 211 university. Yet she was reluctant to attend other Chinese universities because they did not appear as reputable in her eyes.

#### 2. The Important Others

To explore other possibilities, students like Jin, who suffered a setback, sought support from the experiences and advice of those around them:

*“Other people mentioned that [University A] had a positive atmosphere and was generally pretty good, which influenced my decision. It took me no more than three days to familiarize myself with the university and make my choice.”* (Jin, F, Year 4)

Since University A has a shorter history than most traditional Chinese universities, students typically have limited knowledge about it before their enrollment. Although Jin felt disappointed about missing her preferred university, the recommendations from others convinced her that University A would be a worthwhile investment for the next four years.

Similarly, “other people” played a crucial role for a few participants:

*“A friend of my father said [University A] was not bad. He also has a student who went there.”* (Xuan, F, working)

*“It was primarily because one of my relatives has a son who studies at [University A]. He felt it was pretty good. The feedback was positive.”* (Tao, M, Year 3)

As University A is not widely recognized, it is possible that Xuan and Tao overlooked it and did not include it in their initial list of choices. However, their decision-making process was inadvertently influenced by “critical incidents” and “important others”, such as friends and relatives, who ultimately altered their educational and even career paths to a considerable extent. These “incidental others” are common in the lives of participants and can sometimes provide a substantial source of rationality.

### **3. Special Institutional Advantages**

University A may be viewed as a last resort by some “unfortunate” students. However, many others perceived its advantages, particularly when compared to other non-985 and non-211 universities, as distinctive qualities. Respondents primarily identified these qualities as English-medium instruction and opportunities for studying abroad. These advantages are often assessed based on publicly available information and are linked to individuals’ personal values and aspirations:

*“While skimming through the application guidebook, I noticed that the university emphasizes English, which I found quite appealing. I have a strong interest in languages.”* (Yan, F, working)

Instead of choosing a major, Yan initially contemplated studying the English language, seeing it as an important ability and an area of interest for her university education. Given her limited understanding of University A, she believed that pursuing a foreign education would at least improve her English language proficiency, a skill she considered essential for her future.

In addition, as University A was very internationalized, Yan’s parents were attracted to it, believing that the atmosphere—where one could “experience the British educational environment”—was a key advantage. Similarly, Xiao described herself as someone who “could have attended several prestigious Chinese universities” but chose to enroll at University A on a scholarship. She shared her positive impression, which stood in contrast to those of many other participants:

*“I like [University A] because its atmosphere is distinct from that of other typical Chinese universities. There is a greater sense of freedom, which I truly value. English is also one of my strengths.”* (Xiao, F, Year 4)

Having achieved a significantly higher Gaokao score above the Tier 1 cut-off, Xiao could have selected a university that many would consider “better” and made a more conventional decision. However, she stated that she had “deliberately disregarded other options”. Evidently, performing well on Gaokao granted Xiao the autonomy to determine how she wishes to navigate her journey. By opting not to join the crowded, conformist majority, she pursued distinctiveness, which could serve as a compelling advantage but also presented a potentially high-risk strategy.

## “Choosing” the Liberal Arts Major

### 1. Allocation of Admission System

Unlike the most popular majors at University A, such as Finance and Business, International Relations (IR) and Communication and Culture (CC) are less sought after, with relatively lower average entry scores. Many participants admitted that their enrollment in IR was “an accident” and that they were “reallocated” to this field by the Gaokao admission system. Others remembered their initial choices, which were entirely different from IR or CC:

*“The most realistic reason was that I did not achieve a high enough score. At first, I chose Business because I was interested in the subject. However, I was assigned to [CC] due to my insufficient score.”* (Ting, F, Year 3)

Many participants intended to study Business—a degree regarded as more “useful” in their own eyes or those of their parents. However, after competing with other students, they were unable to pursue their preferred major due to their scores. The tendency of these individuals, along with many other Chinese students, to prioritize vocational paths stems from historical and cultural influences. Following China’s reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, the population was confronted with new risks, uncertainties, and the necessity of self-responsibility, moving away from the expectation of permanent, lifelong employment that had previously prevailed (Liu, 2023). Consequently, the generation of these students’ parents often exhibits heightened sensitivity to risks. As a result, professional fields such as business, medical science, and engineering are considered as more favorable career paths due to their stability and potential for higher financial returns:

*“I think [IR] does not have the reputation that Computer Science and Business have among Chinese parents. Chinese parents seem to think that choosing [IR] is sort of like choosing Philosophy... or you know, something abstract that you can never get a job.”* (Gary, M, professor in IR)

As a professor, Gary observed that in China, the utilitarian perspective—viewing university education primarily as preparation for the job market—remains dominant. Students’ parents, who tend to be conservative and risk-averse, are actively involved and can become influential decision-makers in their children’s selection of majors.

### 2. Ignorance of Major

Unlike those who were “obsessed” with hard disciplines, a few participants claimed that they did not give much thought to their chosen majors. Xiao (F, Year 4), a top performer who chose University A, admitted that she “did not think much” after Gaokao about what she wanted to study or her future plans. Another participant, Min, mentioned that she could not

recall the majors she had selected back then, but ultimately found herself studying IR. She speculated that her initial choice was not IR, but acknowledged that she had no clear ideas about majors at that time.

As Min enrolled in IR unwittingly, some other students, despite being aware of their preferences, had only a superficial understanding of what they were about to study. For instance, Ting (F, Year 3) believed it was a coincidence that she studied CC, stating that she “did not know anything about this major before”. Similarly, Qing (F, Year 4) described herself as “quite naïve... did not think too much... [and had] not expected the course content [of CC] to be like this”. Another student evaluated the major solely based on her subjective impression:

*“I picked up the pamphlet of [University A] and skimmed through it to see if I liked the title of the major. I did not analyze the introduction below the major in detail, nor did I fully understand its meaning. However, I felt that the Business major had a distinctly international appeal.”* (Yan, F, working)

Yan admitted that a glimpse of the Business major’s name led her to associate it with “international trade and aspects like that”, which she found very appealing. However, she did not explore her thoughts any further.

Fortunately, there were still a few participants who believed that studying IR or CC aligned with their academic strengths and capabilities, thereby improving their competitiveness. Thus, it was regarded as a relatively rational choice:

*“During high school, I developed a strong interest in interdisciplinary subjects that encompassed politics and history, which ultimately influenced my decision to major in fields such as [IR].”* (Qing, F, Year 4)

Qing was then enrolled in CC, and convinced herself that “there might be another way out”, indicating her uncertainty about whether CC was truly the right choice. Yet she found it “acceptable”, suggesting that she was potentially capable of pursuing a career in this field afterwards. More importantly, she was candid about her primary goal, which was to study at University A rather than to choose a specific major.

### **3. An Unusual Decision**

A small number of participants transferred from more popular majors to IR and CC. Of particular interest are the decisions made by two female students, Xiao and Yu, who switched from Finance to IR and CC respectively after one year of study. Xiao described Finance as “very boring”, stating that the student group was “homogeneous and not very interesting”. She felt there were “too many straight-A students”, which led to fierce competition characterized by “numerous certificates to prepare for” and “ceaseless internships”. A more significant factor influencing her decision to change was her observation that “the majority of students in Finance had similar development paths and engaged in similar activities”. Xiao transferred to IR from Finance, hoping her university education would be “exploratory”, “humanistic”, and one that could “bring passion to life”:

*“Students in [IR] were more active. My Finance classmates behaved like high school students in class; their responses were often similar. But in [IR], everyone was eager*

*to share their ideas, which were quite diverse. For example, one female student expressed that her dream was to become a shepherdess.” (Xiao, F, Year 4)*

Xiao appreciated the open-minded perspectives and attitudes of IR students, and she was more inclined to engage with those who embraced a variety of lifestyles. She was, however, not the only student who enjoyed meeting people with diverse interests, hobbies, and ideas. Yu, a student who transferred from Finance to CC, considered herself “a very communicative person” with “a colorful life.” Yu described her choice of veering to CC as very sensible because “everyone was very capable in the Finance major”, which, once again, fostered intense competition. Therefore, she opted to leverage her personal strengths, such as communication skills and creativity, as her “professional advantage” by directly studying CC. In her view, graduates in Finance, and possibly in Business, are in oversupply in the Chinese labor market:

*“The Finance major is highly popular in China, with many universities offering related programs. Although the demand for graduates in this field is limited, the number of students pursuing this major is virtually limitless.” (Yu, F, Year 4)*

Furthermore, after changing her major to IR, Xiao wondered whether she possessed the same capacity to study a more applied subject. To address her concerns, she independently enrolled in an online course on financial management and completed the exams for the Finance major at University A to reassure herself of her abilities. She then demonstrated that she was more than capable of passing these exams. This experience strongly boosted her confidence in her learning skills, and she asserted that much of the content in Finance “can be learned on your own”. This realization provided her with a sense of relief as she pursued a liberal arts discipline.

Another male student, Ran, initially enrolled in the Computer Science major but later switched to IR on his own initiative. His motivation for making this unconventional decision derived from his critical understanding of the role of a university, which he associated with a liberal arts education:

*“I was profoundly influenced by the idea that at university, we should prioritize developing a way of thinking and fostering a habit of lifelong learning over solely acquiring specific skills. Therefore, the choice of major is not of utmost importance; what holds greater significance is the cultivation of values. So I chose [IR], which is a rather ‘vague’ discipline.” (Ran, M, working)*

## **Discussion**

Based on the findings, it can be inferred that individuals’ motivations for pursuing a liberal arts major are primarily influenced by socio-economic factors. Sino-foreign universities typically charge much higher tuition fees than domestic institutions. This disparity implies that the socio-economic status of the interviewees could provide a social foundation for their pursuit of a liberal arts major and personal fulfillment. Indeed, the possession of social and cultural capital plays a crucial role in the admission processes of European and American liberal arts colleges, which tend to favor applicants from advantaged backgrounds (Lewis, 2016). In China, Hu and Wu (2017, p. 190) found that:

*those with greater endowment of cultural capital are more likely to come from socioeconomically advantaged families, and, at the same time, demonstrate a stronger propensity to major in liberal arts fields rather than science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.*

At University A, the few exceptions who transferred from STEM or business to liberal arts all came from privileged family backgrounds and exhibited decent cultural capital through their understanding of a “proper” university education. Thus, they were empowered to take on the risks associated with choosing a major that contradicts the utilitarian perspective on employability and higher education.

Secondly, the curricula of liberal arts education have been implemented in various regional contexts, each characterized by distinct academic traditions, structures, and cultures. This illustrates how the practice and interpretation of this educational philosophy can vary based on differing contextual needs, beliefs, and values (Kirby & Van der Wende, 2016). A persistent identification of liberal arts education can be its distinction from education aimed at professional purposes (The Yale Report, 1828). A “professional” education prepares students for specific roles demanded by the labor market, while a “liberal” education equips students with fundamental knowledge and skills applicable in various life situations. In this regard, President Xi (2024) also continues to advocate for a well-rounded education and the development of an education system that fosters “*a new generation of young people who possess comprehensive moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic grounding, along with a strong work ethic*”. Thus, universities and society should collaborate to create a more balanced and healthy educational environment by promoting a broader definition of success that encompasses not only academic achievements but also personal growth, creativity, and social responsibility. Sino-foreign joint ventures could positively influence other Chinese universities by nurturing well-rounded individuals and contributing to societal progress.

In recent years, University A has welcomed a growing number of students with exceptional Gaokao scores, particularly in business-related majors, which consistently have the highest admission requirements. Some students have chosen to pursue majors deemed the “strongest”, believing that choosing a major with the highest Gaokao score would maximize the utility of their scores. Participants who previously followed the high school Liberal Arts track were ineligible to select pure STEM majors; however, they were given the opportunity to study business-related fields once they achieved the required admission score. Many perceive these fields as more applied, specific, and lucrative compared to “pure” Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Nevertheless, driven by this score-oriented mindset, many students may later find themselves uncertain about which major to pursue or may have simply followed their parents’ advice. Besides, as the university selection mechanism has changed in some provinces of China—where students must choose specific disciplines rather than purely universities—the decision-making process has become increasingly complex. Therefore, there is an urgent need for activities that assist high school students in making informed educational and career plans. Initiatives such as school visits and lectures can help them prepare for their futures well in advance.

## **Conclusion**

This study analyzed the motivations of individuals pursuing a liberal arts major at a transnational university in China. Empirical data collection and analysis suggest that: (1) Students’ major decisions are often intertwined with their choice of university, particularly

regarding the characteristics of Sino-foreign institutions; (2) The majority of students were excluded from their initially desired majors because of their scores on the College Entrance Examination (Gaokao); (3) Some students exhibited a rational understanding of their strengths, preferences, and career plans, while others acknowledged making decisions without sufficient information; (4) A small group of students is intrinsically motivated by the liberal arts, and possesses unique perceptions and expectations that align with the principles of a liberal arts education. In summary, despite the encouraging trend of rising admission scores at University A, there are many unusual, intricate, and potentially unpredictable factors influencing students' decision-making processes. These complexities are likely to remain hidden without engaging with students in a way that facilitates thorough exploration.

Due to its qualitative sampling and processing techniques, this research is neither generalizable nor statistically representative. The applicability of data is limited to other universities offering liberal arts majors and to individuals enrolled in different liberal arts programs. However, the findings could be enhanced by incorporating quantitative data collection and analysis, which would enable the investigation of correlations among different demographic variables, such as gender, family background, and personal experiences. Another limitation is that practical issues related to curriculum design were not fully addressed, and were not the primary focus of this study. The selected humanities and social science disciplines from the two cases are temporarily referred to as "liberal arts", but if a deeper pedagogical perspective is employed, the content, format, and organization of the courses may offer a better understanding of their characteristics.

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