

## Public Affairs Students' Government Career Preference: Comparing China and Singapore

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### Abstract

Contemporary research reveals that distinctive job features and personal values, particularly within the public sector, play a pivotal role in influencing career preferences. This research adopts a comparative angle by analysing the job motivators of public affairs students from two East Asian countries, China and Singapore. We identified five key motivators influencing career preferences, namely altruism, the desire for job security, valuing a high salary, need for job autonomy, and opportunity for growth and development. Across the aggregate sample, each of these factors emerged as important predictors of students' preference for government employment. However, the extent of their influence varies across the two sample countries. Findings suggested that the negative impact of the need for job autonomy on public sector preference was more pronounced among Singaporean than Chinese students. Conversely, the negative association between the opportunity for growth and development and public sector preference was stronger in the Chinese than Singaporean sample. Additionally, valuing high salary and opportunity for growth and development increased the likelihood of preferring public sector careers among the Singaporean sample, whereas both factors showed a negative correlation in the Chinese sample. These findings are followed by some theoretical and practical implications.

**Keywords:** career preferences, job motivations, public sector careers, comparative study

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## I. Introduction

Job sector preferences of students from public administrative programs remain an important area of research, with its amplified impact on the recruitment of quality public workers and the design of curricula for public administration education programs (Tschirhart et al., 2008). Over the past decade, much research has concentrated on how the differences in job characteristics and work values between existing private and public employees have influenced career choices (Korac et al., 2019). This includes the study of sector switching, which explores the motivational factors behind employees' changing of sectors and the potential convergence of values between the public and private sectors (Hansen, 2014).

In recent literature, public service motivation (PSM) has redirected attention from existing to prospective employees, using PSM to predict an individual's inclination to enter the public service (Vandenabeele, 2008). For instance, studies have found that individuals with prosocial attitudes are more likely to prefer public sector employment, whereas individuals with a higher need for autonomy are more likely to switch from the public to the private sector (Hansen, 2014; Ng & Gossett, 2013). Millennials, with their focus on the meaning of work, drive for self-development and desire for societal contribution have also indicated a higher preference to pursue public sector employment (Ng & Gossett, 2013).

Aside from PSM, scholars argue that extrinsic factors, such as remuneration and job security also influence preferences for public sector careers. Despite the prevailing assumption that public employees are predominantly more motivated by altruistic factors than by monetary rewards, research has found that remuneration undeniably plays an important role in their decision-making process (Taylor, 2005). On the other hand, while salary in the public sector is anecdotally less competitive than in the private sector, public service remains an attractive career option due to favourable employment conditions such as high job security (Van de Walle et al., 2015).

Notwithstanding the extensive exploration of individual motives and needs in the pursuit of public sector employment, the validity of these findings remains questionable when viewed through the lens of non-Western perspectives (Ongaro,

2021). For example, contrary to the general disdain for bureaucracy and lack of trust in government entities common in Western states, public service is regarded as a prestigious and popular profession in East Asian societies, such as China, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, which has Confucian cultural roots ranging back in history (Chen et al., 2022). However, within these East Asian states, there lies distinctive differences in public sector career preferences due to their unique historical developments and their administrative contexts (Frederickson, 2002; Van Der Wal, 2015). Norris (2003) further proposed three key factors, namely cultural distinction, public service reform and labour economy that influences public sector job preferences between different countries.

However, comparative studies examining the influence of sociocultural and administrative contexts on motivational factors toward sectoral career preferences remain scarce—particularly in East Asia, where states are generally perceived to share a cultural identity. In this study we aim to explore the motivations towards public sector job preferences through the lens of sociocultural influence and administrative context, using a sample of university students studying public affairs from China and Singapore. We propose that the comparison between both countries offers an interesting contrast, showcasing how their historical development, administrative context and societal norms shape preferences for public sector employment. We will explore how different motivation factors, namely: altruism, the desire for job security, valuing a high salary, need for job autonomy and opportunity for growth and development, influence public career preferences for public affairs students in both states.

## **II. The Study Context**

In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in demand for public affairs education in East Asia. This demand is often linked to countries' own intent to cultivate future public servants, as well as students' own preferences for careers in the public service (Dressel & Stern, 2021). In this study, we have chosen Singapore and China as our study context to offer a unique comparative perspective on how sociocultural dynamics, labour conditions and administrative context shape

preferences for public service careers. We will further consider the differences between the two states in areas such as government leadership and the recruitment processes for public employees.

### **A. Cultural context: Traditions and values shaping**

In response to the phenomenal rapid rise of East Asian states, Hofstede and Bond (1988) proposed that this could be partly attributed to the cultural traits of Confucianism which had shaped the region's path to global competitiveness. Culture, deeply embedded in the social fabric of a country, extends beyond individuals and further permeates into the institutional and organisational structures that govern society. In the context of public administration, it can be seen as a byproduct of the broader societal environment in which it operates, where national culture influences organisational practices in the bureaucracy (Giacomelli et al., 2024; Jreisat, 2017). However, some scholars argued that Asian values, particularly those rooted in Confucianism – such as the emphasis on respect for hierarchy, were leveraged to exert political control and legitimise the centralised power of the ruling government (Pezzutto, 2019).

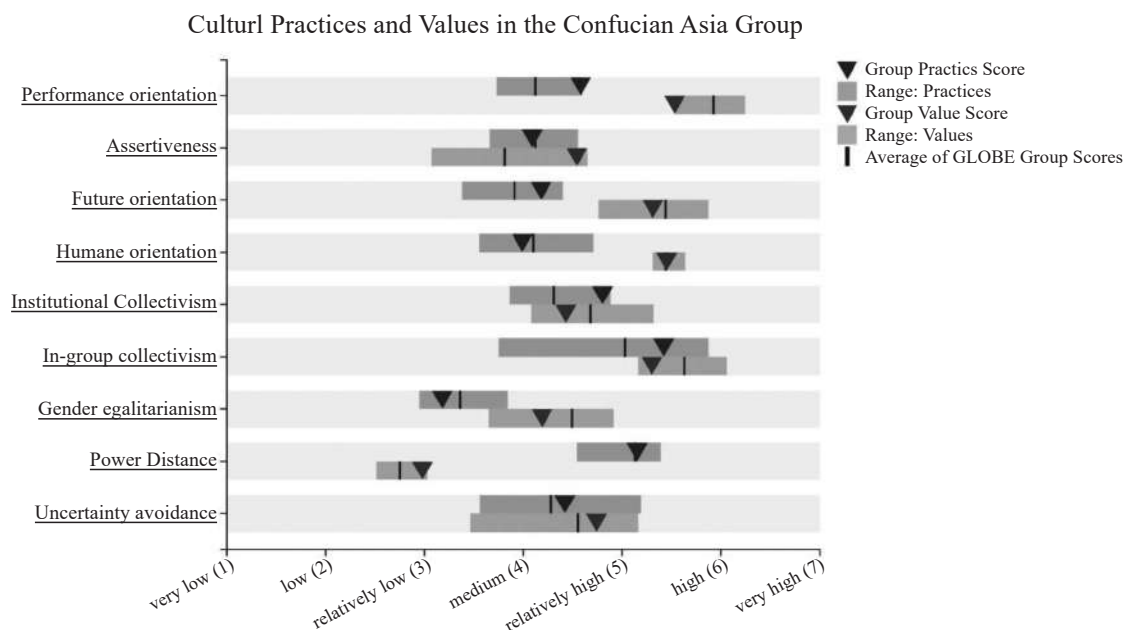
To understand the influence of national culture, Hofstede's landmark model on cultural differences has been widely cited as a foundational framework. According to Hofstede (2001), there are a total of 6 value dimensions to examine cultural values, namely: Individualism/collectivism, power distance, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term/short-term orientation and indulgence/restraint. Building on Hofstede's research, the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behavior Effectiveness) programme further expanded the context to provide more comprehensive knowledge on the variation among different cultures (Hofstede, 2006; House et al., 2004).

In this study, we have chosen China and Singapore as the study context. The GLOBE programme had grouped both states as part of the Confucian Asia typology, which includes other societies such as Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. Results suggested that societies in this typology generally exhibited high scores in areas such as Power Distance and Collectivism (*Results - GLOBE Project*,

n.d.). High Power Distance refers to the society's general acceptance of unequal distribution of authority and power differences as a means to ensure structure and social stability, whereas Collectivism emphasizes the value of collective action and group cohesion. While high Power Distance and strong Collectivism are not exclusive to Confucian values, these traits are particularly pronounced in societies influenced by Confucian traditions (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, we recognise that there are also distinct differences in how each state has evolved within its cultural and political framework. For example, Singapore was ranked relatively high in future orientation and lower in humane orientation, whereas China was ranked medium in future orientation and higher in human orientation. These findings can be explained partly in terms of the cultural context.

**Figure 1**  
*Cultural Practice in the Confucian Typology*

Culture Visualization



Source: Compiled by the authors.

In recent years, China has seen a resurgence of Confucian ideals, frequently appearing in government speeches, reports and even internal guidelines for party

members (Wang, 2024; Zhang, 2014; Zhao, 2018). One key principle of Confucian principles is the concept of “*Wu Lun*”, which depicts the hierarchical order in the society where individuals should act in accordance with their societal status to preserve harmony from the family unit to broader society (Lee et al., 2020). This hierarchical framework is also evident in the Chinese government, with a core leadership that embodies paternalistic values and fosters a culture of authority and responsibility. Another fundamental aspect of social life within Chinese community is the “*guanxi*” network system which is rooted in Confucian principles on relationship and reciprocity. Such informal relationships are not only accepted but even encouraged in the Chinese community, with such practices used to navigate formal structures in the bureaucracy (Zhou, 2021). Over time, this system has evolved into intricate social networks formed on reciprocal favours and mutual interests that influences business dealings, politics and even daily life (Chen & Kuo, 2023).

On the other hand, Singapore adopted its own interpretation of Confucian values during its early formation years to shape the identity of the nation and guide its development. In light of its pluralistic societal fabric, the PAP has actively propagated a Confucian-like collective shared vision among its citizens since its early founding days, promoting societal well-being over individual interests (Tan, 2012). The state’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, was a vocal advocate of Confucian values which he believed that had laid the ground for Singapore’s market-driven success and rapid modernisation.

Singapore’s embrace of Confucian values also served as a safeguard to reduce the level of ‘westernisation’. The ruling party perceived that a risk of cultural erosion, especially for the Chinese community which formed the majority of the population, while pursuing accelerated economic development. One example is the focus on citizenship building through moral education in schools, where all students were taught from a young age on values aligned with Confucian teachings, such as respecting authority and prioritising of the collective good (Sim & Chow, 2019). These Confucian ideals were then entrenched in the unique political and economic context of Singapore, creating a governance model that emphasized efficiency, meritocracy, and long-term development while maintaining deep cultural roots

(Chong, 2011). However, as Singapore strides forward in its pursuit of economic progress and emphasis on corporatism, Confucian ideals have waned in the city-state (Englehart, 2000).

In view of the above, China and Singapore represent two distinct East Asian states which will provide a good context for cross-comparison study. Furthermore, while culture is observed to form some of the foundational practices and thoughts of the society and its people, Hofstede and Bond (1988) suggested that two other important factors which accelerated the growth of East Asian states were the existence of the global market as well as political environment that fostered growth. We will discuss the unique political environments of China and Singapore subsequently.

### **B. Political context: The impact of governance structures and sector image**

Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has remained the only ruling party throughout post-revolution history, with the party's leadership and influence extending into China's economy and society (Bian et al., 2001). Chinese leadership was lauded as the cornerstone of the development and success of the state, where having strong political faith to the governing party and loyalty to the nation were core values of the public service (Jiang & Shao, 2018). Throughout its long history of administrative reforms, the Chinese government has implemented a series of impressive and rapid changes to the public administrative system, establishing an institutionalised and professional civil service in a highly controlled bureaucratic setting (Chan & Ma, 2011).

In modern China, government officials are often regarded as the "parents" of citizens, wielding great authority and having a high ranking status in society (Zaobao, 2023). Citizens' trust in the Chinese Government has remained consistently high especially due to its strong track record in economic growth, where such positive sector image could influence public sector career preferences (Yang et al., 2021). Other than the prestige, the public service offers a financially comfortable and stable career in China. Research by Chan and Ma (2011) found that despite lower base salaries compared to private sector, public employees receive additional fringe benefits such as housing support, locality allowances and welfare benefits, which

increases the overall compensation in the public service.

Given the allure of job stability and generally positive image, public service careers in China remain highly sought after. However, to enter the public service, one needs to pass the notoriously difficult public service examination which has existed in China since its imperial era. In 2023, more than 1.5 million students had flocked to sit for the annual public service examination, with the odds of recruitment standing at a low 1:41 (Xinhua, 2023). Passing the examination served as an indicator of the individual's exceptional quality endorsed by the government (Wang et al., 2023). Given the high stakes of passing the public service entrance exam, many individuals are driven to devote extraordinary time and effort to their preparation.

On the other hand, after being under British colonial rule for more than a hundred years, Singapore declared independence in 1965 under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP). The early years of nation-building in Singapore, marked by significant challenges and hardship, had strongly influenced the founding values of pragmatism and efficiency. The PAP government has implemented swift and comprehensive administrative reforms, emphasising *meritocracy* within the public service. Recruitment and promotion were determined solely on individual abilities and qualifications (Quah, 2010). Unlike other East Asian states such as China, Taiwan and South Korea which utilise standardised examinations for entering the public service, Singapore adopts a recruitment and leadership selection approach similar to Western states and the private sector, involving interviews and case studies (Wang et al., 2023; Ye, 2021).

### **C. Labour conditions: The influence of institutional and market dynamics**

With its large population and highly educated workforce, securing employment in the job market remains a major challenge for many Chinese fresh graduates in the sluggish economy, where job opportunities are scarce and competition is fierce (Hawkins, 2023). Stressful work environment in the private sector also holds less appeal to the younger generation, who are increasingly seeking for work-life balance. The above considerations have collectively contributed to the emergence of a new *shang'an* mentality among Chinese youth, which literally translates to moving



towards the shore and reflects the eagerness of the younger generation to pursue stable careers in the public sector (Ji, 2021).

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, there has been more emphasis on the empowering of the public sector, commonly known as “*guo jin min tui*”, which means advancement of the state while the private sector retreats (Du et al., 2014). This is reflected in China’s economy with the highest number of SOEs in the world, with these SOEs contributing a significant portion of GDP and serving as channels for implementing government directives and policies (Fang & Ruan, 2023). Private companies are also facing a series of challenges, such as from the global US-China trade dispute to internal issues such as heavy tax burden and tight control under the CCP (Hou, 2019). Hence, this has likely led to additional opportunity cost to enter the private sector than public organisations and SOEs.

In Singapore, given the government’s emphasis on meritocracy and performance ability, civil service careers remain accessible to Singaporeans so long as they prove themselves capable (Bellows, 2009). Other than the public service, there are numerous job opportunities in Singapore, where majority of fresh graduates are able to find employment within six months of completing their final university examinations (Awang, 2023). To ensure competitiveness with the private sector in the search for talent, the Singapore public service has consistently fine-tuned its salary and remuneration packages (Poocharoen & Lee, 2013). However, talent retention in the Singapore government service remains an issue, with recent reports indicating increased attrition as more public employees have left the service to join the private sector (Tan, 2022).

### III. Hypothesis Development

Under this backdrop, we propose that the variations in sociocultural dynamics, labour conditions and the administrative context can exert distinctive influences on the preference for careers in the public service. Nevertheless, public service careers in both Singapore and China continue to be a relatively stable career option. The promise of job security, above average income for public service personnel and social prestige are key reasons for its popularity (Quah, 2010; Zaobao, 2023).

Furthermore, although the private sector generally offers more financially lucrative packages, the public sector often balances it with non-pecuniary benefits such as better working conditions, a family-oriented workplace, and work-life balance (Feeney & Stritch, 2019). In this study, we consider the following five factors, namely altruism, the desire for job security, valuing high salary, need for job autonomy and an opportunity for growth and development.

### **A. Altruism**

Extensive research has been dedicated to understand the motivational factors underpinning the preference of individuals to join the public service. Of which, the “Attraction-Selection-Attrition” model posits that individuals are likely drawn to organisations with characteristics that are aligned to their personal attributes (Christensen & Wright, 2011). Defined as an individual’s altruistic motivation to serve the public interest and contribute to the common good, PSM has drawn significant attention given its influence on diverse facets within the public sector (Vandenabeele, 2008). These include, but are not limited to, areas such as job satisfaction (Breugh et al., 2018; Vandenabeele, 2009); individual work performance (Vandenabeele, 2009) and active engagement in the workplace (Mussagulova, 2021). Studies have focused on students in masters programmes specialising in public administration (MPA) and public policy (MPP), with the assumption that they are more inclined to enter the public service upon graduation. Indeed, general literature in this area has observed that students in such public affairs programmes have generally scored high in altruism and perceived public sector employment more positively (Infeld et al., 2010; Tschirhart et al., 2008). In view of the above, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1: Altruism is positively correlated with public sector preference.

While contemporary research has found that altruism generally positively influenced the preference for public sector employment, we argue that the level of influence differs across geographical borders and cultural contexts. For example, a cross country analysis conducted by Infeld et al., (2010) surveying MPA and MPP

students observed that while altruism was a key career priority across all three states, students from Malaysia and the United States exhibited higher propensity on the desire to help the society (i.e. altruism) than Chinese students. Hence, despite the extensive study of PSM in Western states, doubt arises regarding the applicability and validity of such construct in Asian states. On this, scholars have called for a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between PSM and public sector employment within non-Western contexts, considering the differences in cultural influences on altruistic tendencies (Van de Walle et al., 2015).

For example, a study conducted by Liu et al. (2008) which sampled public servants in China had not only identified the presence of PSM in China akin to Western states, but also affirmed the role of PSM as a significant predictor of job satisfaction. Another study by Lee et al. (2022) suggested that the ingrained collectivist Confucian values in the Chinese society, such as prioritising harmonious relationship has shaped the culture of public service in China, in turn enhancing PSM among public employees to serve the public interest. In general, studies in the context of China commonly find that altruism is an important motivator for students to pursue public sector employment (Ko & Han, 2013). Similarly, studies in the Singapore context also yielded consistent results, where students in public administration programmes displayed high levels of PSM and preference for public sector careers (Van Der Wal & Mussagulova, 2020). Another cross country study conducted by Ko and Jun (2015) observed that the altruistic interest to benefit society had positively influenced preferences for public sector careers for Singapore students, but did not find such a relationship for Chinese students.

Zooming into the GLOBE's study (House et al., 2004) on the different dimension of national cultures, we noted that China was ranked medium-high whereas Singapore ranked medium-low on the scale of humane orientation which measures the level of collective promotion of altruism. This reflects a relatively higher level of collectivism in China and emphasis on well-being of the community. In the case of Singapore, while the city state is characterised by lawfulness and strong governance, the emphasis on pragmatism and efficiency may have diminished the collectivist promotion of community well-being. In view of the above, we propose that the correlation between altruism and preference for public sector

employment is stronger among Chinese students than Singapore students.

H1a: The positive relationship in H1 is more pronounced among public affairs students in China than in Singapore.

## **B. The desire for job security**

Scholars have long underscored the importance of job security as a key consideration for public service careers, often safeguarded by rules and union agreements within the bureaucratic system. Van de Walle et al. (2015) examined employment preference in 26 countries and found that public service remains an attractive career option given its favourable employment conditions such as high job security. Factors relating to stability which influence preference for public service careers are the pursuit for work-life balance (Buelens & Van den Broeck, 2007; Feeney & Stritch, 2019); parental influence (Chen et al., 2022); gender differences (DeRiviere et al., 2021); and personal characteristic traits such as risk aversion (Chen, 2012). Other than the personal need for job security, labour market shifts and economic downturns also increase the allure of public service employment. For example, a study conducted by Wang and Xie (2015) revealed that Chinese public servants who remained in the public service reported higher levels of happiness compared to their counterparts who had transitioned to the private sector. Further research in this area suggests that developing states tend to exhibit a greater preference for public sector careers due to the promise of job security, which is in turn associated with higher levels of PSM and satisfaction at work (Ng et al., 2016). In view of the above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: The desire for job security is positively correlated with public sector preference.

While current literature has observed a general positive correlation between the need for security and preference for public sector employment, we argue that such a relationship would be stronger in students from public affairs programmes in China than Singapore. We posit that the need for stability differs inherently between the two contexts, influenced by economic conditions as well as perceptions towards

public sector employment. In the context of China, the '*bianzhi*' system which is the formal establishment of job postings in the public sector, has been part of China's administrative reform efforts to downsize the bureaucracy (Brødsgaard, 2002). Beyond the objectives of reducing excessive expenditure and enhancing efficiency, controlling the size of the government holds particular importance in China. A study by Chen and Xu (2021) highlighted a trend of career entrenchment among public sector personnel in China, despite reports of lowered workplace morale. In terms of the employment outlook, recent media reports had highlighted the challenges faced by Chinese graduates in securing employment post-graduation due to the bleak economy, intense competition, and high stress from the private sector (Hawkins, 2023). Furthermore, there has long been a disparity in pension benefits between the public and private sectors in China, with the public service offering better benefits (Jia, 2017). In view of the above, the promise of a stable lifetime employment and robust retirement pension has driven a significant number of youths in China to prepare for the public service examination in a bid to secure a public service job (Ko & Han, 2013; Wang et al., 2023).

In the case of Singapore, post-graduation employment opportunities are typically available for the majority of graduates, affording them a broader range of job options as compared to their counterparts in China. Pension benefits are provided through a mandatory security saving fund, contributed by both employees and employers, with uniform contribution rates across public and private sectors (Lim, 2001). In addition, Singapore's embrace towards globalisation has led to a slew of trade policies such as tax breaks to attract foreign direct investments and multinational companies. This has resulted in a robust private sector with strong growth and job opportunities available in the meritocratic city-state (Pang & Lim, 2015). Given the abundance of job opportunities and minimal differences between the benefits of public and private sector, concerns regarding job security are less pronounced in Singapore. In fact, the Singapore public service had recently announced better remuneration packages to retain and attract more talent (Tan, 2022). This stands in stark contrast to China, where public workers are systematically entrenched in their positions and unlikely to leave the service once employed. Consequently, we hypothesise that the pursuit of job stability will positively influence preference for public sector careers for Chinese students as compared to Singapore students.

H2a: The positive relationship in H2 is more pronounced among public affairs students in China than in Singapore.

### **C. Valuing high salary**

In general, individuals who prioritise high salary are less likely to join the public service. Anecdotally, the pursuit of high salary often appears incongruent with public service, which is typically driven by altruistic values. Further research on sector switching finds that remuneration is a more significant consideration for ex-public employees transiting to the private sector than those shifting to another public agency (Hansen, 2014; Tschirhart et al., 2008). A study by Taylor (2005) found that while remuneration was not the foremost consideration influencing students' preference for public sector employment, it still played an important role in their decision-making process. Thus, in line with current literature, we argue that valuing high salary will negatively influence students from both China and Singapore on their preference towards public service careers:

H3: Valuing high salary is negatively correlated with public sector preference.

Ko and Jun (2015) compared job preferences amongst students in China and Singapore and found that salary remained an important motivator for students in both countries, regardless of their choice of sector. Upon closer inspection of the salary packages of public employees, studies found that while the base salary was lower for public employees in China, the non-pecuniary benefits such as better prospects of retirement benefits had improved the overall compensation package. In recent years, the Chinese government has been implementing tighter control on the private sector while intensifying efforts to reform and prioritise state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Hou, 2019; Lin, 2017). This shift in focus has potentially heightened the risks and challenges associated with pursuing employment in the private sector, where growth and job opportunities may become less predictable and more constrained. This could have inadvertently reduced the opportunity cost for graduates to join public service or SOEs instead of the private sector.

Furthermore, the allure of public service employment in China extends beyond mere financial considerations, given the high social prestige and informal benefits attached. For example, Chen and Xu (2021) further proposed that the motivation to join the public service can also stem from parochial interests, such as providing favours or benefiting family and acquaintances in dealings with the government. Given the prevalence of the “*guanxi*” system in Chinese society, it is often common to leverage informal network relations, although scholars have argued that the line between corruption and maintaining of “*guanxi*” is often unclear (Li, 2018; Shin & Lui, 2022). Zhu et al. (2019) further proposed that despite President Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive that was implemented in 2012, studies has shown that it has actually reinforced the status of the CCP than reduce corruption. In view of the above, the societal status and informal networking culture have further enhanced the attractiveness of public service careers beyond salary.

In the context of Singapore, remuneration for public service jobs has generally maintained a modest trajectory without surpassing that of the private sector. One distinct difference between China and Singapore would be Singapore’s well-known success in combating corruption (Quah, 2017). For example, to enhance the effectiveness of its anti-corruption measures, Singapore maintains a delicate balance between its stringent laws and well-structured systems by offering competitive salaries to top public officials (Quah, 2016). Lastly, given the robust private sector in Singapore, individuals may perceive high-salary opportunities in the private sector as more attainable and desirable compared to public service employment. In view of the differences in context and perception of government employment as above, we hypothesise the following:

H3a: The negative relationship in H3 is more pronounced among public affairs students in Singapore than in China.

#### **D. Need for job autonomy**

In terms of self-autonomy in the workplace, the public sector generally offers less freedom at work as compared to the private sector, due to its centralised top-down bureaucratic structure and legislative restrictions (Pandey & Kingsley, 2000).

As boundaries between the public and private sectors become increasingly blurred in recent years, there is growing evidence underscoring the importance of improving work autonomy in the public sector. This is aimed at cultivating job satisfaction, fostering effective work engagement and retaining a skilled workforce within the public sector (Jiang et al., 2023; Jung et al., 2020). For example, a study by Chen (2012) found that public employees with past work experience in the private sector reported a higher degree of inflexibility within bureaucratic organisations and red tape, compared with respondents with only work experience in the public sector.

While the broader literature generally contends that job autonomy is of lesser importance to public sector employees given the highly structured public organisations with formalised rules and guidelines, a study by Duerrenberger and Warning (2025) had instead found that having job autonomy exerts a stronger positive effect on satisfaction at work among public than private sector workers. As senior workers eventually retire and millennials who place greater importance on psychological well-being enter the workforce, job autonomy is an important motivator to improve positive mental wellness in the workplace (Gallo et al., 2020; Yap & Badri, 2021). Thus, we suggest that the need for job autonomy will continue to negatively influence students' preferences to join the public service.

H4: Need for job autonomy is negatively correlated with public sector preference.

While current literature has generally found a negative correlation between the need for job autonomy and preference for public service careers, we argue that this effect is less pronounced for students from China than students from Singapore. In China, the boundaries between the public and private sector are less distinct, as the state serves as the largest shareholder for numerous enterprises and directly nominates top leaders at state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Brødsgaard, 2020). Leutert and Eaton (2021) added that under Xi Jinping's administration, SOEs had experienced enhanced centralised control by the CCP, further solidifying the CCP's central leadership in these entities. In light of the significant extent of SOEs in China, this likely blurs the private-public sector divide in the country. We posit that the intertwining of political power and economic outlook in China has shaped



societal norms that favour deference to authority, making bureaucratic systems a common feature of the workplace. Given the prevalence of SOEs, Chinese workers are generally more accustomed to such hierarchical environments which typically offer limited job autonomy.

On the other hand, we argue that the public-private differences in Singapore are clearer as compared to China. In the early days of nation building, the Singapore government placed great emphasis on globalisation, free trade movement and efficiency. This strategic focus led to the privatisation exercise of SOEs in the 1980s (Sikorski, 1989). Thus, there is a clear distinction between the public and private sector in Singapore, with each sector fulfilling distinct roles and responsibilities within the economy and society. Even for the government-linked companies such as Temasek Holdings, operational independence is maintained where the Singapore government does not exert direct control on its day-to-day operations (Ang & Ding, 2006). Hence, we propose that the clear public-private distinction and opportunities available in Singapore have influenced career preferences for Singapore students, where the need for job autonomy would likely be stronger for Singaporean students as compared to Chinese students.

H4a: The negative relationship in H4 is more pronounced among public affairs students in Singapore than in China.

### **E. An opportunity for growth and development**

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, scholars generally agree that growth needs such as career development and training opportunities are important motivators for public employees (Hur, 2018). Comparison studies on career preferences have found that individuals who choose the public sector are generally more attracted to intrinsic rewards such as self-development, meaningful work and the opportunity to learn new skills (Lyons et al., 2006). For example, a study by Triest (2023) found that career growth and job skill development had a stronger effect for public sector workers than their private counterparts when comparing the performance effort. However, public organisations with its bureaucratic structure, often implements unnecessary rules and compliance burdens (i.e red tape) that limit

public employees' ability to deliver effective public services (Feeney & Bozeman, 2009). In such work environments, public sector employees may be perceived as relatively lazy and inefficient compared to private sector workers (Dinhof et al., 2023). Other research has further suggested that compared with employees in the private sector, public sector employees place less importance on continuous learning at work or the development of work abilities (Lyons et al., 2006). Similarly, Buelens and Van den Broeck (2007) did not find the same level of motivation for self-development in public workers. The authors posited that this may be attributed to the distinct prioritisation of work-life balance among public employees. In view of above, we hypothesise that the opportunity for growth and development is likely to negatively influence the preference for public sector career:

H5: An opportunity for growth and development is negatively correlated with public sector preference.

In the Chinese context, scholars have highlighted the pervasive “*guanxi*” culture and its influence within the public sector. Not only do familial affiliations within the public service influence individual recruitment, but the cultivation of robust “*guanxi*” networks is an equally indispensable factor alongside personal merit (Ko & Han, 2013; Ma et al., 2015). This illuminates the interplay between work advancement and social connections in the Chinese public sector, where cultivating personal relationships is a strategic imperative for public workers. Due to the centralised power structure in the Chinese government and the prevalent deference to authority figures in Confucian culture, public employees may feel compelled to develop “*guanxi*” with their hierarchical superiors over focusing on self-development (Chen & Kuo, 2023). Another study by Ko and Jun (2015) also observed similar findings, where opportunities to acquire new knowledge were negatively correlated with preference for public sector careers for Chinese students.

On the other hand, entry and advancement in the Singapore public service are meritocratic in nature and determined by individual merits and performance (Bellows, 2009; Quah, 2010). Within this meritocratic framework, the Singapore public sector provides a clear and transparent pathway for career advancement.

This could in turn motivate Singaporeans to actively invest in personal growth, thereby positioning themselves favourably for opportunities and progression in a meritocratic labour market. Hence, we hypothesise that the negative relationship between the opportunity for growth and development and public sector preference would be more pronounced among students in China than those in Singapore.

H5a: The negative relationship in H5 is more pronounced among public affairs students in China than in Singapore.

## **IV. Methods**

### **A. Data**

To answer our research questions, we conducted a cross-national survey of first-year undergraduate students majoring in public affairs programmes from Singapore and China in 2017 and 2019. Students enrolled in public affairs programmes were chosen for their accessibility and their relevant knowledge about the survey topics. We surveyed 4 first-class universities (Fudan University, Xiamen University, Renmin University of China, and Nanjing University) in China. In Singapore, we surveyed students from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), which is one of the most prestigious and largest universities in Singapore. All five of the selected universities are among the most prestigious in their respective countries. The combined data set from both countries consists of 567 completed surveys, with  $N = 443$  from the Chinese sample and  $N = 124$  from the Singaporean sample.

### **B. Variables**

In our research model, our dependent variable measures the subject's career intentions towards public sector jobs. We seek to understand the preference for a public sector career through public service preference, with the following question: "Which one of the following statements is closest to what you think? Please tick one only." Respondents are given choices between 1 = I have never thought about being a public servant and 4 = I am determined to have a public service career, and

will keep trying until I am in. As our dependent variable is an ordinal variable, we adopt ordinal logistic regression for our data analysis. As discussed in the preceding literature review, public service exam in East Asia states are known to be notoriously difficult and generally the only way to enter public sector, and hence this variable captures the strength of the preference for public sector careers despite the barrier of a difficult exam.

We have identified a total of five independent variables, the question for the independent variable is stated in the survey as: “When considering your future career, how does each of the following factors affect your choice? Please tick the boxes accordingly.” While there were 12 factors presented to respondents, we have further combined some factors to improve data interpretation given the similarity of some factors. Firstly, we have combined variable of the item “Contribution/usefulness to society” and “Helping others” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .8087$ ) into a new variable named ‘altruism’. We have also combined both “Self-actualisation” and “Learning and growth” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .7069$ ) into a new variable named ‘Opportunity for growth and development’.

For our analysis, we have selected the following factors of desire for job stability, valuing high salary, need for job autonomy, altruism, and opportunity for growth and development. These five variables were measured by a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 = Not important at all to 4 = Very important. We have specifically selected these five variables instead of the full range, as they were more closely associated with the motivation to pursue a career in public service compared to other sectors. The selection was also guided by existing studies and theoretical models in contemporary literature. By focusing on these factors, we aim to provide a more precise and meaningful analysis. The items used in this study are summarised in Table A in Appendix.

In our study, we opted not to standardise the variables in the moderation analysis, as doing so could alter the interpretation of the regression coefficients, in particular the intercept and primary effects of the independent variable. This approach aligns with the recommendations by Aguinis and Gottfredson (2010), who highlighted that standardisation may potentially result in distortions of the coefficient interpretation. To further mitigate potential multicollinearity between

the independent variables and the moderator term, we have employed centering in our moderation analysis by subtracting the mean from each independent variable to improve the interpretability of the results.

We also consider several control variables in our modelling. First, gender (1 = male, 0 = female) is an important factor in understanding career intentions. This is because the exclusion of gender as an independent variable may cause an omission bias, as gender is correlated both with independent variables and with the dependent variable (career intention).

Lastly, we have used the following variables of father's work (1 = yes; 0 = no) and mother's work (1 = yes; 0 = no) in the public sector as control variables to account for differences in country samples. Empirical evidence has shown that parental employment in the public sector may affect their children's preference to work in the public sector (Chen et al., 2022; Fischer & Schott, 2022). In addition, we include family income, extracurricular learning (5 = more than 10 hours; 1 = less than 1 hour), academic performance (1 = top 20%; 5 = bottom 20%), father's education (1 = Not educated; 8 = Doctoral Degree), and mother's education (1 = Not educated; 8 = Doctoral Degree). The items used in this study are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	Full sample (n = 567)			Chinese sample (n = 443)			Singaporean sample (n = 124)		
	mean	min	max	mean	min	max	mean	min	max
<b>Dependent variable</b>									
Public service preference	2.578	1	4	2.474	1	4	2.951	1	4
<b>Independent variable</b>									
Altruism	3.172	1	4	3.175	1	4	3.163	1	4
Desire for job security	3.060	1	4	2.982	1	4	3.341	1	4
Valuing high salary	3.102	1	4	3.120	1	4	3.040	2	4
Need for job autonomy	2.961	1	4	3.029	1	4	2.715	1	4
Opp for growth and development	3.390	1	4	3.427	2	4	3.260	1	4

Source: Compiled by the authors.

### C. T-tests

Table 2 reports descriptive and t-test results for job selection motivation. Results indicate that Singaporean students have a slightly higher desire for stability, with a mean score of 3.341, compared to 2.982 among Chinese students. Chinese students pay more attention to the need for job autonomy than Singaporean students. At the same time, the students in the Chinese sample displayed a higher need for the opportunity for growth and development than their counterparts in Singapore. The factors of valuing high salary and altruism in the Chinese sample are both higher than those in Singapore, but the coefficients are not statistically significant.

**Table 2**

*Descriptives and T-test Results for Job Selection Motivation (n = 567)*

Variables	China (n = 443)	Singapore (n = 124)	Mean Diff
	Mean	Mean	
Altruism	3.175	3.163	0.012
Desire for job security	2.982	3.341	-0.360***
Valuing high salary	3.120	3.040	0.079
Need for job autonomy	3.029	2.715	0.314***
Opp for growth and development	3.427	3.260	0.166***

Note. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Source: Compiled by the authors.

## V. Findings

We conducted logistic regression to explore the influence of our independent factors on public sector job preference for both the Chinese and Singaporean sample. Table 3 presents the results of our logistic regression and moderation analysis, with the dependent variable as public service preference. In the full sample for Model 1, our results yielded similar findings as contemporary research. We found support for both H1 and H2, where both altruism (Coef = 0.814,  $p < 0.01$ ) and desire for job stability (Coef = 0.607,  $p < 0.01$ ) were positively correlated with public sector

preference. H3, H4 and H5 were also supported, where valuing high salary (Coef = -0.666,  $p < 0.01$ ), need for job autonomy (Coef = -0.403,  $p < 0.01$ ), and opportunity for growth and development (Coef = -0.348,  $p < 0.1$ ) were negatively correlated with public sector preference. A quick glance in Model 2 and 3 illustrates distinct differences between the Chinese and Singaporean sample in the following factors of desire for job stability, valuing high salary, need for job autonomy and opportunity for growth and development.

**Table 3**  
*Logistic Regression Results*

<i>DV: Public service preference</i>	Full sample		Chinese Sample		Singaporean sample		Moderation analysis	
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 3</i>		<i>Model 4</i>	
	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Coef</i>	<i>SD</i>
(1) Altruism	<b>0.814***</b>	(0.173)	<b>0.958***</b>	(0.215)	<b>0.773**</b>	(0.314)	<b>0.937***</b>	(0.210)
(2) Desire for job security	<b>0.607***</b>	(0.153)	<b>0.667***</b>	(0.183)	0.359	(0.347)	<b>0.673***</b>	(0.180)
(3) Valuing high salary	<b>-0.666***</b>	(0.160)	<b>-0.861***</b>	(0.184)	0.045	(0.374)	<b>-0.819***</b>	(0.181)
(4) Need for job autonomy	<b>-0.403***</b>	(0.124)	-0.202	(0.152)	<b>-0.832***</b>	(0.238)	-0.197	(0.150)
(5) Opp for growth & development	<b>-0.348*</b>	(0.188)	<b>-0.559**</b>	(0.235)	0.310	(0.355)	<b>-0.595***</b>	(0.230)
Nation (CN = 0; SG = 1)	--	--	--	--	--	--	<b>0.538*</b>	(0.295)
(1) x nation	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.259	(0.371)
(2) x nation	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.266	(0.404)
(3) x nation	--	--	--	--	--	--	<b>1.092***</b>	(0.421)
(4) x nation	--	--	--	--	--	--	<b>-0.698**</b>	(0.279)
(5) x nation	--	--	--	--	--	--	<b>1.062**</b>	(0.417)
Gender	-0.160	(0.192)	-0.159	(0.219)	-0.173	(0.431)	-0.137	(0.193)
Family income	-0.028	(0.055)	-0.081	(0.070)	0.038	(0.097)	-0.053	(0.056)
Extracurricular learning	<b>0.139*</b>	(0.072)	0.042	(0.082)	<b>0.640***</b>	(0.216)	0.123	(0.075)
Academic performance	<b>0.275***</b>	(0.104)	0.047	(0.149)	0.246	(0.178)	<b>0.218*</b>	(0.112)
Father's education	-0.101	(0.087)	-0.129	(0.109)	-0.004	(0.159)	-0.081	(0.088)
Mother's education	-0.053	(0.093)	-0.039	(0.113)	0.038	(0.180)	-0.044	(0.095)
Father's work	-0.325	(0.227)	-0.135	(0.257)	<b>-1.099*</b>	(0.637)	-0.291	(0.231)
Mother's work	0.136	(0.256)	0.232	(0.289)	-0.374	(0.654)	0.180	(0.260)
/Cut1	-1.523	(1.049)	<b>-2.333*</b>	(1.238)	3.161	(2.366)	-1.615	(1.171)
/Cut2	-1.315	(1.048)	<b>-2.133*</b>	(1.237)	3.469	(2.369)	-1.402	(1.170)
/Cut3	1.887*	(1.050)	1.319	(1.231)	6.464***	(2.444)	1.885	(1.170)
Observations	549		443		106		549	
Pseudo R-squared	0.093		0.095		0.135		0.109	
Log likelihood	-525.648		-406.870		-101.635		-516.6	

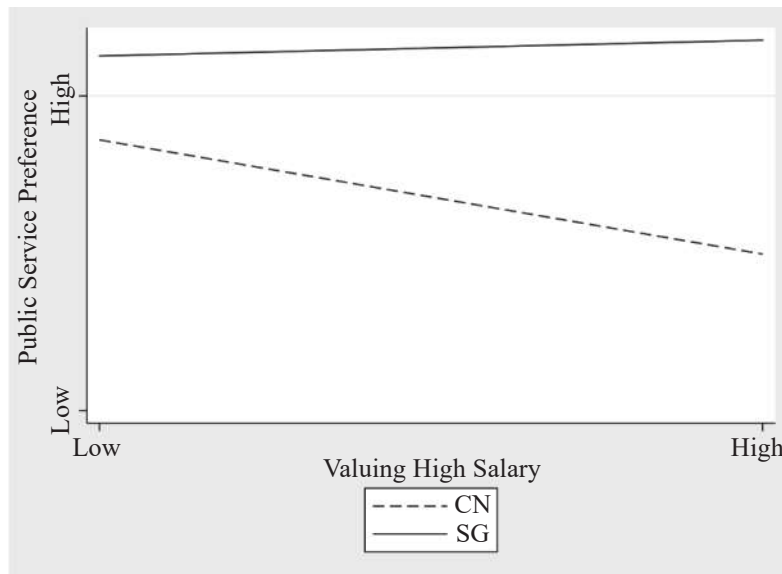
Note. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Model 4 presents a moderation analysis to test the remaining cross comparison hypotheses on whether nation (China = 0, Singapore = 1) moderates the effects of the identified IVs on public sector career preference. Looking at the interactive terms, we observed that there are significant and distinct differences between the Singaporean and Chinese samples in the independent variables of *valuing high salary* (Figure 2), *need for job autonomy* (Figure 3) and *opportunity for growth and development* (Figure 4).

**Figure 2**

*The Moderator Effect of Nation on Valuing High Salary and Public Service Preference Relationship*

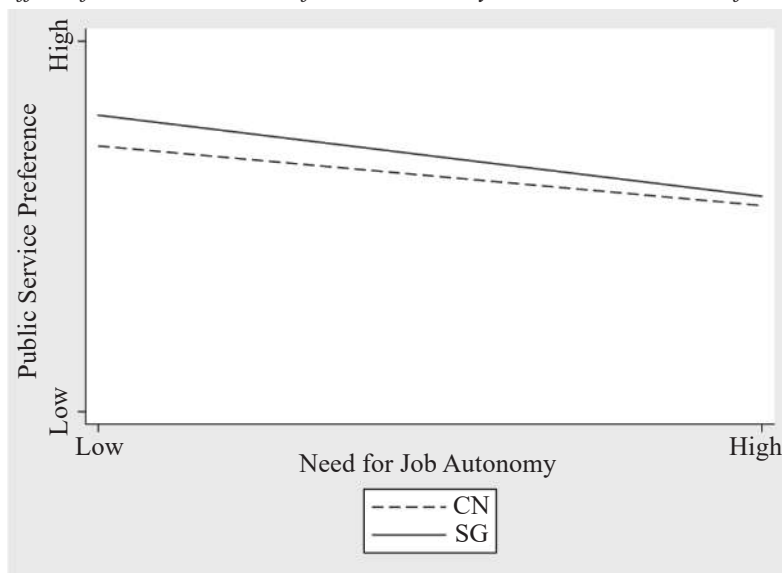


Source: Compiled by the authors.



**Figure 3**

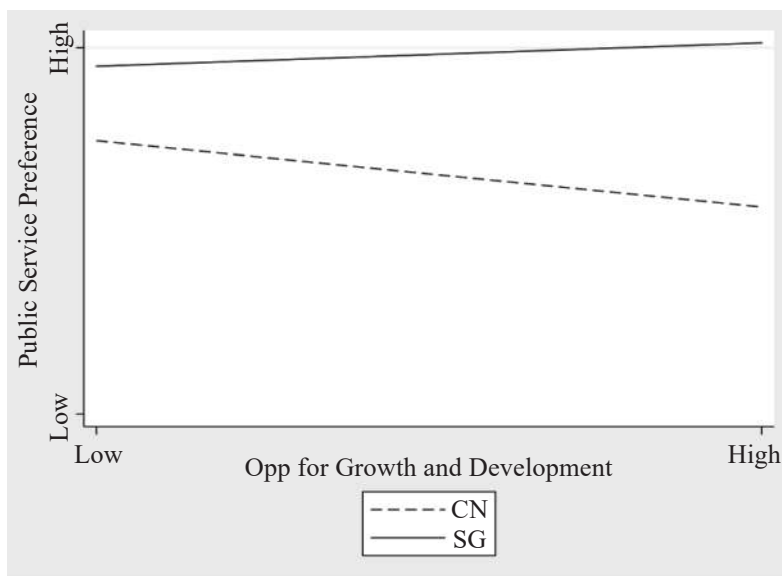
*The Moderator Effect of Nation on the Need for Job Autonomy and Public Service Preference Relationship*



Source: Compiled by the authors.

**Figure 4**

*The Moderator Effect of Nation on Opportunity for Growth and Development and Public Service Preference Relationship*



Source: Compiled by the authors.

Firstly, contrary to our initial hypothesis of H3a which suggested that the negative relationship of valuing high salary is more pronounced among students in Singapore than in China, our results presented a different picture. While we found a negative relationship between valuing high salary and public sector preference in the Chinese sample, this relationship was actually positive for the Singaporean sample. We will explore this further in our discussion section.

We found support for H4a where the negative effect on the need for job autonomy was more pronounced in the Singaporean sample than the Chinese sample as hypothesised. We also found support for H5a, where the negative correlation between the opportunity for growth and development and public sector preference is stronger for the Chinese sample than Singaporean sample. Furthermore, we observed a positive correlation in the Singaporean sample where an increase in the pursuance of opportunity for growth and development increases the preference for public service employment, which we will discuss in the subsequent section.

Lastly, although the differences in the factors of altruism and desire for job stability between the Chinese and Singaporean samples were not statistically significant, the observed results were consistent with our H1a and H2a, where the positive effects of altruism and desire for job stability were both stronger for Chinese students than Singaporean students.

## VI. Discussion

Our empirical evidence generally supports the findings in current literature, where factors such as altruism, desire for job security, valuing high salary, need for job autonomy, and opportunity for growth and development were important predictors of preference towards public sector employment.

Firstly, our findings suggested that the need for job autonomy was more pronounced for Singaporean than Chinese students. One possible explanation for this difference could be the labour market and the differences in administrative structures between the two countries. In China, the dominance of SOEs which often operate within highly centralised hierarchies and bureaucratic norms, has likely normalised lower levels of autonomy in the workplace. In contrast, Singapore's clearer

distinction between the public and private sectors, coupled with a more market-oriented working environment, may cultivate greater expectations for individual autonomy at work.

Next, our hypothesis proposing a negative correlation between valuing high salary and public sector preference was validated by our findings, indicating that individuals prioritising high salary are less likely to pursue employment in the public service. Notably, while we observed a negative correlation among students from China, an opposite trend emerged from the Singaporean sample, where a positive correlation was instead found. We propose that beyond the relatively better pension benefits that compensate for lower base salaries in China's public sector, recent policies by the CCP and heightened regulatory control over the private sector may have further increased the opportunity cost of private sector employment. Moreover, motivations for pursuing public sector careers in China may extend beyond financial considerations, such as status-related interests. In contrast, the clearer delineation between public and private sectors in Singapore, coupled with a competitive private job market, makes the private sector more attractive to individuals prioritising higher salary. In bid of the talent war, the Singapore government has also been improving remuneration packages for public workers in the Singapore public service to increase the attractiveness of public sector careers (Lim, 2022). These contrasting patterns highlight how institutional and cultural differences between the two countries shape students' perceptions of salary and its role in influencing public sector career preferences.

Next, the results also showed that the negative correlation between the opportunity for growth and development and preference for public sector employment was stronger in the Chinese sample than in the Singaporean sample, where a positive correlation between the opportunity for growth and development and public sector preference was found in the Singaporean sample. This disparity prompts a closer examination of the country's context. In the Chinese context where '*guanxi*' holds considerable influence, our findings echoed the negative correlation found, suggesting that personal connections may overshadow individual aspirations for advancement within the public service. On the other hand, we suggest that Singapore's ethos of meritocracy focusing on individual competence could

have resulted in the positive correlation between the opportunity for growth and development and public sector career preference in the Singaporean sample.

## VII. Conclusion

Our study has provided a new perspective of how sociocultural dynamics, labour conditions and administrative contexts have influenced the preferences for public service careers for two East Asian states, namely China and Singapore. While the overall findings of our motivational factors were consistent with the general literature, there were observable differences in the extent to which these factors have shaped public service career preferences in the two countries. By recognising how motivational factors influence preferences for public service careers across different country contexts, this study will enable hiring managers to enhance talent attraction and retention strategies within the public sector.

One notable constraint of this study is our approach on data collection. For our study, we have opted to conduct surveys with first-year undergraduate students in public affairs programmes from Singapore and China. However, we acknowledge that these students who are in the early stages of their academic pursuit may not possess a holistic understanding of their future career preferences. In addition, as these students progress further in their studies, their priorities and preferences are likely to evolve, whereby external factors such as economic outlook may further influence their eventual career pursuits. Secondly, we acknowledge that the student sample for Singapore was considerably smaller than the sample for China, which could have reduced the reliability and generalisability of our results.

Nevertheless, we contend that these students who have chosen to major in public affairs programmes are likely to have a genuine interest or an inherent inclination towards public service careers regardless of the stages in their academic pursuit. In light that students' career preferences may evolve as they continue their academic pursuit, we propose that future research endeavors could consider surveying a larger and more balanced student size, and also students who are closer to graduation to capture their sectoral career preferences more accurately.

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## Appendix: Items Used in the Study

**Table A**

*Items Used in the Study*

Variables	Items
<b>Dependent variables</b>	
Public service preference	<p>Which one of the following statements is closest to what you think?</p> <p>Please tick one only.</p> <p>1 = I have never thought about being a public servant.</p> <p>2 = It is a good idea to be a public servant, but I don't want to be one as the exam is too hard.</p> <p>3 = I will take the public service exam. If the exam is hard and I fail, I will try something else.</p> <p>4 = I am determined to have a public service career. If I take the exam and fail, I will keep on trying until I finally passed it.</p>
<b>Independent variable</b>	
Job motivators	When considering your future career, how does each of the following factors affect your choice? Please tick the boxes accordingly. (1: <i>Not important at all</i> , 2: <i>Not important</i> , 3: <i>Important</i> , 4: <i>Very important</i> )
Desire for job stability	Stability (job security)
Valuing high salary	High salary
Need for job autonomy	A job that is not too constrained by authority
Altruism	Contribution/usefulness to society; Helping others
Opp for growth and development	Self-actualization; Learning and growth
<b>Control variables</b>	
Gender	<p>Your gender</p> <p>1 = male</p> <p>0 = female</p>
Family income	<p>How much is your monthly family income?</p> <p>1 = less than SGD 2000</p> <p>2 = SGD 2001 – SGD 3500</p> <p>3 = SGD 3501 – SGD 5000</p>

Table A (continued)

Variables	Items
	4 = SGD 5001 – SGD 6500
	5 = SGD 6501 – SGD 8000
	6 = SGD 8001 – SGD 10000
	7 = SGD 10001 – SGD 12000
	8 = SGD 12000 – SGD 15000
	9 = more than SGD 15000
Extracurricular learning	Excluding the time for class, on average, how much time per week do you spend on the preparation for PPGA course materials?
	1 = less than 1 hour
	2 = 1-3 hrs
	3 = 4-6 hrs
	4 = 7-9 hrs
	5 = more than 10 hrs
Academic performance	How was your academic performance when you were still a student in junior college/polytechnic/high school?
	1 = top 20%
	2 = 21%-40%
	3 = 41%-60%
	4 = 61%-80%
	5 = bottom 20%
Father's education	Your father's highest level of education
	1 = Not educated
	2 = Primary school
	3 = Secondary school
	4 = Junior college
	5 = Polytechnic
	6 = Bachelor Degree
	7 = Master Degree
	8 = Doctoral Degree
Mother's education	Your mother's highest level of education
	1 = Not educated

**Table A (continued)**

Variables	Items
	2 = Primary school
	3 = Secondary school
	4 = Junior college
	5 = Polytechnic
	6 = Bachelor Degree
	7 = Master Degree
	8 = Doctoral Degree
Father's work	Does your father work as a public employee (including soldiers and public school teachers)?
	1 = yes
	0 = no
Mother's work	Does your mother work as a public employee (including soldiers and public school teachers)?
	1 = yes
	0 = no

Source: Compiled by the authors.

# 公共事務大學生的公共部門職業偏好影響因素分析：基於新加坡與中國的比較研究

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## 摘要

公共部門職業偏好是公共組織行為領域的研究熱點之一。大量研究指出，工作特徵和個人價值觀是影響公共部門職業偏好的重要因素。本研究採用比較視角，分析來自兩個東亞國家——中國與新加坡——的公共事務學生的職業動機。我們識別出五項影響公共事務學生職業選擇的主要動機，分別是：利他主義、對工作穩定性的渴望、重視高薪、對工作自主性的需求，以及成長與自我發展的機會。在整體樣本中，這些因素皆是影響學生選擇政府工作的顯著預測指標。然而，這些因素的影響程度，特別是在重視高薪、工作自主性需求，以及成長與自我發展機會方面，在兩個國家間有所不同。例如，對工作自主性的需求對公共部門偏好的負面影響，在新加坡學生中比中國學生更為明顯。相反地，成長與自我發展機會與公共部門偏好之間的負相關性，在中國樣本中強於新加坡樣本。此外，在新加坡樣本中，重視高薪與對成長與發展的渴望這兩項因素與公共部門偏好呈現正相關；而在中國樣本中，這兩項因素則呈現負相關。最後，本研究也提供了一些理論與實務上的建議。

**關鍵詞：**職業偏好、工作動機、公務員、比較研究

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