

# Crafting identity: how youth athletes navigate borders and find their place in China's Sport-Education System (Part 1)

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Crafting Identity: How Youth Athletes Navigate Borders and Find Their Place in China's Sport-Education System (Part 1)

*Employing an Eastern adaptation of a constructivist grounded theory, our authors investigated identity construction during youth athletes' specialization transition within China's sport-education system, defined by an institutional sport-education divide where athletic and academic demands conflict. Data were derived from interviews with four school-team coaches, all graduates of professional sports universities, who provided institutional and developmental perspectives, six school team athletes (aged 11-13 years, M = 12.33) offering developmental insights as elite sports reserves, and two elite athletes (aged 18 and 26, competing at national and international levels) representing high-performance experiences. This article (Part 1) was conceived to elaborate on the theoretical and methodological foundations of our inquiry, proposing an Eastern relational framework that advances the understanding of identity construction in constrained systems. The empirical findings and culturally informed support strategies arising from this framework will be presented in a subsequent article (Part 2).*

KEY WORDS: Youth athletes, Identity construction, Sport-education system, Dual careers, China, Relational ontology, Constructivist grounded theory.

## Introduction

China's sport-education system, characterized by a significant institutional sport-education divide, presents a critical juncture for youth athletes

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during their transition to specialization (Guo et al., 2023). The specialization transition period intensifies the inherent conflict between learning and training, forcing athletes to navigate competing demands of rigorous athletic development and a highly examination-oriented academic system (Yin et al., 2024). The resulting role and identity conflict translates into a profound source of identity anxiety, a central challenge in dual career development (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Successfully navigating this conflict is essential, as the integration of athletic, academic, and personal life is a cornerstone of overall success for student-athletes (Lin & Liang, 2024). The sport-education system is further shaped by the Whole-Nation System which prioritizes collective honor from a young age, potentially at the expense of personal autonomy (Ge et al., 2019). This institutional and cultural context crystallizes a core theoretical tension between the culturally shaped interdependent self and the individual's need for autonomy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While the individualism-collectivism dynamic has been studied in sport psychology (e.g., Koh & Hanrahan, 2017), its role in shaping the identity construction of youth athletes within the specific context of China's sport system remains underexplored.

The tension between collectivism and individualism is embedded within institutional logics that prioritize collective interests (Si et al., 2011) and uneasily coexist with an examination-oriented education system (Zhang et al., 2019). To navigate these constraints, youth athletes engage in boundary work (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Research has begun to map the terrain of Chinese youth athletes' experiences, detailing the macro-level structures of China's sport system (Si et al., 2015) and the key features of dual career environments (Storm et al., 2021). Furthermore, broader literature on student-athlete development often centers on the collegiate phase, highlighting a need for more longitudinal perspectives (Lenahan et al., 2022).

However, a critical gap persists at the meso-level of process: we lack a granular understanding of how youth athletes actively construct a sense of self when collective priorities supersede individual autonomy. While we know what identities may be held or what structural barriers exist, the meaning-making processes through which identities are forged within this constrained system remain underexplored.

To address this process-level gap, the present study (Part 1) was conceived to introduce and elaborate on an Eastern relational framework for inquiry. Our framework is grounded in indigenous Chinese constructs of the differential mode of association (Fei, 1992) and the social-oriented self (Li & Wang, 2019). We position these indigenous constructs as the substantive ontological foundation that guides and reshapes social constructivist epistemology, providing a cul-

turally resonant lens to theorize identity as co-constructed within hierarchical relational networks. The full elaboration of our Eastern relational framework constitutes a central contribution of this paper. Our framework is designed to illuminate the following core research questions:

What key structural borders (e.g., institutional sport-academic divide) and cultural borders (e.g., personal ambition vs. national duty) define the landscape for Chinese youth athletes?

How do Chinese youth athletes manifest agency through specific strategies of border negotiation to secure legitimacy and meet psychological needs within these structural and cultural borders?

When individual strategies repeatedly interact with the system, what enduring patterns emerge? How do these processes give rise to distinct identity trajectories that reflect both initiative and systemic influences?

What unique insights do these Chinese identity construction processes within the Whole Nation System offer for reconceptualizing dual career support across different cultural contexts? The empirical findings and analysis that answer these questions, derived from applying the framework developed here, will be presented in a subsequent article (Part 2).

## **Methodology**

Our authors employed an Eastern relational paradigm that aligns with China's collectivist sport system, responding to calls for culturally consonant research in cultural sport psychology (Schinke et al., 2019). Our approach resonates with the cultural praxis of athletes' careers paradigm (Stambulova & Ryba, 2024) through its emphasis on contextualizing research within specific socio-cultural environments while maintaining international dialogue. We utilize an Eastern relational ontology framing identity formation as negotiation within hierarchical social networks rather than individualistic pursuit. Theoretically grounded in indigenous Chinese frameworks prioritizing the interdependent self (Li & Wang, 2019), this perspective is further supported by psychological research on the primacy of collective self in Chinese self-construal (Zheng et al., 2018). Empirical support comes from scholarship on Chinese sport's socio-institutional structures, including the top-down Whole-Nation System and cultural norms emphasizing collective honor (Si et al., 2015), which function as macro-level instantiations of collectivist psychology. Our framework thus positions young athletes' identities as co-constructed through relational navigation, advancing theory from a distinctly Chinese perspective.

Epistemologically, knowledge is understood as co-constructed through intersubjective dialogue within the socio-cultural context. We treat Chinese cultural values of social harmony, respect for authority, and collective purpose (Liu & Li, 2020; Yang, 2004) as essential interpretive lenses. We further refine this by framing the research as an investigation into relational sense-making within athletes' social webs (Hwang, 1987), necessitating ongoing cultural reflexivity (Ryba et al., 2024) to ensure a fine-grained analysis of how athletes navigate their local training environment and organizational culture, upholding the principle of context-philosophy-method alignment.

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2024) was employed to capture the complex process of identity construction within China's sports-education system. This study significantly departs from conventional applications of grounded theory by fundamentally re-grounding it within an Eastern relational ontology. We selected constructivist grounded theory not because it is a Western methodological standard, but because its iterative, co-constructive nature is uniquely compatible with and can be meaningfully reshaped by our Eastern relational epistemology. To empirically map the "borders" defining our participants' social reality, we employed strategic sampling of youth athletes, coaches, and institutional stakeholders. Our approach was guided by Fei's theory of the differential mode of association (Fei, 1992), which reveals how an athlete's position within the coach's relational network creates a tangible hierarchy of obligations and access to training resources, a critical dimension of their developmental environment.

This study departs significantly from prior grounded theory approaches by grounding our methodology in an Eastern relational ontology. This framework, informed by the Confucian conception of the interdependent person (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), operationalizes indigenous Chinese constructs including the "interdependent self," "differential mode of association," and "social-oriented" tendency (Li & Wang, 2019, pp. 245-246). This shift reorients data analysis from individual agency toward relational network logic, where identity negotiation prioritizes community and duty. Consequently, the resulting theory is co-constituted with its socio-cultural ecosystem, demonstrating how Eastern ontological framing yields distinct theoretical insights.

## **Methods**

### RESEARCH TEAM AND POSITIONALITY

Our research team operationalized cultural reflexivity (Schinke et al., 2012) through the distinctively Eastern practice of strategic deference. This

approach involved fluidly yielding analytical authority to whichever team member offered the most context-critical insight at each analysis stage. Governed by indigenous protocols of relational hierarchy and harmony, this process enabled dynamic co-construction that rigorously tested emerging theories. Through an Eastern pathway to knowledge production, we seek to demonstrate how positionality structured through indigenous relational ethics generates contextual authenticity, thereby enriching global cultural reflexivity practice with a grounded Eastern methodology.

The first author's sustained psychological support work with national team athletes and International Masters of Sport, including those preparing for the 2026 Winter Olympics, provided deep understanding of high-pressure training environments. Her background in adolescent psychological support, particularly clinical sensitivity developed through work with vulnerable youth facing non-suicidal self-injury, proved instrumental in identifying nuanced identity conflicts and normalized psychological burdens. This sensitivity was further refined through understanding critical developmental pressures in sport, including complex identity work during meta-transitions (Li et al., 2025) and the relational strain of feeling instrumentalized by significant others, while her clinical awareness of severe psychological risks, such as suicidal ideation within high-performance sport cultures, ensured the research remained attuned to the profound implications of identity negotiations that often remain concealed (see Lui et al., 2025).

The second author, a preeminent authority in Chinese competitive sport psychology, served as guardian of indigenous authenticity and contextual precision. Her decades of experience providing psychological support to Olympic champions and national team members established an authoritative benchmark for the system's highest performance standards and cultural ethos. Crucially, her extensive work with elite athletes at provincial levels and national university competitions provided grounded, developmentally sensitive understanding of pathways to the top. This dual-level expertise allowed rigorous stress-testing of emerging theories against lived realities of athletes across key stages of China's sports hierarchy, ensuring our interpretations accurately reflected the system's values and demands.

The third author, an internationally recognized scientist-practitioner in cultural sport psychology and named Chinese Foreign Expert, provided the essential external vantage point and comparative analytical lens. His extensive research with elite athletes across diverse national contexts, developmental stages, and cultural backgrounds equipped him to systematically interrogate our tacit cultural assumptions and foreground power issues embedded in institutional narratives. By challenging us to articulate implicit cultural logics,

he played a pivotal role in ensuring the theoretical model's transferability, robustness, and relevance to global scholarly dialogues on identity formation in constrained systems.

Our research remained anchored in an Eastern relational paradigm, with knowledge co-constructed through collaborative processes guided by strategic deference. This approach involved adaptively leveraging our distinct expertise to harmonize psychological, indigenous, and cross-cultural perspectives. Grounded theory was employed not merely as methodology, but as means to theorize from an Eastern vantage point the core social process through which youth athletes navigate the student-athlete divide. This positioned our collective roles as relational foundation for generating a theoretically and culturally resonant model of identity construction.

#### SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

The current study received ethical approval from the Sports Science Experiment Ethics Committee of Beijing Sport University (Approval No.2025440H). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental/guardian consent secured for adolescent participants after detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and right to withdraw.

Our sampling strategy was guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2024) and fundamentally structured by an Eastern relational ontology centered on Fei's (1992) concept of the "differential mode of association" (p. 60). This ontological commitment reconceptualizes the athlete not as an isolated individual but as a node embedded within hierarchical networks of obligation and resource access. Consequently, our sampling logic prioritized mapping this relational ecosystem, a decision that collectively emerged from our research team's integration of indigenous and psychological perspectives. Sampling began with coaches due to their pivotal role in China's sporting "interpersonal order" (Si et al., 2011), where they mediate interpersonal connections and socially contingent self-esteem dynamics as both institutional agents and relational brokers. As former athletes who navigated the system and current professionals operationalizing its logic (Guo et al., 2023), they provided dual perspectives essential for illuminating the border work central to this study. The second author, an indigenous authority with decades of experience in the Chinese elite sport system, validated the coaches' contextual relevance based on explicit criteria: each coach (a) had personally navigated the sport-education system as a former athlete, (b) was

actively shaping youth pathways in their current role, and (c) could articulate the institutional tensions inherent in the system.

Recruitment commenced with snowball sampling (Noy, 2008; Parker et al., 2019) through professional networks, yielding four qualified coaches who met these criteria above. The recruited coaches were all currently serving as school team coaches (3 males, 1 female;  $M$  age=34.50,  $SD$ =7.14) from Chinese sports universities. These coaches possessed diverse expertise in athletics ( $n$ =2), football ( $n$ =1), and basketball ( $n$ =1), with coaching experience ranging from 6 to 21 years ( $M$ =12.00,  $SD$ =6.78). Subsequently, snowball sampling facilitated recruitment of six school team athletes (4 males, 2 females;  $M$  age=12.33,  $SD$ =0.82) across athletics ( $n$ =2), football ( $n$ =1), cheerleading ( $n$ =1), street dance ( $n$ =1), and basketball ( $n$ =1).

Sampling focused on the school team as an institutional context because it generates relational dynamics essential to border work, including peer hierarchies, collective accountability, and visible role negotiations. As junior middle school students, they represent elite sports reserve candidates at a critical stage where systemic tension between academic and athletic demands peaks (Hou & Xiao, 2021). This phase serves as a crucial filtering mechanism within China's development pathway, where specialization decisions emerge amid intense exam pressures, thus providing indispensable data on how negotiation strategies first develop during this pivotal period.

Guided by the emergent theoretical need to compare identity construction across contrasting system positions, we theoretically sampled two elite athletes: an 18-year-old female figure skater (International Master of Sports) and a 26-year-old male Wushu Taolu athlete (National Level 2). This pairing maximized variation along three dimensions: (a) career stage (emerging vs. established); (b) system embeddedness (core Olympic sport vs. peripheral traditional discipline); and (c) cultural provenance (global vs. indigenous). Wushu's inclusion was theoretically pertinent given scholarly identification of distinctive identity transformation patterns among its practitioners (Xi et al., 2025). This comparative design enabled examination of identity navigation from different vantage points within the same national system.

The sampling strategy, encompassing coaches, school team athletes, and elite athletes, was designed to theorize the core process of identity construction as it manifests across China's sport-education ecosystem. The three groups presented above constitute interdependent analytical vantage points within a unified system. Their perspectives function as multiple prisms, each refracting distinct yet complementary insights into the same fundamental phenomenon. Coaches illuminate institutional implementation, school team athletes reveal developmental experiences, and elite athletes articulate

high-performance realities of navigating borders to construct identity. This integrated approach ensures our emergent model captures border navigation as a coherent process operating across different system levels, rather than as segmented experiences of discrete groups. This multi-stage sampling process (Figure 1) sequentially recruited coaches, school-team athletes, and elite athletes, enabling constant comparative analysis across institutional, developmental, and high-performance perspectives, which ensured the emergent identity construction model was both triangulated and contextually rich.

Theoretical saturation was assessed for the emerging theoretical model rather than for each participant subgroup in isolation. This approach was consistent with

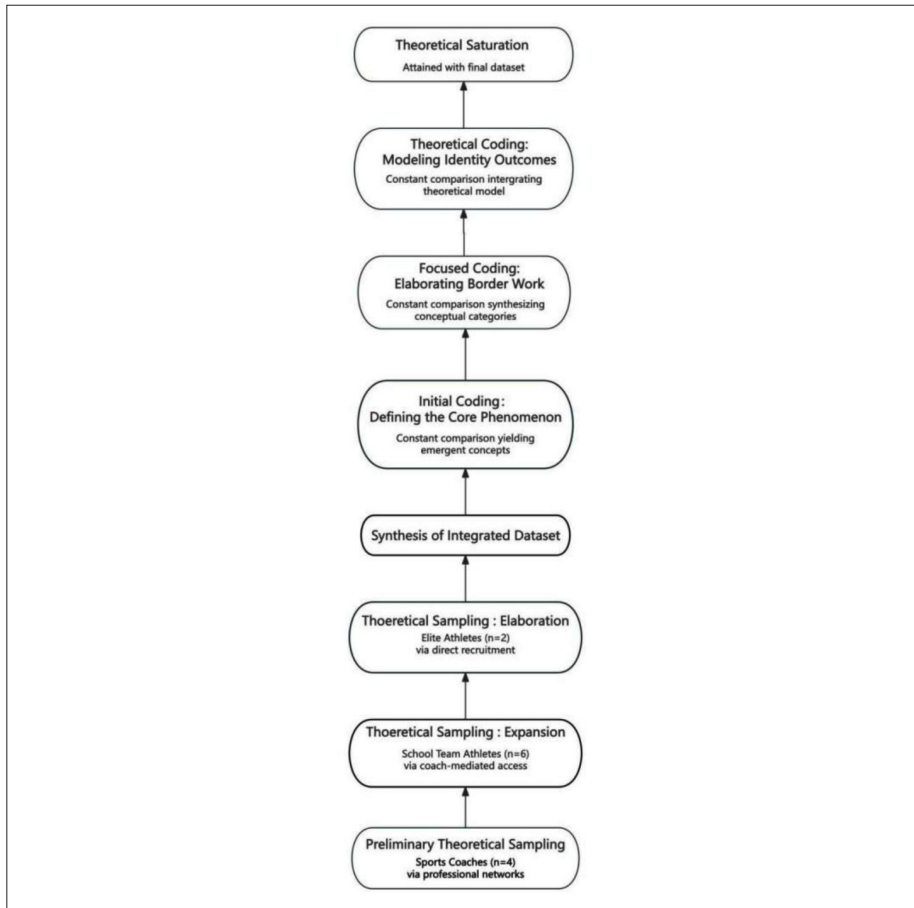


Figure 1. Phases of Theoretical Sampling and Analysis: Participant Recruitment and Progression to Saturation.

our relational ontology, which posits that identity is co-constructed across the system's hierarchical networks, necessitating that the theory be saturated at the level of the entire relational ecosystem. After initial coding of the entire dataset, we conducted three subsequent interviews with representatives from each participant group. The final interview with the Wushu athlete proved decisive; his narrative of disengagement served as a critical boundary case that helped define the properties of the three identity trajectories. We concluded that theoretical saturation was achieved when new data no longer yielded novel theoretical insights into the core category (Charmaz, 2024), a judgment made through constant comparative analysis that aligns with established qualitative research standards (Bowen, 2008; Morse, 2015b).

#### DATA COLLECTION

We conducted semi-structured interviews in Mandarin to best capture nuanced cultural meanings within the Chinese context. This method embodied our relational ontology by facilitating what Fei (1992, pp. 60-70) terms the differential mode of association, enabling candid discussions of social hierarchies and obligations. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, creating a unified 146-page single-spaced Chinese transcript for comprehensive analysis. The initial interview protocol was developed through an iterative process informed by research questions and key literature constructs (e.g., boundary work, identity negotiation). As data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded concurrently, the protocol evolved dynamically through theoretical sampling. Emerging conceptual insights directly informed the prospective refinement of questions for subsequent participants. For instance, the initial interviews with coaches revealed parents' predominant focus on competition outcomes. This emergent insight – coded as “parental result-orientation” prompted deeper probing of this phenomenon. In subsequent interviews with school-team athletes, we refined questions from general parental involvement inquiries to targeted probes: “Do your parents pay more attention to your training process or the final results?” Contrasting athletes' reports of parental concern for psychological well-being with coaches' observations of public result-oriented advocacy proved decisive. This iterative comparison critically developed the core category of family as “Strategic Border Guard,” delineating public instrumental oversight from private emotional support.

The interview durations reflected distinct methodological roles within our China-specific context. Coaches (total 124 minutes,  $M=31$  minutes) and school team athletes (total 137 minutes) provided extended narratives illuminating institutional and developmental aspects of China's sport-education

system. Elite athlete interviews were strategically condensed (29-33 minutes each; 62 minutes total) to accommodate their rigorously managed schedules. Sessions were scheduled during training breaks or after psychological support sessions. Despite brevity, these interviews yielded exceptionally dense data, evidenced by substantial transcripts (figure skater: 9,009 words; Wushu athlete: 16,533 words), confirming methodological effectiveness.

The interview protocol evolved iteratively through theoretical sampling to pursue emergent categories. We employed broad, open-ended questions designed to operationalize core phenomena into culturally resonant inquiries, creating conversational space where structural and relational dynamics of China's sport-education system could be naturally recounted. Question design translated abstract concepts into everyday narratives. To examine how young athletes navigate borders within school teams' differential mode of association, we asked coaches: "In your coaching experience, how do you identify a student who possesses not just skill, but genuine potential and connection to their sport?" Their responses revealed talent's relational embeddedness through peer relationships, collective goal commitment, and team hierarchy positions. To explore identity negotiation involving exploration-commitment cycles (Marcia, 1966), we employed culturally embedded questions like "What made you persevere?", invoking perseverance as a culturally salient virtue that elicited reasons for sustained involvement ranging from relational obligations to personal passion, thereby illuminating identity commitment foundations.

Data collection followed an iterative grounded theory cycle (Charmaz, 2024), where preliminary interview analysis directly informed theoretical sampling and question refinement. Through constant comparative analysis, conceptual categories were systematically developed across data collection rounds. For example, when coding revealed identity construction strategies, we asked elite athletes about balancing athletic and personal roles during performance pressures. Similarly, when analysis showed motivational evolution, we asked school team athletes how their sports participation reasons had changed over time. This approach grounded the theoretical framework in lived experiences while enabling systematic development through comparison. The iterative approach unfolded through integrated analysis stages. It commenced with open coding of all imported transcripts to identify emergent concepts, directly informing subsequent theoretical sampling and interview guide refinement. As constant comparison across the dataset allowed categories to stabilize, analysis progressed to focused coding (Glaser, 1978).

Crucially, theoretical verification was undertaken through member checking with a subset of early participants selected via purposive theoretical sampling based on: (1) initial interviews providing rich, illustrative data central to core

theoretical categories, and (2) collective representation of emerging identity trajectories (Pragmatist, Value Seeker, System Perpetuator) and key relational roles (athlete, coach) within the network. Their confirmation that the synthesized model – including border work and identity trajectories – accurately reflected their experiences was pivotal in validating theoretical construction. This cycle of collection, comparison, and refinement continued until theoretical saturation was conclusively achieved at theoretical coding stage. Saturation was determined when new data failed to yield new substantive codes or dimensions and did not challenge the developed framework (Glaser, 1978).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Guided by our relational ontology, the entire analytic process was a translation of grounded theory procedures into a framework of relational sense-making. Open, focused, and theoretical coding were all interpreted through the lens of the differential mode of association and the social-oriented self. Data analysis employed constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2024) through three concurrent coding phases. We began with line-by-line open coding of early interviews, yielding over 150 emergent codes in NVivo. These were treated as unique empirical indicators requiring theoretical interpretation rather than universal constructs. For example, the code *Glorifying the Nation* illustrated the moral framework of the “Whole-Nation System” (Ge et al., 2019, p. 2), while *Obtaining ‘Master of Sports’ Title* revealed essential credential-conversion logic. Similarly, *Sport-Academia Conflict* voiced the structural “sport education divide” (Guo et al., 2023, pp. 22-23). This granular approach maintained theoretical sensitivity to both lived experiences and socio-institutional structures. The entire analytic process, from initial coding to category development, was guided by the established procedures of constant comparison and theoretical sampling as outlined in the grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Focused coding advanced initial analysis by developing categories through our relational framework, treating data as narratives of negotiation within China’s sport-education ecosystem. Constant comparative analysis traced code manifestations across structural and cultural borders, examining tensions between institutionalized sport pathways and exam-oriented academics, plus negotiations between personal development and national purposes. This context-driven process enabled categories to map onto border landscapes with explanatory power. For example, *Seeking Affirmational Support* refined into pursuing emotional legitimacy from parents alongside

institutional endorsement from Confucian-oriented coaches, revealing Navigating Borders as identity construction's core process in the Chinese context.

Theoretical coding established 'Identity Construction through Border Negotiation' as the core category. Through selective theoretical analysis, we systematically tested the three identity trajectories against all participant accounts. The Value Seeker trajectory refined through narratives where personal achievement fused with national pride, exemplified by the figure skater invoking "a slow sparrow must make an early start after experiencing "the national flag draped over her shoulders." Concurrently, the System Perpetuator trajectory reached saturation through the Wushu athlete's critical case of Functional Subordination and his assertion of "No Other Choice." Theoretical saturation confirmed when comprehensive analysis yielded no new properties or conceptual relationships, demonstrating the model's capacity to account for identity formation experiences across the spectrum from autonomous exploration to foreclosed commitment while maintaining strong Chinese cultural grounding.

## QUALITY

The quality of this inquiry is defined by its grounding in an Eastern relational ontology, where rigor resides in the contextual fidelity and relational responsibility of the research process. This paradigm was enacted by making indigenous constructs the active drivers of methodology. The differential mode of association and the interdependent self operated as sensitizing concepts that guided data interpretation toward the logic of obligation networks. Within the research team, the practice of strategic deference structurally embedded hierarchical harmony into analysis, ensuring dialogic co-construction. Established qualitative practices were engaged through this relational commitment: constructivist grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2024) provided procedural direction, while their enactment was fundamentally shaped by a precedent that roots rigor in socio-cultural context (Li et al., 2023). Consequently, credibility flowed from multi-voiced member checking with participants as co-interpreters, originality from the culturally situated Navigational Model, resonance from participants' recognition of their lived experience, and usefulness from grounded applications. The study's rigor is thus demonstrated by the consistent fidelity of its relational engagements.

Through purposive sampling, seven participants (three coaches, three school-team athletes, one elite athlete) reviewed Mandarin presentations of our theoretical framework. When asked "Does this model reflect your personal journey?", their feedback confirmed the model's resonance with lived ex-

periences rather than researcher-imposed constructs. Participants consistently reported the framework not only mirrored their experiences but also clarified their broader systemic context. One coach noted it helped “make sense of the different types of athletes,” validating its explanatory power within the sport ecosystem. Substantive refinements emerged from this process, particularly when a male track athlete’s motivational weighting (70% educational utility vs. 30% personal affinity) demonstrated instrumental reasoning preceding identity commitment in the Pragmatist trajectory. This grounded feedback, combined with no new theoretical insights from additional participants, confirmed both theoretical saturation and ecological validity of our final model.

## Conclusion

This article (Part 1) was developed to establish an Eastern relational framework to investigate how youth athletes construct identity within China’s sport-education system. Rather than applying Western paradigms, the framework theorizes from within indigenous Chinese constructs – the differential mode of association (Fei, 1992) and the social-oriented self. It positions identity as a relational achievement co-constructed through navigation of hierarchical networks.

Our central contribution is a methodological integration that re-grounds constructivist grounded theory within our approach to an Eastern relational ontology. Our hybrid approach is realized through the practice of strategic deference and a sampling logic focused on relational ecosystems, together forming a culturally consonant lens. This lens is designed specifically to address the meso-level process gap identified in our research questions: how identity is negotiated under collective constraints. In the subsequent article (Part 2), this framework will be applied to present the empirical findings. Paper 2 is provided next to detail the specific borders, negotiation strategies, and emergent identity pathways, thereby fulfilling the empirical agenda set forth here and contributing to culturally informed understandings of dual career development.

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