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Constructing false consciousness: vocational college students' aspirations and agency in China

Abstract

Individual academic achievement is highly valued in Chinese society, with vocational education students positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy and suffering considerable societal prejudice. In this paper we present new findings from the choice-making experiences of students in two vocational education colleges in China, how they are perceived by their teachers, and how, in the context of their negatively-stereotyped status, they perceive themselves. Drawing on the Marxist notion of false consciousness to help understand the agency of these students, we found that almost all perceived themselves as being agentic and having control over their destiny. They felt they only had themselves to blame for the stereotyping to which they were subjected. One student had not adopted this mindset and was critical of the exam system. We argue that the perceived agency of the majority of the students resonates strongly with the neoliberal values which are associated with responsibilisation, and which have been encouraged in China since the 1970s with the beginning of the Reform Era. The evidence from our study also suggests, however, that some young people are able, by their own efforts, to move away from the state of false consciousness.

Keywords: Vocational education students in China, youth agency; false consciousness, responsibilisation; aspirations

1. Introduction

Whilst scholars disagree about whether or not China has become a neoliberal country (I. Weber 2018), it is generally accepted that with the start of the Reform Era in 1978 the sweeping economic reforms that were put in place gave the market a significant role in Chinese society. These reforms impacted on housing (Lee and Zhu 2006), health care (Li and Wei 2010) and education (Mok and Lo 2007). With the reforms came a redesigning of the official public discourse through which the suffering and social inequality experienced by some in Chinese society were concealed, and even condoned (Harvey 2005; So 2005; Nonini 2008; Shue and Wong 2007). As in neoliberal countries, in China it is now accepted that individuals have to make choices within an excessively aggressive culture of 'competition' (Shue and Wong 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008). It is within this public discourse that young people are negotiating their education choices.

In this paper, we focus on vocational education college students. We present new findings from interviews and focus groups with a sample of these students and their teachers and locate the findings within the debate on the concept of ‘youth agency’. The paper seeks theoretical purchase on the ‘agency’ of Chinese VET students through an innovative exploration of the Marxist notion of ‘false consciousness’. In the next section we provide a brief positioning of VET within China’s education system, and societal attitudes to VET students. Discussions on youth agency and the concept of false consciousness are presented in Section 3 and 4. This is followed in Section 5 with an explanation of the methods used to gather the research data, and the findings. Section 6 provides a discussion of the findings, and Section 7 some conclusions.

2. Chinese vocational education and vocational youth

Chinese VET has been subjected to a range of long-standing societal sentiments and precepts (Xiong, 2011). In imperial China (221 BC—1912 AD), the highest positions in the social hierarchy, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants were the scholar-officials (*shidafu*). Members of the ruling class, they were educated in the classics and were experts in morality (Münch and Risler 1987, 23). The Chinese philosopher, Confucius, whose teachings have been revered in China since the 6th century BC, regarded them as superior people (*junzi*). Only briefly during the Socialist Era (1949-1978) did technical education enjoy higher status and respect from society than academic education (Unger 1982). In the Reform Era VET again became politically and financially neglected with the expansion of university education (Klorer and Stepan 2015, 4). Academic higher education is embraced by Chinese society (Bai 2006, 137), but VET is regarded as a poor second choice (Yang 2004; Zha 2011; Liu and Wang 2015). Vocational colleges sit at the bottom of a three-tier system (Liu and Wang 2015) below *yiben* (the most prestigious public research universities) and *erben* (provincial and local institutions).

Access to post-secondary education is mainly determined by the high-stakes academic CEE (College Entrance Exam). There are cut-off lines which guarantee that a certain percentage of students will not be able to do well in the exam irrespective of the effort expended by them in preparing for it. Vocational institutions accept these so-called ‘left-over’ students (Yang 2004). The CEE selection model is reminiscent of the civil service examination system (the *Keju*). Adopted during the Imperial Era, it was based on Confucian meritocratic ideology (Liu 2016, 7). In Chinese society, an exam-based system is regarded as being fair and just (Song 2016) and exam success is highly respected (Kipnis 2011, 143). Entrance to post-secondary programmes is by the CEE examination and the test scores are regarded as evidence that a fair, meritocratic system is in place, although several scholars strongly contest this (Jin and Ball 2019; Liu 2013, 2016).

While academically oriented students are considered as ‘cultivated’ and possessing ‘more cultural quality’ (M. Weber 1970), VET students are regarded as lazy, intellectually and morally suspect youth with ‘less good’ academic records (Woronov 2015). They are regarded by Chinese society as ‘bad students’ and ‘failures’ who deserve the limited occupational opportunities open to them (Woronov 2015; Ling 2015). They are rendered, in Weberian terms, a ‘status group of negative honour’ (M. Weber 1978). The CEE test scores have become not only a quantitative expression of educational achievement but also to represent the social value of a young person (Woronov 2015, 13). VET students with low ‘educational prestige’ (M. Weber 1970) are, in mainstream mores, easily stereotyped using the test scores. Given these status issues, it is perhaps unsurprising that the lives of vocational students and how they respond to this uniquely unfavourable social and educational context in China, are

under-researched. The focus of our paper is on the choice-making experiences of VET students and their ‘agency’ for making choices. This is very timely because China is in the process of radically reforming vocational education, following the 19th National Congress in 2017¹ State Council, 2017a), and the government is keen to encourage young people to choose the vocational route whilst as Chinese society still values academic pathways more highly. In the next section we discuss the concept of youth agency in relation to young people’s choice-making capacity.

3. Youth agency

There is strong evidence that in neoliberal countries across the world, the assumption that young people should take full responsibility for themselves and their own future has become normalised. As Luhmann (1989) explained, ‘being an individual becomes a duty’ (cited in Bröckling, 2016, 3). Individualised responsibility is an important element in the neoliberal ideology that is the dominant narrative in capitalist economies (Harvey 2005, 76) where everyone is expected to be an ‘entrepreneurial self’, living by ‘the promise of success and the threat of failure’ - just like a business, in fact (Bröckling 2016, xiv). Ubiquitously present in youth studies, agency carries different meanings in different conceptual frameworks (Coffey and Farrugia 2014) but in essence the focus of interest is the individual and subjectivities. White and Wyn define agency as ‘the exercise of will and conscious action on the part of human subjects’. They analyse different dimensions of how it is exercised which, they argue, is ‘by and large inscribed within existing social relations’ (1998). The freedom to choose is also regarded as an important ingredient in notions of youth agency (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Thomson et al. 2002). From a lifecourse perspective, Biesta and Tedder perceive agency as the ability to exert control over, and give direction to, one’s life (2016). At the same time, these understandings of ‘agency’ arguably resonate with what Rose (1992) saw as the neoliberal notion of ‘responsibilisation’ of the self.

Recent debates in youth studies around agency present what Coffey and Farrugia (2014) refer to as ‘a worrying move away from the nuanced perspectives on agency’ and towards ‘unproductive dichotomies between “agency” and “structure”’ (463). These debates have focused on the individualisation thesis and its perceived celebration of autonomous agency (Woodman 2009). Drawing on empirical evidence, and still with the focus on the individual experience, various researchers have argued that far from living in their ‘choice biographies’, young people’s choices have been shaped by continued structural inequalities (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; te Riele 2004; Lehmann 2004). In order to better understand the experiences of VET students in China, rather than taking this ‘traditional’ route of investigation, which potentially contributes to the ‘worrying’ and ‘unproductive’ debates mentioned above, this paper constructed a theoretical alternative in an attempt to make sense of the ‘agency’ of the young people in the study. How these youngsters, regarded as ‘stupid and lazy’ youth (Woronov 2015), perceive their choice-making capacity and responsibility for their subsequent actions is a theme we wish to explore through the lens of false consciousness. The next section will provide a brief discussion on this theoretical lens.

4. False Consciousness

For France and Threadgold (2016), in their acrimonious dismissal of Côté’s construction of a political economy of youth (2014): ‘the notion of false consciousness has little analytical value other than describing millions of people as unthinking, mindless dupes’. For them the

¹ At the end of 2017, after the 19th People’s Congress, the State Council published its *Plans on Deepening the Integration of Industry and Vocational Education* (State Council 2017b).

term also: ‘in general lacks empirical rigour’ (618). Critics such as Larrain (1983) and McLellan (1986) have suggested that the very notion of false consciousness is inherently unsound because it is vague and ambiguous, but this is partly because there has been very little work devoted to analysing the meaning or meanings of the term (Pines 1993, 10).

More recently, Michael Apple, in *Ideology and Curriculum*, has been examining why Marxist understanding has not been more impactful in Anglo-Western educational investigation (Apple 2019, 135). He argues that the neglect of this scholarly tradition says more about the fear-laden past of society than it does about the merits of the (all too often unexplored) tradition, which indicates it is difficult ‘for there to be acceptance of a position which holds that most social and intellectual categories are themselves *valuative* in nature and may reflect ideological commitments’ (136). Apple argues that the Marxist tradition illuminates the tendencies for unwarranted and often unconscious domination, alienation and repression within educational institutions and promotes conscious individual and collective emancipatory activity (137). The Marxist tradition also has the potential to connect the students’ perspectives with White and Wyn’s (1998) ‘existing social relations’ (referred to above), and to locate them within a broad political economy approach. We concur with Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) who argue that ‘to understand the significance of youth in global society, it is ... necessary to look well beyond youth and young people in and of themselves’ (4). Most significantly, we argue that the concept of false consciousness carries with it the assumption that it is possible for young people to think their way out of their predicament.

Consistent with Marx (Pines, 1993), Engels wrote disparagingly of the ‘ideologist’ (as distinct from the materialist) and ‘so-called thinker’ who relies on the reports of other thinkers, past and present whilst ‘the real motives impelling him remain unknown to him’, resulting in a state of ‘false consciousness’. He thought that there emerged from this mindset an accepted understanding of the way the State operates ‘which dazzles most people’ (Engels 1893). Implicit here, far from perceiving people as ‘mindless dupes’ (France and Threadgold 2016), is the assumption that people are also capable of undazzling themselves through a critical evaluation of their situation and what might be causing it. The implicitness is evident in the context of Engels’s other writings (e.g. Communist Manifesto 1846), where he is clearly assuming that working people² are not only capable of critical thought but they have a responsibility to engage in it, and to act on the conclusions they draw from it. According to Wood (2004), Marx inherited the concept of false consciousness as an ‘alienated consciousness’ from his study of Hegel and Feuerbach. Alienated consciousness is false because social agents have failed to recognise social reality as a product of their collective labour (Fay 1987). ‘Alienated creatures..... do not recognize the world they have created as their own world, but rather take it to be something “just there”, something given, something alien and powerful...’ (Fay 1987). For some researchers, the Marxist notion of false consciousness was influenced by Francis Bacon as denoting a false understanding and distorted perception of social reality. According to Bacon, the human understanding and perception of reality are falsified and distorted in a number of ways by certain irrational influences and common fallacies which Bacon referred to as ‘the idols of the mind’ (Pines 1993, 13).

² In this paper, we assume that young people, including vocational students, who are dependent on the state (and their parents), are members of the same class as their parents, who have to sell their labour in order to pay for food and housing etc.

For a consciousness to be false, it must include certain kinds of false beliefs ‘held by people whose own continuing oppression is partly maintained by their holding them’ and ‘part of a society’s political culture’ (Cunningham 1987, 255). Pertinent for this study, Jost (1995) has shown some specific examples of false consciousness, including the beliefs some members of subordinate groups may have that they are inferior and deserving of their plight, or justify systems of inequality and make the false attribution of self-blame (Jost 1995).

5. Method and findings

The full study on which this paper is based consisted of three phases with students in two vocational colleges (one publicly funded and one private) in north China. In each college a questionnaire was administered to 100 respondents, recruited using the snowball method. Four focus group interviews, each consisting of 4-8 students drawn from the questionnaire sample, were carried out in each college, making a total of eight focus groups with 36 students across the two colleges. Individual narrative interviews were then carried out with nine of these students in each college. The individuals were selected on the basis of whether their responses to the questionnaire were ‘information rich’ (Patton 1990, 169), would add to our knowledge or understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell 2012, 206), or seemed most likely to help us ‘develop and test emerging analytic ideas’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 138). The interviews made it possible to explore the lived experiences of vocational students to gain some insights into their thinking. Limitation of space precludes reporting on the analysis of the questionnaires so this paper focuses on the interview and focus group data from the students. Additional interviews were carried out with three teaching staff, selected through convenience sampling, for their perspectives on the students. As the findings presented in this paper provide ‘indications of the way in which subjects think and feel’ (Bryman 1988, 140) there are no claims to generalisability. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo and the themes below were generated from the data using coding procedures and techniques such as open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The themes capture the full range of the perspectives of the students in this study on their choice-making processes on leaving secondary education (‘I was dropped down’), the stereotyping that was imposed on them when they were in vocational college (‘They are “bad seeds”’) together with their perceptions of the education system and their place within it (‘Taking the blame’).

‘I was dropped down’

The students were asked to reflect on their post-secondary choice-making experience. Many considered that they did not ‘test well’ and had ‘dropped down’ to vocational colleges as a last resort.

In the interviews the students were asked to talk about what the selection process was like for them. Hai described his experience:

...so I got my (CEE) result, which was lower than the score I needed for second-tier colleges. I guessed (they) weren’t going to consider me at all. So I decided to apply for a third-tier. But I was dropped down again. It (the CEE score) was still not good enough. There were only vocational colleges for me. So here I am. And that is it (sigh). I did not test well after all.

Hai was not alone. All of the students had wanted to enrol in top-tier academic universities and regretted not achieving higher scores. Wei was fatalistic about it: ‘I feel like CEE decided things once for all. I didn’t want (vocational college). But I cannot do anything about

it. I guess that is fate' (Wei). Attending a vocational college was the outcome of their being dropped to the bottom tier of the post-secondary choices by their CEE scores:

When filling out that form (application), I didn't have any choices left. Because let's face it, I didn't score as high as others. Those with higher scores could pick first. (Xiaoxin).

Following on from the challenge of the CEE we find that the students are faced with yet another test of endurance, this time at their VET colleges. In the next section the teachers give their perspectives on the students coming to them.

'They are "bad seeds"'

Teacher Ning had received her Master's degree from a prestigious university in the city and had been a vocational college teacher for over ten years. Of her students, she said:

When I was their age, I worked so hard at university - everyone worked hard. But our students, they only do the minimum amount of work that they are told by the teachers.... they are bad seeds. What do you expect us to grow out of bad seeds? I only see them playing games or just idling.

Int: Do they have any positive attributes, would you say?

Some students have a higher level of emotional intelligence. They know how to socialise with people and be flexible. I think this has something to do with them having poor grades in high school.... They probably used (their time) to play (and) were more sociable than academic students.

For Teacher Ning, the VET students' behaviour and study habits, and even their emotional intelligence, demonstrated that they were 'bad seeds' who deserved to be at the bottom. All of the teaching staff interviewed concurred at some level with the stereotypical view above, as illustrated here:

I have never seen them really motivated to do any work. They probably are just reluctant to make any effort. We always have to push them to do stuff. (Teacher Lei)

Teaching is never an easy occupation, *especially teaching vocational kids*. They need constant encouragement to get things done. Otherwise, they will just slack off. (Teacher Lianshuang)

Teacher Xiao reported that her students 'never seemed to get' what was delivered in class and 'had a hard time understanding the textbooks'. Teacher Ning believes that the reason for students being allocated to a vocational college is due to their lack of intelligence, as proven by their CEE scores: 'As much as some people like to deny it, it is a matter of intelligence. CEE is a test of one's intelligence'. It would seem that whilst the CEE is the beginning of the stereotyping of vocational students as 'failures', this is continued and reinforced by the teachers' interpretation of the students' behaviour when they are at VET college.

Taking the blame

The attitudes of the college staff towards their vocational students capture the negative stereotyping imposed on the students. We found this echoed in the way the students perceive

themselves, their place in the tracking system, and the stereotyping to which they are subjected in society more generally.

In the main, the students themselves did not question the rationale or the efficacy of the tracking system which they viewed as being meritocratic. As Qihan explained:

I think it is fair enough. I guess there is no better way than exams to judge who is better than whom.

Xiu was able to elaborate further:

(the system) is pretty fair... it allocates us to different levels of college. You get in to the level of college of which you are capable ... (and this) determines your future opportunities. To some extent, it represents your capability and how hard-working you are. If you don't have the proper degree and you say that you are very able at this and that, no one will believe you. That degree and the level of college you went to are the best proof of everything.

Thirty-five of the thirty-six students were supportive of the CEE as a fair test of ability. They had internalised the deficit model and that individuals were responsible for their own life chances including their test levels. Yujie considered that if students had managed to get into a good university it was because they were:

Not only good at schoolwork, they must also be persevering, resilient, hard-working, dedicated and willing to commit and put in effort.

The majority of the students in the study were not only resigned to being designated by the system as 'failures' they also took full personal responsibility for that. They reflected on their personal failings as proof of their innate inadequacy accurately measured, they thought, by the CEE. For Jiren, the CEE had also measured his ability to take tests and he did not question the fairness of that:

Test taking is more important than just studying hard. If I knew how to take tests, I could have scored high enough to get in to a better college.

Guoshuai blamed herself for not working hard enough before. She thought 'if you were hardworking and diligent enough, you would definitely get the results you want'. Self-blame was common. Yifan also judged that he had 'indulged (himself) too much' instead of working and was philosophical about it: 'one always becomes the victim of one's own evil deeds.... So, after all that, I came here (vocational college)'.

Xiaoxin had decided early on at school that he was simply not as bright as his fellow students and as a result had given up:

I have always thought of myself as being a slow, no school-brain type of student. My classmates knew the stuff after the teacher had explained once or twice. For me, I needed going over and over it many times. After a while, I just didn't put in enough effort.

Students had internalised the stereotyping to the point where they believed that they really were less intelligent and less hardworking, and invariably attributed the negative stereotyping they experienced to their own individual ‘failures’. They thought if they possessed ‘test skills’, putting in ‘enough effort’, or having ‘school brain’, they could have avoided being relegated in vocational colleges. They talked with resignation and regret about things they thought they could have done better but had ‘chosen’ not to, as Yuwei explained: ‘it is normal that academic students have better opportunities... I’m now paying the price for my failure’.

In the focus group interviews, the students had the opportunity to discuss and exchange views about the exam system and its roots in China’s past, still evident today:

Int: Do you think this [exam system] is fair?

Hai: Yes. Why is it not fair?

Ran: It dates back to the Imperial Exam in ancient times. It has always been like this.

Cheng: This was your choice, wasn’t it? It is you choosing not to study hard in high school. You didn’t study hard, so here you are.

Ran: Yes. It is the rule of society. You cannot do anything about it.

Steeped in an education system which they regarded as based on meritocratic principles and rooted in the past, now being nurtured in the present Reform Era, they accepted their unsatisfactory outcome and saw their failure to achieve within it the result of their own shortcomings and weaknesses and ultimately their own choice.

But what about the exception, mentioned above? One student out of the thirty five participants took a different, and critical view, of the system that had resulted in her attending vocational education college. Jia was reflecting critically about the exam system and shared her view in an angry tone:

Some people would say it is fate (that they did not do well at CEE and ended up in vocational colleges). It’s not fate at all! Because I do not think it is fair that people are evaluated and compared like that, by test scores! I do not think it is fair that the bad exam performance should contribute to (me going to) vocational college!

Here we have an example of a young person, seemingly by her own efforts, thinking her way out of the accepted truth that the CEE is fair, indicating that not only is this alternative view possible to achieve, but also suggesting that others may have come to similar conclusions.

In the next section, we present the findings through the conceptual lens of ‘false consciousness’ (Engels 1893) and discuss ‘youth agency’ as it is manifested in these students’ narratives.

6. Discussion

The illusion of control

The findings presented above suggest that vocational colleges or programmes were chosen by students as the last resort or ‘leftover option’ in a bid to obtain an educational credential. The students’ lower test scores in the College Entrance Exam (CEE) had automatically limited their capacity to be ‘free choosers’. As Hai acknowledged, ‘There weren’t any other options for me except vocational colleges. There was nothing I could do. So here I am’. Almost all of the students in the study wished they had attained a better grade so that they could have

enrolled at higher tier universities. The findings reveal the students' eagerness to participate in post-secondary education even if it meant they would be on the vocational track. They believed that the CEE offered an efficient and fair means of selection based on individual achievement. Better credentials would lead to good jobs and higher rewards, while, credentials are the currency of opportunity (Brown 2003). The students were encouraged to do their best and strive for excellence. However, they cannot all be the best. The students' CEE scores are compared with all the high school pupils' CEE performance, which is used to establish cut-off lines. The immense efforts of the students in this study towards CEE preparation, and their 'choices' or 'decisions' to go to vocational college upon leaving secondary education were passive responses to the ever-increasing demand for educational credentials. The students and their families preferred to enter the job market with a vocational credential rather than no degree at all (Hansen and Woronov 2013).

The students' determination to gain better credentials and their belief that more effort equals better credentials and better life prospects, suggests that they are labouring under false consciousness because even their very best efforts to achieve the high test scores count for little if everyone else does the same or better. There is never a guaranteed better life as individuals' opportunities depend on 'the opportunities of others' (Brown 2003). Such false consciousness has successfully locked in students, and their families, in the competition for better schools, colleges and jobs, with few able to opt out (Brown 2003, 142). Drawing on Côté's analysis, the students can be said to have been relegated 'to a compulsory period "youth" in which student-identities are prominent'. The young people act as a "filter" of social reproduction, with credential attainment operating as a smokescreen, obscuring structural obstacles by attributing success and failure to specific attributes of the individual in making youth transitions' (Côté 2016, 856). A false consciousness is created by manufacturing the illusion that these young people could decide or have control over their CEE results by using 'proper test skills', putting in 'enough effort', or having a better 'school brain'. There is an 'illusion of control' when they participate in the determining process even when institutions are producing unfavourable outcomes for them (Lind and Tyler 1988; Taylor and Brown 1988). As Guoshuai said, 'If you were hard-working and diligent enough, you would definitely get the results you want'. Similarly, Jiren felt that 'if I knew how to take tests, I could score high enough to get into a better college', and Chen thought 'it is you who chooses not to study hard'. The students believed they had the capacity to choose or control their test results, which in turn led to their own post-secondary outcomes. What they did not realise is that their efforts to achieve better test scores were less relevant in determining their outcomes than the 'cut-off lines' set by the Government. There would always be a certain percentage of young people who fail this exam no matter how hard any individual student prepares for the CEE. For Marx, people generally are unaware of the social factors influencing their thinking and action, and as a result begin to think falsely about the origins and validity of their ideas (Pines 1993, 7-8).

Fair and legitimate

Nearly all of those in the student sample, and all in the teacher sample regarded the CEE exam as efficient in what they saw as weeding out weak students. To most of the students, 'it (the exam system) is pretty fair'. In order for them to accept their unsatisfactory outcomes they have to believe (albeit falsely) that the system used to determine the outcomes is fair and legitimate (Jost 1995). The system of exam-based meritocracy has been seen as a sacred means to success since the imperial period (Song 2016; Yu and Suen 2005); as Ran said 'it has always been like this'. This acceptance is bound up with their assumption that they themselves were inadequate, evidenced for them by their low CEE scores, and their sense of

individualised responsibility for those scores. The students' sense of personal failure and inadequacy is echoed by the teachers stereotyping of them as unmotivated students with a habit of 'slacking off', or 'bad seeds', from which nothing worthwhile can grow, or poor learners who never 'get' the textbook. The vocational students' false consciousness, we argue, is further manifested in their active consent to the current exam system, the main cause of the stereotyping to which they are subjected. This leads them to falsely believe in the legitimacy of the system and to take their disadvantaged position for granted. The negative stereotyping they experience serves the function of justifying the prevailing system of social arrangements (Jost and Banaji 1994). These young people have subscribed to stereotypical beliefs about themselves in such a way that their status seems justifiable and appropriate. They have formed the false consciousness that they *are* the kind of students who 'have played around too much or drifted through', 'did not work hard enough' or are naturally 'slow' with 'no school brain'.

Significantly, in this small qualitative study there was evidence that not all of the students took the blame for their own 'failure'. One student, Jia, was critical of the exam system, did not blame herself, and was clearly angry that she had been put in a situation that she did not consider was of her making but rather due to an unjust exam system. Her view was that 'it is not fair' to be evaluated and compared by test scores. This rebellious response is indicative of the way in which an awareness – a move away from false consciousness - can emerge from a seemingly 'false consensus' (Apple 2019). This contradicts France and Threadgold's (2016) dismissal of the notion of false consciousness as labelling people as 'unthinking, mindless dupes'. Jia has undazzled herself from a state of false consciousness, an act of conscious 'emancipatory activity' (Apple 2019, 137) in the manner that Marx and Engels assume in their writing as a basic tenet, suggesting that other young people in Chinese society could be, and are capable of, doing the same.

The perceived agency

Rather than having an 'agentic' feeling, the vocational students felt fatalistic or powerless when they were 'dropped down' and had to relegate themselves to vocational colleges or forego the opportunity of going to college at all. However, there is the appearance of 'agency' when young people believe they have control over their test scores and could 'choose to study hard' and realise their goals. This sense of 'agency' appeared again when they failed to achieve the desired outcome and felt responsible for the consequence of that 'choice'. They tend to attribute their misfortune to their own 'inferiorities'. In Yifan's words, 'one always becomes the victim of one's own evil deeds'. As Bauman (2001) argues, in a 'society of individuals' all the messes one gets into are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures of those who have fallen into it (9). Only one student in the study (Jia) was prepared to lay the blame on systemic error associated with the exam-based hierarchical educational system. The students had been encouraged to assume that their life chances should be and only could be the responsibility of themselves. This is in line with neoliberal hegemonic rule, which involves 'a redistribution of responsibilities and the emergence of new forms of government - self-government' (Ball 2013, 159). These young people have developed the false impression that their success or failure is solely due to their own characteristics, such as their apparent laziness or lack of motivation. They have been created as 'disciplined self-management' individuals governed by a neoliberal ideology (Ozga 2009, 152).

In this study, the perspectives of the vocational education students on their experiences suggest that they have been exposed to the political and economic culture of neoliberalism,

with its stress on individualism and competition. With the start of the Reform Era, a shift from a well-supported socialist system with youth careers in the ‘iron rice bowl’³ was evident (Hoffman 2006). It seems that the perceived capacity or freedom to choose, offered by market egalitarianism, and the ‘responsibilization’ of the self (Rose 1992), could have become sedimented into Chinese social consciousness. As Ren said in his focus group, ‘it is the rule of the society’. This accords with the phenomenon, observed among young people in western neoliberal societies, that they think ‘they *do* have choices’ and are ‘likely to blame themselves for any lack of success’ (Beck 1992; Dwyer and Wyn 2001; Ball et al. 2000; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Bauman 2007). In modern Chinese society it seems there could be a perfect storm, ideologically speaking, with meritocratic ideas from a pre-revolutionary period, still firmly embedded even in the thinking of young people (Kipnis 2011), meeting the new individualised, anti-collective (I. Weber 2018) neoliberal order. However, Jia’s statement above suggests that there are young people who neither agree with ‘the rule of the society’ nor are prepared to take the blame for their lack of success.

A key finding of this study is that the student participants perceived themselves as being agentic and as having control over their destiny. Further, they felt they had only themselves to blame for the stereotyping to which they were being subjected. We argue that the students’ perceptions of themselves and their experiences resonate strongly with neoliberal values of responsibilisation, based on perceived agency, and encouraged during China’s Reform Era. These students will be joining the future young labour force, which has been managed through what is only an ostensibly meritocratic system with ‘bad’ choices (which include vocational education because it is seen as inferior to academic options) a matter of individual responsibility, rather than the result of dispossession. Isabella Weber (2018) argues that this type of influence is the price the Chinese Communist Party knew it was risking when, from the late 1970s, it consciously engaged the Chinese state with the market forces of capitalism (225).

7. Conclusions

This paper began with an outline of the Chinese system with respect to vocational education and presented evidence from Chinese youth on their perspectives and experiences as vocational students, as well as their teachers’ stereotypical attitudes towards them. We have drawn on the Marxist notions of false consciousness to understand youth agency differently through insights into the choice-making experiences of these youth and their perspectives on the current system in the context of their disadvantaged and negatively-stereotyped status. We offer a new contribution to the often neglected and unexplored Marxist scholarly tradition (Apple 2019) by developing the concept of false consciousness as a theoretical lens and provided it with an empirical basis. We conclude that the young people’s interpretations of their situation - that it is their personal failure in not achieving better test scores (which they associate with ensuring a better life) are evidence of false consciousness, as conceived by Engels (1893) and Marx and Engels (1846). The young people have formed false perceptions of their own agency in the belief that they have the power to control their own achievement level and, through this, that they have freedom of choice to determine their own futures. The current exam system has secured active collusion from these vocational students at the same time as it generates the poor outcomes. The students are under the impression that they only have themselves to blame and they should take responsibility their own misfortune. This perceived sense of ‘agency’ – in the sense we understand here as control of one’s own

³ ‘Iron rice bowl’ refers to the job assignment system that comes with the lifetime guarantee of steady salaries and the benefits of a socialist welfare package (Hoffman 2006, 551).

destiny along with the sense of personal responsibility for making choices – is, we argue, created by false consciousness which helps to sustain the hegemonic control neoliberal economies need to survive. The perspective of Jia, as the only exception who did not accept the unified ‘false’ discourse, offers evidence that young people can have the capability to move away from the state of false consciousness. We conclude that the concept of false consciousness provides the opportunity for a critical turn in understanding agency, which for too long has been used in the drive to find some form of self-driven personal empowerment in young people, even when the evidence for it is thin. False consciousness offers a different theoretical perspective within the educational community, which can, as Apple (2019) explains: ‘contribute to the creation of alternative programmes of research and development that challenge the commonsense assumptions that underpin the field’ (Apple 2019). We suggest that this theoretical perspective could further improve our understanding of youth decision-making outside of VET and in countries other than China.

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