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‘Stupid and lazy’ youths? Meritocratic discourse and perceptions of popular stereotyping of VET students in China

Geng Wang*

School of Education, Tianjin University, China

Since the start of the Reform Era in 1978, vocational education and training (VET) in China has been seen as inferior to academic routes and positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy. VET students are stereotyped as being ‘stupid and lazy’ and suffer considerable prejudice in Chinese society. Drawing on Foucault’s disciplinary power and Ball’s idea of performativity, this paper analyses how academically focused, exam-driven societal attitudes, as a form of meritocratic discourse, impact on these students and on how they perceive their stereotyped position within the Reform Era educational system. The findings reveal that these students have internalised the ideology of meritocracy, coming to see themselves as inferior and inadequate compared to their academic counterparts. Turning ‘the gaze’ upon themselves, they examine whether they ‘add up’ and assume responsibility for their own ‘failures’. VET students are trained to be the new kind of youthful subject required to sustain the Reform Era China’s engagement with neoliberal governance.

Keywords: VET in China; stereotype; meritocracy; Foucault; neoliberalism; Chinese reform era

Introduction

Similar to the situation in other countries (Di Stasio, Bol, & van der Werfhorst, 2016; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2017), vocational education and training (VET) in China has come to be regarded as a poor second choice (Liu & Wang, 2015; Yang, 2004; Zha, 2012), with VET colleges positioned less favourably in the educational hierarchy, and absorbing ‘left-over’ students with low academic grades (Li, 2004; Mok, 2001; Stewart, 2015). Whilst vocational students had enjoyed respect from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and society during the Revolutionary Period (1949–1978) (*People’s Daily Reporter,* 2008), in the education system of the Reform Era, they became stereotyped as ‘educational failures’ and ‘stupid and lazy youths’ (Woronov, 2015). The Chinese education system is assumed to be a case of ‘meritocracy in action’, as access to colleges or universities is almost exclusively based on exam performance (Jin & Ball, 2019). The current ‘meritocratic’ education system resonates with Chinese society, given its strong historical attachment to the system operating in Imperial China (Yu & Suen, 2005). Nevertheless, meritocracy is also, in its modern

* Email: Geng.wang0313@hotmail.com

permutation, neoliberalism's 'handmaiden', which facilitates the atomisation of individuals while extending competition and entrepreneurial behaviour into 'the nooks and crannies of everyday life' (Littler, 2018, p. 2). Based on the lived experiences of Chinese vocational college students, this article focuses on the academically focused, exam-driven societal attitudes and sentiments that have permeated so many areas of these young people's lives. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Stephen Ball's (2000, 2003, 2012) idea of performativity, this study analyses how such societal attitudes, as a form of meritocratic discourse, impact on vocational students and on how they perceive their position within the Reform Era educational system.

Since the introduction of sweeping economic reforms in 1978, China has achieved impressive results in poverty reduction in both rural and urban areas (Pei, 2018). The country has 'a sustained growth rate unparalleled in human history' (Harvey, 2005, p. 1). However, the Reform Era witnessed a redistribution of wealth and income within Chinese society, realised by 'accumulation by dispossession'[1] (Harvey, 2003, 2005). Researchers have also observed a redesigning of the official public discourse since the Reform, which has involved concealing, and even condoning, certain forms of suffering and social inequality (Shue & Wong, 2007). Individual choices must be made within an excessively aggressive culture of competition (Shue & Wong, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008). The Reform Era requires the production of new kinds of individual subjects who can act in their own self-interest and become entrepreneurs of the self (Zhang and Ong, 2008; Hoffman, 2010). This paper will focus on the ideology of meritocracy as the redesigned public discourse within which vocational students are experiencing the stereotypes.

The following section will briefly discuss the Chinese Reform Era and the position of VET within China's post-secondary education system, as well as explore meritocratic discourse. The paper will then investigate the lived experiences of vocational students in relation to the meritocratic discourse through the findings from narrative interviews with a sample of these students. It locates these experiences within the theoretical arguments of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) and performativity (Ball, 2000, 2003, 2012).

The reform era, Chinese post-secondary system, and VET

Scholars have argued that China has embraced neoliberalism since the start of the Reform Era, coinciding with similar changes in other parts of the world (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Gledhill, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Sharma & Gupta, 2006). The market has come to play an ever more significant role in Chinese society. Reforms in housing (Lee & Zhu, 2006), health care (Lu & Wei, 2010), and education (Mok & Lo, 2007) all seem to follow neoliberal principles. However, many argue that the authoritarian control exercised by the ruling Communist Party over economic development and governance contradicts the neoliberal template (Nonini, 2008; Ong, 2007). Some hold that there is no neoliberal subjectification of Chinese people as there has been a co-existence of what would initially appear to be two very incompatible ideologies (Gong & Dobinson, 2019). Analysing the historical accounts of China's political and economic problems in the late 1970s, Weber argues that while neoliberalism was used as a way out of the crisis, the country has not fully embraced the neoliberal path, and it has remained a mixed economy with a consciously and actively visible hand of the state shaping economic development (Weber, 2018). In spite of the above-mentioned

differences among scholars regarding whether or not China has become neoliberal, many of them agree that China has become one of the most unequal societies during its rapid economic growth since the Reform Era (Hart-Landsberg & Burkett, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Nonini, 2008; So, 2005).

In the Reform Era, the value of education was heightened as the country developed a market economy (Maurer-Fazio, 2006). Driven by a neoliberal ideology of human capital, the Chinese government envisioned education as a motor of economic growth and has implemented a series of reforms to expand post-secondary education since the late 1990s (Thøgersen, 1990, 2002). As a result of both an open labour market and the expansion of education, 'educational desires' (Kipnis, 2011) in China have grown, thus greatly increasing pressure on students to gain higher educational credentials, particularly in the form of university degrees. Educational credentials are used as a tool to distinguish between job applicants in an increasingly competitive market (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). Mid-level managerial jobs, technical jobs, and skilled jobs, which 30 years ago would have been filled by graduates with vocational degrees, are now increasingly reserved for university graduates (Hansen & Woronov, 2013).

The current structure of China's post-secondary education system can be broken down into three tiers (Liu, 2013; Liu & Wang, 2015). In the first tier are the most prestigious, public, research-focused universities. Provincial and local institutions remain in the middle, while vocational colleges are largely at the bottom, focusing on vocationally oriented programmes (Liu & Wang, 2015). Access to any form of post-secondary education in China is mainly determined by the National College Entrance Examination (CEE or *gaokao*), which is a high-stakes, academically orientated exam. After completing their secondary education (generally at the age of 18 years), students have the option of taking the CEE and applying for post-secondary education (Liu, 2013). The top-tier research universities are able to recruit the students with the highest exam scores. Then, the second-tier provincial universities recruit students with the lower scores. At the bottom of this educational caste system lie the vocational institutions, which accept the 'left-over' students (Zha, 2012). Cut-off lines for each tier guarantee that only a certain percentage of students are able to gain admission (Liu, 2013). Therefore, should their CEE scores fail to surpass the cut-off lines, students risk being rejected by the universities/colleges to which they have applied (Liu, 2013; Loyalka, 2009).

Besides absorbing the 'left-over' students who fail the CEE, vocational colleges also admit students who take the Spring CEE, an exam solely focused on admission to vocational colleges. Those with poor test scores in secondary schools are often advised by their teachers to take the 'easier' Spring CEE (Woronov, 2015, p. 5). The Spring CEE is also academically oriented, but less demanding than the real CEE that is sat in the summer.

Chinese vocational colleges generally offer three-year vocational degrees, which are considered to be significantly inferior to academic ones (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). The Higher Education Act of 1998 emphasises that vocational colleges and universities should be offering two different *types* of higher education – vocational and academic degrees; however, whilst these qualifications are officially set at the same level (Ding, 2004), this does not mean there is parity of esteem between them. Rather, vocational education is treated as an inferior form of higher education, a non-formal version of higher education, and a kind of higher education reserved for low-scoring students (Ling, 2015; Yang, 2004). Some researchers have suggested that Chinese vocational studies are mostly chosen by default or as a last resort – a fallback

for those who failed their exams – rather than out of personal or family interest (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Luo, 2013; Klorer & Stepan, 2015; Woronov, 2015; Zhang, 2008).

The CEE, VET students, and meritocracy

In the Reform Era, the CEE has been the key mechanism for structuring higher education opportunities (Liu, 2013). The Chinese education system might appear to be 'meritocracy in action', given that selection is exclusively based on exam performance, which is the outcome of intelligence plus effort (Jin & Ball, 2019, p. 2). Meritocracy advocates the giving of rewards to individuals based on merit or achievement (Walton, Spencer, & Erman, 2013), and promotes the notion of equality of opportunity (Jin & Ball, 2019). When Fox (1956) and, later, Young (1958) started writing about the concept of meritocracy in the 1950s, it was intended as a warning – if society were considered to be meritocratic, there might be no sympathy for the disadvantaged, who would be assumed to deserve their fate (Littler, 2018). However, the positive conceptions of meritocracy have been enthusiastically embraced in the West, as it appears to constitute a highly attractive 'progressive' goal to which centre-left parties can commit (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007, p. 4). Many researchers have challenged this concept, arguing that meritocracy creates an illusion of social justice that disguises structural inequalities (Bell, 1973; Brown & Tannock, 2009; Dench, 2006; Young, 2001).

Whilst the Chinese education system might appear to be 'a prime meritocratic environment' (Jin & Ball, 2019, p. 13), the extent to which the Chinese educational system is meritocratic is questionable. Conducting a survey study involving around 960 first-year college students, Ye Liu (2013; 2016) found that the CEE, with its association with meritocratic selection, justified the privileges of urban residents and advantaged families in the form of merit outcomes, while at the same time maintaining social inequality among different regions and between the rural and the urban. Inherited from the Imperial Period (Yu & Suen, 2005), the system of exam-based meritocracy is viewed as fair and just (Song, 2016), and the social respect shown to those achieving exam success is apparent (Kipnis, 2011). Students regard the exam system as a form of sacred and fair competition, as well as a means to success (Song, 2016). As exam performance is assumed to be evidence of merit, it is considered to prove the overall quality of a person (Kipnis, 2011). Under the influence of an 'examination culture', academically focused, exam/credential-driven societal attitudes are evident in the Reform Era (Kipnis, 2011, p. 143). Test scores have become more than just a quantitative expression of educational outcome; they condense and represent the social value of young people (Woronov, 2015). Given their lower test scores, vocational students, at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, are considered to be 'stupid and lazy', 'failures', and 'bad students' (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015).

These ideas and beliefs constitute a general worldview and uphold particular power dynamics, which can be understood as a form of meritocratic ideological discourse (Littler, 2018). As discussed by Littler (2017), ideology is a charged term. For this paper, 'ideology' is considered a way to secure hegemony or more dominant forms of social, political, and economic power and control (Althusser, 2014; Gramsci, 2005). Based on Littler's definition (2018), 'discourse' is here taken to mean 'a set of shared meanings in a historically specific "discursive formation", and it could be

conveyed through institutions, imagery and behaviour as well as language' (2018, p. 10). For this paper, the focus is on meritocracy as an ideological discourse (Littler, 2018, p. 8) and an investigation of young lives within the 'shared meanings' of meritocracy. The stereotyping of vocational students has received limited attention in the literature and few researchers have investigated the many assumptions at the heart of these stereotypes (Woronov, 2015, p. 2). There are also few studies on the effect of meritocratic discourse on vocational students within a society that only values academic studies (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2015). Presenting new findings from interviews with vocational students, this paper aims to address the gaps in the literature by demonstrating how ubiquitous the meritocratic discourse has become in Reform Era China and how it relates to and sustains the stereotypes against vocational students. This paper turns to two critical concepts to make sense of the data, disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) and performativity (Ball, 2000, 2003, 2012).

Disciplinary power and performativity

In his early work, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault suggests that disciplinary power is a form of 'power-knowledge' that observes, monitors, shapes, and controls the behaviour of individuals within institutions and society. The technique of examination is particularly powerful as 'it is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish', and 'it establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (1977, p. 184). Within a Foucauldian framework, Ball theorised his ideas about the performance of students, teachers, and schools into the notion of 'performativity' (2000, 2003, 2012). For Ball, performativity is a technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation – or a system of 'terror', in Lyotard's words – that employs judgments, comparisons, and displays as means of control, attrition, and change (Ball, 2000; 2003). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or as displays of 'quality', or as 'moments' of promotion or inspection. They stand for, encapsulate, or represent the worth, quality, or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement (Ball, 2000). Operating in the neoliberal market of performances, the individual is made into an enterprise, a self-maximising productive unit committed to the 'headlong pursuit of relevance as defined by the market' (Falk, 1999, p. 25).

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, especially his understanding of using examination as a technique (1977, p. 184), provides a conceptual lens to help us understand how individual young subjects are formed in the Reform Era and how the exam culture constructs the 'docile and capable' bodies required by neoliberalism (Foucault, 1977, p. 294). Moreover, Ball's idea of performativity is an important complement to the Foucauldian perspective for this paper, as it looks at the ways in which lists, grades, and rankings work to change the meaning of educational practice within a neoliberal context (Ball, 2013). Ball extended the Foucauldian concepts to consider how performativity as a key mechanism of neoliberal government uses comparisons, judgments, and self-management (Ball, 2013, p. 163). The next section discusses the methods employed for this study.

Methods

The data was collected from two different vocational colleges in China: Seaside and Riverside College (both names are pseudonyms). Riverside College is state-funded, recruits students nationwide, and offers vocational degrees only. Seaside College is a private college with a focus on IT. Although offering both academic and vocational degrees, it, like Riverside College, is still ranked as a bottom-tiered vocational college in the Chinese post-secondary education hierarchy. This qualitative study employed a narrative interview approach to encourage and stimulate the participants to tell the stories of significant events in their lives (Bauer, 1996). The approach goes beyond the question-response-type interview and follows "self-generating schema", using everyday communicative interaction, namely storytelling and listening. The narrative interview is used to investigate "hot issues" that may be potentially embarrassing for respondents or of a personal nature (Bauer, 1996). Since the participants of this study are vocational students who have not performed well academically or might consider their 'vocational student status' as a source of embarrassment due to popular stereotypes, narrative interview technique is particularly useful for providing 'a more sensitive approach' to investigating these issues (Bauer, 1996, p. 12). A total of 18 students (9 at each college) participated in the narrative interviews. All of them were undertaking vocational degrees. The sample was made up of 8 male and 10 female students; 6 were in their first year, 8 were in their second or third years, and 4 were in their final year. The study areas of the participants fall into four discipline categories: 6 were in finance and management, 3 were in engineering, 5 were in language, and 4 were in IT.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English at the transcription stage. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo and the themes below were generated from the data using coding procedures such as open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the stage of open coding, analytic techniques such as asking questions (Charmaz, 2003, p. 94) and making comparisons (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 73) were utilised to open up the line of inquiry and bring out different properties and dimensions of the data (p. 73). Axial coding involves reassembling data and relating themes or categories to their subcategories (p. 124). The themes capture the full range of the participants' perspectives of their experiences and opinions within the meritocratic discourse (e.g. 'family expectations' and 'secondary school learning experiences'), as well as their perceptions of the education system and their place within it (e.g. 'taking the blame'). Within the themes of 'family expectations' and 'secondary school learning experiences', vignettes were used to provide information regarding the participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes (Hughes, 1998, p. 381). The transcript from each narrative interview was used to develop the first draft of a vignette. A 'narrative skeleton' was constructed by rereading each transcript and highlighting keywords, quotes and ideas that seemed to represent the individual's character and story (Blodgett et al., 2011, p. 525). By linking together the experiences and ideas contained in the narrative skeleton, a full and flowing representation of the individual's story was produced in the form of a vignette. The participants were encouraged to read and edit the initial drafts so that they accurately reflected their stories. Some revisions were made before final approval were given by the participants. The findings presented in the next section reveal the students' lived experiences, and their perceptions of the exam system and their place within it.

Findings

This section begins with an investigation of the lived experiences and opinions of vocational youth in relation to powerful academically focused societal sentiments and attitudes. To shed light on the subject, vignettes are presented of several students' life stories regarding their family expectations and secondary school learning experiences. These vignettes are representative of the stories told by the participants in the study.

Family expectations

The students talked a great deal about their parents and how their attitudes influenced their feelings and actions. For example, Qiang's stories demonstrated his parents' high hopes for him as well as the enormous burden they placed on him, his mother, and their relationship.

Vignette 1: Qiang
Qiang was a very talkative 21-year-old young man. He was in his first year at Riverside College. His parents owned a small clothes shop in his hometown, Liaoning province. His older cousin, who was also from a working-class family, had progressed in his career as a government official in Beijing due to his high academic achievements. He was 'the phoenix flying from a henhouse', as the Chinese idiom goes. Since Qiang's childhood, his mother had compared his school performance to that of his 'phoenix' cousin. Unfortunately, Qiang's grades were less than his mother expected, which caused a great deal of tension between the two of them. Qiang felt enormous pressure and guilt for being a 'bad student'. He saw it as not fulfilling his filial duty. His mother also had little confidence or trust in his ability to make career decisions by himself as he had failed to prove himself to be 'a good student' like his cousin. His poor grades made his mother worry about his future. Qiang was not happy always living in the shadow of his cousin and unable to win the faith of his mother. He said his dream is to become a successful businessman so that he could prove to his mother that he can make it by himself.

As can be seen from Qiang's story, he was always compared to his cousin, who had obviously gained upward mobility thanks to his academic achievements. Qiang shared with me his feelings about being constantly compared:

> My mum always talked about how great my cousin was ever since I was a kid. He got many awards for his good grades. I always see my cousin as Mount Everest. But I, however, only wearing shorts and sandals, how can I ever climb that far with these? I am never made for climbing I guess, because we are different and have different paths. But my mum didn't know that. She thought studying was the only way out and if my cousin did it, I could do it too.

Qiang pointed out the huge gap between him and his cousin and the fact that they may 'have different paths'. What was regarded by his parents as the 'only way out' may not be suitable for him. Among the vocational students I encountered, Qiang was not the only one experiencing high family expectations in terms of their academic studies. The story of Yuehan is also worth mentioning here.

Vignette 2: Yuehan
Yuehan was a 22-year-old young woman. She was in her third year at Seaside College's business English programme. Her father was a senior police officer and her mother was a college lecturer. As Yuehan's father was an excellent student at school, he was always very strict with Yuehan when it came to her studies. Every time she fell behind or failed to improve her test scores, her father would leave a long letter on her desk and refuse to talk to her for a few days. He would be very angry if he found his daughter sleeping late, watching TV, playing with her phone, or 'slacking off'. When she did not do well at the CEE, her father did not talk to her for an entire month. He was so disappointed that he never said a word to her. In Yuehan's hometown, there was a tradition for people to host a banquet to celebrate their children going to college. Yuehan's father did not host any banquet, as he thought her test score was too low and there was nothing to celebrate. Her father finally helped Yuehan choose her college and major in the hope that she would gain an English-related qualification and also upgrade to a master's degree programme. Yuehan was reluctant to upgrade as she has always hated her area of study. But she was taking extra classes and trying really hard to gain those qualifications, even though she found it torturous. She tried to be as diligent as possible in front of her father as she worried she would upset him if she did not do so.

The 'silence treatment' administered by Yuehan's father, his anger towards his daughter for not investing more time in her studies, and his display of disappointment all compelled Yuehan to pursue academic excellence, despite having little interest in doing so. However, it is not only the students' parents that expect academic excellence from them; their entire secondary school learning experience that prepares them to this end.

Secondary school learning experience

Chinese secondary schools are designed to prepare students to take the CEE at the end of their senior year (Woronov, 2015). Those whose test scores are not high enough to enter university are often advised by their teachers to take the Spring CEE, an exam only for vocational college admission. The Spring CEE is also academically oriented, but less demanding than the CEE, which takes place in the summer. This section presents the students' experiences of their academically focused secondary schools and their encounters with their teachers.

Vignette 3: Xiaoxin
Xiaoxin was a 22-year-old young man in his second year at Riverside College. His hometown was located in the outskirts of Tianjin. His mother was a nurse and his father had run off when he was a kid, leaving a huge amount of debt for his mother to pay. His primary and secondary schooling years were plagued by constant family troubles. He was too embarrassed to make his teachers aware of his situation. He always thought he was 'slower' than the other students and he felt bad for making his mother worry about his poor grades, as she already had too much on her plate. At secondary school, Xiaoxin's grades were not ideal. His teachers strongly suggested he take the easier Spring CEE so he could

enrol at a vocational college. Xiaoxin was afraid that his poor test scores may result in him having no college to go to at all. Therefore, following his teachers' advice, he took the Spring CEE. He was accepted by Riverside College for the following year. Back in his secondary school classroom to complete the final school year, he began to realise that his teachers were not that happy to see him in class anymore. He and other soon-to-be vocational college students were advised to go home so as not to disturb the students who were working on the 'real' CEE.

As can be seen in the vignette, Xiaoxin was treated as an outsider in his secondary school after being admitted to vocational college. He and his classmates were constantly reminded by their teachers of the inferiority of this choice. For example, Xiaoxin recounted how his teachers 'encouraged' him to try harder:

> Actually, I felt extremely relieved when I found out I could get into Riverside College. Because my secondary school teachers always told me that my grades were so bad that even vocational colleges would not take me. I know that these threats were because they wanted me to work harder. But I was so worried and scared. I simply cannot have no college to go to. So, I took the Spring CEE and got into a vocational college as soon as possible.

The fear of 'even a vocational college' not taking them accompanied students like Xiaoxin throughout their three years of secondary school. Despite knowing that going to a vocational college was a last resort, Xiaoxin was still happy with it as he 'simply cannot have no college to go to'. It was obvious that the desires and fears that build up during their entire secondary schooling acted as powerful forces.

The academically focused societal attitudes were captured in the student accounts of their experiences of their secondary education as well as of their parents' high academic expectations. The following section presents how the students perceived the exam system and their stereotyped positions.

Student perspectives and the logic of 'meritocracy'

There was a popular assumption among the participants that the CEE system provides all students with the same starting point when they take the tests. Once the test scores are published and compared, individual students are rewarded based on their test performance; hence, the results are considered to be fair and just. A surprisingly large percentage of the students I encountered praised the fairness of the system. They held the view that one's life chances ought to accord with one's test performance. Final year student Xiu, for example, was a devoted believer in the meritocracy of the system:

> I think it is pretty fair that it [the system] assigns us to different levels of college. You will get into the level of college which you are capable of [via the admission test scores]. Therefore, a certain level of college leads to certain future opportunities. I think one's level of degree or academic achievement says a lot about them. To some extent, it could represent your capability as a person. If you don't have the proper degree and you say that you are very capable of doing this or that, no one will believe you. The degree and the level of college you went to are the best proof of everything.

Xiaoxin had a similar view:

> I think society values degrees so much because it's a fair way of judging who is better than who. It's the most obvious way to show someone you are a stronger candidate compared with other people.

Within a logic of meritocracy, the exam system naturally rewards clever, hard-working students, whilst, in accordance with the stereotype, vocational students are castigated for being stupid and lazy individuals who deserve to be relegated to vocational college. The stereotype was internalised by many of the participants, as they regarded one's test performance as a fair evaluating mechanism. In their eyes, a variety of attributes could be identified from one's test score, such as how hard working, smart, or motivated a student is. The following section explores in greater depth the students' perceptions of those attributes or 'merits', and how they see themselves.

Taking the blame?

The majority of the participants deemed an excellent test performance to be a demonstration of a student's diligence, intelligence, and commitment. Such expressions as 'hard-working', 'the amount of efforts equals the amount of return', or 'no pain no gain' were typical. It seems that the only reason they could give for their being in the bottom track, according to the popular view, was that they must lack the required effort or intelligence.

Some students saw themselves as being less intelligent than their academically inclined peers, and they viewed this as explaining why they had been tracked to vocational college. Jiren stated:

Jiren:	I think different academic outcomes means different levels of intelligence.
Interviewer:	Why is that?
Jiren:	I think they [academic students] are smarter than me. I really do believe so. I have been taking this training course with students from Haishi [a nearby academic university]. In class, the way I think is so different from them. And they always get the right answers. I feel I am never smart enough.

As can be seen from the above exchange, the student deemed the academic students to be 'smarter' than him. Jiren's inability to perform as well as the academic students in class made him question his own intelligence. In the participants' views, it was their own limitations or shortcomings that had led to their being relegated to vocational college. They invariably attributed their being stereotyped to their individual 'failures'. A few students mentioned that they had to pay the price for their 'failures'. For example, in Riverside College, Tai shared her views:

Interviewer:	What do you think of these prevalent attitudes we have in our society?
Tai:	Actually, I think it is pretty fair. Because I did not work hard enough in the past.
Interviewer:	Work hard enough?
Tai:	In the same period of time [at secondary school], they [academic students] put in much more effort than we did. They deserve to have an academic degree, which leads to more career options. But for me, I did not work as hard back then. So, I need to take my time and pay for this. I know it was my fault.

Xiaoxin also attributed the blame for his problems to himself:

> I know I have always been slower than others and I sometimes just drifted by back in secondary school. Those who worked hard deserved to go to good universities. But for us, vocational students, we deserve what we have got now. It is all down to you, isn't it? You asked for it. Because everyone should have been studying and trying hard back then, but you did not. So, you get yourself into this place.

However, one student among the 36 participants of the qualitative sample did in fact perceive the system as being unfair. She refused to take the blame for her so-called failure in the ways that her peers did. Jia was critical of the lack of fairness in the exam system:

> All the expectations and hard work were dependent on this piece of paper [CEE exam]. It might involve so many uncertainties. What if I got sick or I got really nervous? What if something unpredictable happened that contributed to my bad performance on the exam day, but I was actually really good? Some people would say: 'It's fate'. It's not fate at all. Because I think it is not fair that things should be evaluated like that, just by test scores in one exam. We should be assessed on our level of skills-based competence throughout the school year.

The findings illustrate the vocational students' experiences and opinions impacted by the stereotypical sentiments prevalent in society. Vignettes of a few of the students' life stories were presented to demonstrate how they experienced academically focused and exam-driven attitudes. When talking about the system that assigned them to the 'under-performing' track, a large percentage of the vocational students in the sample believed the current system to be meritocratic. From constantly comparing themselves with academic students, they had come to feel inadequate and lacked a sense of self-worth. Some of them believed that it was their own limitations or shortcomings that caused them to be 'relegated' to vocational colleges.

Discussion

Moving towards the optimum

In this section, the findings relating to these students' lives in the discourse of meritocracy will be discussed in relation to the Foucauldian (1977) concept of disciplinary power and Ball's (2000) idea of performativity.

As can been seen from Vignettes 1 and 2, family expectations appear to be the manifestations of a powerful discourse of meritocracy, which regarded academic success as 'an optimum towards which one must move' (Foucault, 1977, p. 183). For Qiang's parents, the cousin's experience was a perfect example of educational meritocracy in action – academic success results in upward social mobility, while poor academic outcomes may lead to a dubious future. Qiang was told that 'studying was the only way out'. Similar to Qiang, Yuehan was also pushed to pursue academic excellence by her father, even though she had little interest in doing so. In the life stories of these young people, there was a sense that the disciplinary power that hierarchises them in terms of their academic achievements is embedded in the practices and routines of the homes within which they grew up.

Those who fail to move towards the 'optimum of action' were treated as outsiders in their secondary schools. As depicted in Vignette 3, Xiaoxin was advised to go home after being admitted to vocational college, and was constantly reminded of the inferiority of this 'choice' by his teacher. Separation, differentiation, and exile

established ‘breaks’ between those worth ‘investing in’ and those not. With his ‘vocational student status’, Xiaoxin was considered unsuitable or even a threat to the CEE preparation classroom. His behaviour was considered potentially disturbing by his teachers simply because he did not have the expected test scores and had been tracked to the ‘second-choice’ option (i.e., vocational college). His teachers ‘encouraged’ him by warning that *even* vocational colleges would not take someone like him with grades that bad. In Xiaoxin’s story, the meritocratic discourse was constructed and maintained by his teachers. He was led to believe that obtaining post-secondary qualifications, especially top-tiered academic qualifications, was vital for him to have a prosperous future. It was obvious that the desires and fears that built up during their entire secondary schooling were overpowering for him. Xiaoxin’s story demonstrates that the secondary education system was designed to support or encourage those who, like Xiaoxin, are unable to ‘keep up’ by using ‘the tyranny of little fears’ (Rose, 1996, p. 54).

Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as the objects and as the instruments of its exercise (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). All three vignettes seem to reveal that the young people turn a ‘gaze’ upon themselves to see if they ‘add up’. Hence, they learn about and audit themselves, and strive to live up to ‘perfection codes’ through the meritocratic discourse (Rose, 1996). This gaze is constructed and sustained by the exam system which turns young people into ‘describable, analyzable object[s]’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 190), whose individual aptitudes or abilities are measured and the gaps between them calculated. Therefore, it is each student’s very individuality that is being measured, judged, compared, and classified, and it is also the individual who has to be responsible for his or her own exam performance, which then defines his or her status in society.

‘Adding value’ to yourself

The students are ‘described’ and ‘individualised’ by their test scores. In discussing neoliberal performativity, Ball (2003) makes the point that students are encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who make calculations about themselves, ‘add value’ to themselves, improve their productivity, and strive for excellence (p. 158). He observes that neoliberalism is ‘made possible by a “new type of individual”, an individual formed within the logic of competition – a calculating, solipsistic, instrumentally driven “enterprise man”’ (p. 158).

As revealed in Qiang, Yuehan, and Xiaoxin’s stories, their relations with their teachers and parents had become ‘judgmental relations’; they were judged, classified, and stereotyped by their low ‘productivity’. These students were expected to do it for themselves as form of ‘entrepreneurial self-fashioning’ (Littler, 2018, p. 2) and had only themselves to blame for being in vocational colleges and stereotyped by society. Within the meritocratic discourse, it seems that these young people had absorbed its language of equality (i.e., ‘everyone starts running at the same line’ or ‘the amount of efforts equals the amount of return’) and its attempts to atomise people as individuals who must compete with each other to succeed. They were encouraged to believe that it must be them who were ‘never smart enough’, ‘slower’ or ‘did not work hard’ (as proposed by Jiren, Tai, and Xiaoxin); hence, ‘it is fair’ to be stereotyped and they deserved to be in a disadvantaged position within the educational structure. The meritocratic discourse functions as an ‘ideological myth’ that promises opportunity

and mobility whilst obscuring and extending unjust social dynamics (Littler, 2018, p. 7).

However, in this small qualitative study, there was evidence that not all of the students took the blame for their own 'failure'. One student, Jia, 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. It seems that Jia questioned the legitimacy of the competition and refused to engage in this form of 'disciplined self-management' (Ozga, 2009, p. 152). This critical response is indicative of the way in which young people are capable of freeing themselves of the disciplinary power formed by the exam-focused societal attitudes.

Conclusion

This paper began with a discussion of the Chinese VET system in the Reform Era and the notion of meritocracy. It provided new findings that demonstrate how the discourse of meritocracy is embedded in vocational students' dominant narratives and tropes.

The findings reveal the lived experiences of these students when pushed to achieve academic excellence in their previous schooling experiences, their perceptions of the exam system, and their interpretations of their disadvantaged situations. Growing up in an environment where the meritocratic discourse permeated so many areas of their lives, these students had internalised the ideology of meritocracy and consequently the stereotypes against them, seeing themselves as inferior and inadequate in relation to their academic counterparts. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Ball's idea of performativity have provided useful tools for making sense of vocational students' lived experiences and opinions in the Chinese Reform Era.

In their research, Gong and Dobinson (2019, p. 339) found both socialist and neoliberal rhetoric at play in the Chinese young people's narratives they investigated. They supported the view that 'the existence of a neoliberal discourse in Chinese education does not mean a neoliberal subjectification in the Chinese people' (Gong & Dobinson, 2019). However, the findings of this paper demonstrate that the Reform Era has produced a neoliberal legacy – vocational students who are stereotyped as self-deserving failures and assigned to the bottom tier of the educational system. Through the discourse of meritocracy, these young people turn 'the gaze' upon themselves to see if they 'add up', and take responsibility for their own 'failures'. They are trained to be 'bodies that are docile and capable' (Foucault, 1977, p. 294), producing a new kind of youthful subject who can act in their own self-interest in order to sustain the Chinese Reform Era's engagement with neoliberal governance. However, the perspectives of these students also offer evidence that young people have the potential to move beyond being mere 'objects and instruments' for the exercise of disciplinary power.

Note

[1] The continuation and proliferation of accumulation practices which Marx treated as 'primitive' or 'original' during the rise of capitalism (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). In China, these include the conversion

of various forms of property rights (collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights (Nonini, 2008), as well as the exploitation of the peasant population (Wu, 2010).

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