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# Stepping into the labour market from the VET sector in China: student perceptions and experiences

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**Abstract**
The Chinese Government is clear that investment is needed to upskill the workforce, yet VET students, who will play a key role in the upskilling, continue to be positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy and suffer considerable societal prejudice. This paper presents new findings on Chinese VET students' perceptions of the job market and career possibilities in the context of the negatively stereotyped VET system. The findings are analysed through the lens of Gramsci's hegemonic power and with reference to Bauman's individualisation. A lack of confidence was found among the VET students who were about to enter the labour market; moreover, they exhibited a passive acceptance of whatever jobs were available, rather than mindfully choosing. Analysis of the findings suggests that the students gave their active consent to the hegemonic human capital form of thinking and accepted their perceived "inadequacy" and unfavourable places in the division of labour. They were under the impression that they needed to take responsibility for the choices they made as '[our] chances all come down to us. The study concludes that this individualising force could sustain hegemonic control as well as provide the "flexible workers" needed by an economy influenced by neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** VET student; career perception; neoliberalism; Chinese VET; stereotype

## Introduction

Despite the rapid expansion of vocational education and training (VET) systems during China's Reform Era (Stewart 2015), VET does not enjoy the same high regard accorded it during the Revolutionary Era (1949-1978) (Unger 1982), and is considered in Chinese society to constitute a poor second choice (Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang 2015). The Chinese Government has been strengthening the focus on VET over the past few years in order to produce the 'skill-oriented talents' desperately needed by the country's economy

(State Council 2017). However, VET students, who are expected to be key members of the Chinese 'upskilled workforce' (State Council 2017), have received limited attention from researchers (Woronov 2015). In particular, the ways in which their school-to-work transitions articulate with, and are influenced by, the perceived inferior status of VET in China remain under-researched and under-theorised. To address this gap, new findings are presented here from interviews and focus groups with VET students at two Chinese vocational colleges (one public and one private) on how they perceive and construct their careers within the Reform Era. The paper locates the findings within the debate on the neoliberal nature of the Chinese Reform Era and the impact of human capital thinking on Chinese society. It analyses the findings through the lens of Gramsci's notion of hegemonic power and draws on Bauman's understanding of individualisation.

The next section presents a brief discussion on the position of VET within China's education system and the negative societal attitudes towards VET students. This is followed by an exploration of the political and economic context within which VET students are situated, with particular reference to the neoliberal nature of the Reform Era and the influence of the notion of human capital. Next, the theoretical arguments and framework are presented, followed by an explanation of the methods used to conduct the research, and the findings. Finally, a discussion of the findings and some conclusions are provided.

## Chinese VET and VET students

The focus of this study is Chinese VET at post-secondary level (or higher vocational education) provided by institutions such as vocational and technical colleges. 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, although the two types are set at the same level (Ding 2004), this does not mean there is parity of esteem between them; rather, VET is considered to be a lower quality of higher education, or an "informal" type of higher education (Ding 2004).

The past few decades have witnessed a series of expansive reforms of China's VET sector (State Council 2005, 2017, 2018, 2019), aimed at addressing the country's skills mismatch and shortages of skilled labour (Li 2006; State Council 2017). More recently, the Chinese Government has been emphasising the importance of upskilling the workforce so that China

can respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by AI and automation[1] (State Council 2017).

In spite of the ambitious intentions, and the financial resources lavished on this educational sector, Chinese VET is still positioned at the bottom of the post-secondary education hierarchy (Mok 2001; Liu and Wang 2015). The current structure of Chinese post-secondary education consists of three tiers (Liu 2013; Liu and Wang 2015). In the first tier (*yiben*) are the most prestigious public, research-focused universities. Provincial and local institutions (*erben*) lie in the middle tier, serving as the major providers of higher education; vocational colleges are largely at the bottom, focusing on vocationally oriented programmes (Liu and Wang 2015). Access to any form of post-secondary education in China is mainly determined by the National College Entrance Examination (CEE or *gaokao*), a high-stakes academically based exam. After completing their secondary education (generally at the age of 18), Chinese students have the option of taking the CEE and submitting applications to post-secondary education programmes (Liu 2013). The top-tier research universities recruit the students with the highest exam scores, while the second-tier provincial universities recruit the 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).

Chinese vocational colleges generally offer three-year vocational degrees, which are considered significantly inferior to academic ones (Hansen and Woronov 2013). Vocational colleges have inadequately trained teaching staff (Shi 2013), poor student progression (Yi et al. 2018), weak connections with industry (Liang and Chen 2014; Stewart 2015), and tenuous links with the needs of the labour market (Cooke 2012). Students who enrol in vocational colleges – both private and public – are those who have fared poorly in the CEE (Mok 2001; Li 2004; Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang, 2015), and are therefore considered as “failures” and “stupid and lazy” youth by Chinese society, deserving only of limited occupational opportunities (Woronov 2015). Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a lack of research on the experiences of these young people, and how they navigate their transitions. Despite the fact that China’s private vocational colleges are more likely to be

[1] It is argued that China is facing a potential growth of technological unemployment and job polarisation in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) (Li et al. 2017). In 2017, the 19th National Congress of China acknowledged the consequences of the 4th IR and pointed out the need to ‘promote the deep integration of AI and economy’ and ‘cultivate a large number of internationally competitive talents’ (State Council 2017). In 2019, the Chinese State Council published the *Implementation Plan on National Vocational Education Reform*, which announced that 100 billion RMB will be invested in vocational education for 15 million people to upgrade their skills (State Council 2019).

attended by young people from wealthier families (Shen and Yan 2006), while the public colleges attract those from poorer backgrounds (Xie and Wang 2006), societal attitudes do not discriminate between vocational students on the basis of their socioeconomic status (SES) or the type of college they attend. Rather, they discriminate on the basis of whether students follow an academic or a vocational pathway; students at both private and public vocational colleges share the same low status identity. The aim of this paper is to investigate VET students' attitudes towards and perceptions of the job market and career possibilities – irrespective of their SES and the colleges they attend – shaped by a disadvantaged and negatively stereotyped VET system. The paper focuses on a context influenced by neoliberal ideology and explores how this may impact the VET students within the education system. Before discussing the study's theoretical framework, the paper examines the contested terrain (Weber 2018) of the Chinese Reform Era and its associations with neoliberalism.

**China and Neoliberalism**

For this paper, neoliberalism is characterised as 'a set of principles rules undivided across the globe' and 'the most successful ideology in world history' (Anderson 2000, 17). Neoliberalism, in the first instance, can be seen as a theory of 'political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005, 2). The role of the state is to create and preserve processes of privatisation, marketisation, and lessening regulation (Harvey, 2005; Olssen and Peters 2005; Dawson 2013). States must take such actions because, in a global economy, they are forced to compete for capital by developing attractive markets for investment (Strange 1994). The fundamental mission of neoliberal states is to 'facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital' (Harvey 2005, 7). For Harvey, neoliberalisation is interpreted either as 'a utopian project to realise a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism' or as 'a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites' (2005, 19); the second of these objectives has dominated in practice (Harvey 2005). It is the ideology of neoliberalism that is of particular relevance to this paper.

Since launching sweeping economic reforms in 1978, China has transformed 'from a closed backwater to an open centre of capitalist dynamism with a sustained growth rate unparalleled

in human history' (Harvey 2005, 1). The extent to which neoliberalism exists in the Chinese economy has been widely discussed and questioned (Weber 2018). Some scholars claim that China has embraced neoliberalism and that it did so at the same time as various Western countries (e.g. Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gledhill 2004; Harvey 2005; Sharma and Gupta 2006). In the Reform Era, the market has played an ever more significant role in Chinese society. Reforms in housing (Lee and Zhu 2006), health care (Lu and Wei 2010), and education (Mok and Lo 2007) seem to have followed neoliberal principles. However, many argue that the authoritarian control exercised by the ruling Communist Party over economic development and governance contradicts the neoliberal template (Ong 2007; Nonini 2008; Weber 2018). Analysing the historical accounts of China's political and economic problems in the late 1970s, Weber argues that whilst neoliberalism was used as a way out of the crisis, the country has not fully embraced the neoliberal path and has remained a mixed economy with the consciously and actively visible hand of the state shaping economic development (2018, 229).

I concur with Weber (2018) that China is not fully neoliberal. She argues that the basic principles of the Chinese system in the Reform Era are not in accordance with anti-collectivism (229), a principle she considers integral to neoliberal thinking. Although China is not a fully neoliberal country, the neoliberal approaches used in the Reform Era have significantly influenced Chinese society (Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005; Harvey 2005; So 2005; Nonini 2008). Since the start of the reforms, there has been a redesigning of the official public discourse, which involves concealing, and even condoning, certain forms of suffering and social inequality (Shue and Wong 2007). Individual choices must be made within the excessively aggressive culture of "competition" (Shue and Wong 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008). Young people and their families are now expected to be responsible for their own human capital accumulation in order to compete in the labour market (Woronov 2015). The neoliberal notion of human capital has been widely embraced in China, establishing certain relationships between credentials and jobs (Bai 2006).

**Neoliberalism, human capital, and the quest for better credentials**

Young people today are growing up in a world where long periods of study and formal credentials are the norm (Wolf 2002, 2011). Wolf's analysis of the situation in the UK resembles the current context of China, where intense competition from kindergarten through college prevails (Kim et al. 2016); education has become a key to upward mobility and career

opportunities (Bian 2002). Human capital accumulation – planning for an unknown future by investing in education today – is essential in the life courses of Chinese youth (Woronov 2015, 11-12). Developed by Schultz (1962) and Becker (1964), the notion of human capital has substantively complemented and consolidated neoliberal ideas and movements (Carbone 2018, 156). In China, it has been touted in official and popular discourses as an important source of national strength in the new century (Hoffman 2006, 553). The Chinese Government has adopted the belief that the further expansion of higher education is essential to economic success, and the arrival of a knowledge-driven economy requires a universal upskilling of the labour market (Ministry of Education 2010). In 1993, the milestone policy paper *Outline for Educational Reform and Development* in China set education expansion as a goal for the 1990s (Ministry of Education 2010). By sending out a clear message that educational credentials will generate more future income (Bai 2006; Zhang 2008), the Chinese Government was driving families to invest in post-secondary education (Kipnis 2011). Credentials have become more than just an expression of educational achievement; they condense and represent social value (Woronov 2015, 13). As far back as in 2008, *The People's Daily* – the Government's top official newspaper –reported that over 92% of Congress representatives had a university degree and more than half of them had postgraduate degrees (Zhang 2008, 212). The report explained:

> A People's Congress representative is a type of position, which requires the representative to possess a certain ability and competence to carry out the duties of this position. The education credential level of this Congress representative cohort has improved. This means an improvement in the competence level of this cohort. This also lays a more solid foundation that enables the representatives to carry out their duties and play their roles more effectively. (People's Daily Reporter, as cited in Zhang 2008, 212)

The government media officially state that one's educational credentials are regarded as a decisive benchmark for determining one's competence and value. Hence, according to common-sense logic in China, VET students – unable to gain access to universities – are naturally considered as "inferior" and "failures" (Woronov 2015).

In the Chinese Reform Era, educational credentials are used as a tool to distinguish between job applicants in an increasingly competitive market (Hansen and Woronov 2013). Hu's (2013) research on the Chinese labour market between 2003 and 2008 demonstrated a significant increase in the number of jobs requiring post-secondary credentials in that period,

as well as a significant decline in the economic returns for a post-secondary credential. The comparative advantages of vocational college graduates in the labour market are not apparent, and they are easily overtaken by university graduates (Ding 2004; Zhang 2008). There is no good reason why Chinese parents should encourage their children to go into vocational education if they have the option of taking the academic path, and thereby maximising their human capital accumulation and economic return (Zhang 2008; Stewart 2015).

In this study, two perspectives, Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Bauman's individualisation theory, are used to provide the theoretical lenses through which to analyse young people's experiences and perspectives and connect these with the 'existing social relations' (White and Wyn 1998), which are influenced by neoliberal human capital theory. The next section explores in detail these two theoretical lenses.

**Hegemonic power and individualisation**

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is rooted in Marx and Engels's theory of consciousness (Allman 1999). According to Marx and Engels (1970), the ruling class produce the ruling ideas in order to maintain control over the means of intellectual production (64). The ruling class give their ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational and universally valid ones (65-66). Rule from a position of hegemonic power, Gramsci (1971) explains, relies on voluntarism and participation, rather than solely on coercive threat and punishment. It is achieved through securing 'the consent of the governed' (Gramsci 1971, 148).

The individualisation thesis posits that identity is transformed from a "given" into a "task" and that individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for this task (Bauman 2000, 31). Bauman (1992) sees individualisation as a privatisation of responsibility disguised as freedom, which often puts the individual in a position of uncertainty (Bauman 2007b) or ambivalence (Bauman 1991). The individuals, who are now expected to be "free choosers", are responsible for 'resolving the quandaries generated by vexingly volatile and constantly changing circumstances' (Bauman 2007b, 3). The results of this affiliation are a fear of inadequacy and a sense of impotency.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the lived experiences of VET students in China by focusing on their perceptions of the job market and career possibilities, especially in the

context of the negatively stereotyped VET system. The study aims to contextualise Chinese VET students' experiences in terms of the socio-political relations within which young people have to negotiate their choices in China's Reform Era. For analytical purposes, the paper draws on the idea of human capital, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and Bauman's individualisation thesis. Based on Marx's work, Gramsci (1971) observed how hegemonic power in capitalist societies manages populations by securing 'the consent of the governed'. Neoliberal ideas have permeated society in the form of "common-sense language"; the broadly egalitarian and collectivist attitudes that underpinned the welfare state era are giving way to a more competitive, individualistic, market-driven, entrepreneurial, and profit-oriented outlook (Hall and O'Shea 2013). Human capital thinking can be seen as an example of the neoliberal mindset of responsibilisation because it regards human life as 'individual enterprise', 'with investments and incomes' (Foucault, 2008, 230). Similarly, the concept of individualisation, with its focus on reflexivity, choice, and self-responsibility, has been called 'neoliberalism in action' (Lazzarato 2009). Bauman points out that since 'there is no alternative' (2007a), without forms of security and ways of linking the individual to the collective, current forms of inequality will continue apace and become further embedded, and neoliberalism will be reproduced through this embedding (Bauman 1999, 2007a). In this paper, these theoretical perspectives are deployed to help interpret findings from research on Chinese VET students carried out in the context of China's Reform Era. The following section discusses the methods employed for the research.

## Methods

The previous sections reviewed the literature on the social/economic/political structures within which VET students negotiate their schooling and career options. The research reported in this paper aimed to investigate the lived experience of VET students in China by focusing on their perceptions of the job market and career possibilities, as well as their perspectives on the relationship between credentials and jobs. The research involves the important interface between "the structural" and "the individual" aspects of young people's experience. A mixed method research design was adopted so as to bring into focus the impacts of structural forces on the individual experiences (Rudd 1996). The aim was not to make large-scale generalisations from the data, but rather to use the data to provide 'indications of the way in which subjects think and feel' (Bryman 1988, 140), which would inform us about the career hopes of these young people. The research was conducted in accordance with university and institutional ethics committee guidelines and protocols.

The data was collected at two vocational colleges (one public and one private) in northern China. At the time of the research, all of the participants, aged 18 to 22 years old, were undertaking vocational degrees. The sample was made up of 46% male and 54% female students; 35% were in their first year, 44% were in their second or third years, and 21% were in their final year. The participants' study areas fell into four categories: finance and management (35%), engineering (14%), languages (28%), and IT (23%). The research adopted the following approaches to gather data:

- A questionnaire survey of a sample of 100 students in each college, recruited by snowballing (200 in total);
- Four focus group interviews in each college with the students (36 in total), drawn from the questionnaire respondents;
- Nine individual interviews in each college with the students, drawn from the focus groups.

The individuals were selected on the basis of whether their responses to the questionnaire were 'information rich' (Patton 1990, 169), would help learn about or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell 2012, 206), or seemed 'most likely to develop and test emerging analytic ideas' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 138). The interviews made it possible to explore the lived experiences of vocational students in order to gain some insights into their thinking. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and translated into English at the transcription stage. The translation was carried out by the author, as this process requires an understanding of and feeling for a range of sensitivities in different contexts (Filep 2009). Data analysis was conducted using NVivo. The study employed such coding procedures and techniques as open coding, axial coding, and thematic networks (Strauss and Corbin 1998). For reasons of space, only the findings from the students' focus groups and interviews are presented in this paper.

## Findings

### "There was nothing for me"

In the focus group sessions, students talked about their perceptions of the job market:

> Hai: I don't think this vocational degree is good enough.
>
> Hongyu: Yes, they [the employers] always prefer people with academic degrees.

Hai: I was wandering around in this job fair. There was academic, academic, academic and academic. Every company requires an academic degree. So, I, a vocational student, there was nothing for me.
Annan: My friend who is graduating [with a vocational degree] told me that there *were* jobs out there. But none of them really interested her. She wanted to do something in media. But she can never get anything because they have higher requirements. It was really tough for her.
Int: What kind of higher requirements?
Annan: It's the degree. We [vocational graduates] do not meet their requirements. We can only pick the jobs that are available for us, even if we hate them.
(public college students)

The above students directly or indirectly witnessed the constrained career options open to vocational students. For the students at the privately funded college, similar views were expressed. For example:

Tao: My uncle is in charge of hiring people at a governmental institution. He said the way they work is that they put first-tier university graduates on one side, second-tier on the other, and put vocational graduates at the bottom. If the institution is in need of 15 new employees, they would go straight to the first and the second tiers. The situation is just like this.

Zehua: Everybody is saying that a degree is kind of like a stepping stone to the world of work. A vocational degree means not a lot of doors are open for us, or not many "good doors", while having an academic degree will open more and better doors.

The students' experiences may have constructed the pessimistic perceptions that they would not be considered favourably in the job market. Guanglu shared his thoughts:

Guanglu: I don't think I can be optimistic about this [job hunting]. I feel lost actually. I don't know. After three years of college, even if I manage to learn a thing or two, there will always be academic graduates who know more than I do, with more competent skills in this field. There won't be a great chance of me getting hired. (public college)

Yifan had been on a business English programme for a year. She explained her concerns:

> Yifan: I never think I will develop a career. I mean, if I go in as a professional translator, I think it will require a higher level of accuracy and proficiency. I do not think I can meet that level. (public college)

It is evident from the above excerpts, that both the public and private college students perceived vocational degrees as a barrier to them finding suitable jobs, and they experienced a sense of inadequacy and a lack of confidence when it came to job hunting.

**"It's a fair way to judge who is better than whom"**

When talking about this credential-based way of recruiting, the students held the view that an individual's life chances ought to accord with their level of credentials. Final-year student Xiu explained:

> Xiu: I think it is pretty fair that … a certain level of college leads to certain future opportunities. I think the level of degree or academic achievement says a lot about someone. To some extent, it could represent your capabilities as a person. 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. The degree and the level of college you went to are the best proof of everything. (private college)

Xiaoxin had a similar view:

> Xiaoxin: I think society values degrees so much because they're a fair way to judge who is better than whom. They're the most obvious way to show someone you are a stronger candidate compared with other people. (public college)

**"Our chances are all down to us"**

Some students offered a counterpoint to the seemingly undesirable position that vocational graduates have in the job market, as expressed by the students above. They believed that individual capability, or personal competence, is more important than the degree when it comes to finding a job:

> Jiren: I don't see that the degree matters that much. I will try my best to show them [the employers] my skills and capabilities, show them I am up for it. I think if I put in

> enough effort and find the right methods, I will achieve my career goals and find the job I want. (private college)

Other comments along similar lines included: ‘it all comes down to individual competence’; ‘the degrees do not matter if you are capable of doing the job’; and ‘our chances all come down to us. It seems that the students had developed the conception that individuals are essentially responsible for their own capacities and achievements.

When reflecting on the credential-based recruiting system, a few students expressed their opinions about what they saw as its unfairness:

> Tai: I think they [the employers] cannot see everything about you just based on your degree. It is not fair that the companies decide everything just on that. Some academic graduates may have gained fewer achievements over the years than us. (public college)

> Rong: I guess your degree is one thing, and you and what you are capable of is another thing. They are totally different. You cannot completely shut someone out for having a vocational degree. (private college)

**“I am ok with anything”**

When asked about their career plans and goals, some of the students stated that they had ‘not given it much thought’, or that they had not found the things that really interested them. Some had very vague ideas and relatively short-term plans:

> Int: So what are your career plans?
> Hao: I don’t like things that are too much trouble or too complicated. So, I imagine I will work as an office clerk or something like that and play basketball on the weekends. Yes, as long as I am happy.
> Int: What kind of office work then?
> Hao: I don’t know. Anything will do. I will work for whoever [whichever employer] accepts me.
> Int: What about you, Jia?
> Jia: I never had any real plans actually. [Laughs] I guess I can do, you know, running some errands or assisting people in the office. Something stable.

> Int: Just assistance jobs?
>
> Jia: I don't think I have what it takes to be in a higher-level job. I can only see myself doing assistance jobs for now. As long as the pay is ok, I will do it. (private college)

The attitude of 'I will work for whoever accepts me' was not uncommon amongst the participants. It seems that their first steps into the workforce would not involve very mindful choosing or planning, but rather the passive acceptance of whatever is available. When asked what kind of job he thought he would get after finishing college, final-year student Qihan responded with:

> Whatever I can find, I guess, as long as someone is willing to take me on. Just today our counsellor messaged everyone that there is a job fair in the stadium for our soon-to-be graduates. I will go with anyone if they will offer me a job … I would be so grateful if I could find anything. I am ok with anything. (private college)

These students seem to be engaged in a practice of aimless job-searching and had resigned themselves passively to accepting anything they could get. They considered themselves to have low ability levels, and, therefore, did not see how they could actively plan or strategically choose a long-term career.

As vocational graduates, they needed to learn to be flexible, as very few of them had found jobs in their area of vocational training. In a focus group session, Wen shared his views:

> I have found that most of the people graduating from vocational college never go into their field of training. I know a guy who studied advertising design who works as a shop assistant now. The other guy I know did his training in power plant mechanics and does the same job in the [same] shop now. Their pay is not that good. Sometimes, I feel what you have learned does not matter much as you are more likely to do something else anyway. (public college)

Guanglu shared a similar view:

> I have a friend who has already graduated. She studied accounting in our college. But she works as a receptionist in a building, which is not relevant to what she did before.

> She said she just stands there most of the time and there is nothing to do at work. She earns very little and has to share a place with lots of people. (public college)

Guanglu went on to talk about his views on job-seeking in different regions:

> I am from a village in Hebei province and there are no decent jobs around my village. But there will be a new state-funded development area in Xiong'an, which is not far from home. It will be a great idea to try there as there will certainly be many new companies moving into Xiong'an.

While VET students such as Wen believed that stepping into the labour market required a high level of flexibility, Guanglu deemed that success or certainty in obtaining employment could be generated as a result of state planning, an act of the invisible hand of the state. The following section discusses the findings presented above using the theoretical lenses of hegemonic power (Gramsci 1971) and individualisation (Bauman 1999).

## Discussion

### At the back of the queue

The VET students, having directly or indirectly witnessed the constrained job opportunities or decreased wages available to vocational graduates, had formed the opinion that their vocational degrees were considered by employers to be inferior to academic degrees. Through the signalling mechanisms (Ehrenberg and Smith 2000), it appeared from their accounts (e.g. Zehua) that the students had received the signal from the labour market that their level of qualification may not be well-rewarded or 'open more and better doors'. They acknowledged the different employment outcomes and occupational progression that different 'stepping stones' may bring. As Woronov (2015) observes, vocational degrees may indicate less human capital accumulation and possibly higher training costs, which places vocational graduates at the back of the labour queue (Thurow 1975).

Among the students in this study was observed a phenomenon of aimless job-searching and the passive acceptance of whatever jobs became available. They appeared less confident in their abilities to meet the requirements of high-skilled jobs. Even for jobs within their fields of study, some believed there would always 'be graduates who know more than I do…there

won't be a great chance of getting hired for me'. As Yifan shared, professional jobs like translating 'are not for me'. Having lower perceptions or ability-related "beliefs" may have prevented them from forming proper career aspirations and pursuits (Bandura 1997; Bandura et al. 2001). High-skilled jobs, or a career progressing towards those jobs, remained outside of their 'aspirations window' (Gutman and Akerman 2008). The stories they told about their seniors who had been working as receptionists, purchasing assistants, or call centre operators after completing vocational college degrees served as evidence of the kinds of jobs and careers that would be considered "valid or appropriate" for them to obtain in the future (Hodkinson et al. 1996).

**Submitting their consent**

The findings of this study suggest that, the VET students perceived the credential-based recruiting system as 'a fair way to judge who is better than whom', as noted by Xiaoxin, and that credentials can 'represent' one's 'capabilities'. In the Reform Era, it seems that the educational market had seduced the students into thinking that their level of human capital investment would determine their future income and occupational status.

The lens of hegemonic power helps to explain how the students, through their pro-active commitment to developing their human capital, believed in the legitimacy of the ruling system. Those who are consenting must somehow be truly convinced that 'account be taken of the interest of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised', and they must 'feel permanently tied to the ideology and the leadership of the State as the expression of their beliefs and aspiration' (Tamburrano 1958, 282 cited in Femia 1975, 32). For these young people, the credential-based recruiting system is capabilities-based, as credentials are viewed as the legitimate proxies for exchangeable skills that can be converted into profit; consequently, the VET students perceive the system as creating equal opportunities for all people to achieve upward social mobility. Therefore, it would seem that they believed that their equal chances were ensured and protected, which suggests that they were actively giving their consent and approval.

Since they saw the credential-based system as being 'pretty fair' and viewed credentials as proxies for abilities, the VET students, destined to gain lower-prestige vocational degrees, did not think they had the abilities to 'fulfil the requirement[s]' for the careers they wished to pursue, and only saw themselves 'doing assistance jobs' or believed 'there will always be

academic graduates who know more' and are 'more competent'. Committed to a belief in human capital investment, they acknowledged that educational credentials could bring occupational success and income rewards. At the same time, however, they were frustrated by the limited opportunities for upward mobility offered by their vocational degrees. The belief in the legitimacy of human capital thinking and their low "academic worth" could be seen as what Gramsci called 'stratified deposits' (Gramsci 1971), slowly settled or sedimented into 'popular philosophy', 'without leaving an inventory' to trace its sources, or even where a source is known. In this way, the VET students had come to accept their unfavourable positions 'in the competition for a livelihood' in a taken-for-granted manner (Brown 2003, 142). However, students such as Tai and Rong provided the counter-argument that 'it is not fair' to be evaluated by their educational credentials. They questioned the legitimacy of the ruling system and refused to submit their consent. This critical stand indicated the way in which an awareness – a move away from hegemonic power – can emerge from a seemingly 'false consensus' (Apple 2019, 117).

**The risk biography**

Despite facing potentially disadvantaged positions in the labour market, some VET students believed that their individual capabilities or personal achievements were more important and relevant to their success in obtaining employment than the kind of degree they held. They expressed such opinions as 'the chances all come down to us and it is 'all down to an individual's competence'. In a labour market that emphasises "freedom" and "choice", there is evidence that some students believed that the individual must take on most of the responsibility for his or her transition to work and be fully equipped for the competition, thus supporting Bauman's (2001) argument that 'the present-day uncertainty is a powerful individualizing force' (24). He adds that the vagaries of commodity and labour markets inspire and promote divisions, not unity, which puts a premium on competitive attitudes (Bauman 2001, 24).

The findings demonstrate that these students need to learn to be "flexible workers" (Woronov 2015, 132) when stepping into the labour market, as very few of them could secure jobs within the industry for which they have trained; this was noted by students Guanglu and Wen. Wen pointed out that 'what you have learned does not matter much as you are more likely to do something else anyway.' As Bauman argues, the individual is required to possess 'a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice', and pursue 'opportunities according to

their current availability, rather than following one's own established preferences' (Bauman 2007b, 11). It seems that for these students, their individual lives may be splicing into a series of 'short-term projects and episodes, in which concepts like "career" or "progress" would never be meaningfully applied' (Bauman 2007b, 10). Similar to Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) observations in neoliberal countries, some of the young people in this study faced the combined forces of individual responsibility and accountability, on the one hand, and vulnerability and lack of control, on the other. However, there was evidence that not all of the students felt a lack of control in terms of job-seeking. Guanglu was positive about Xiong'an, a new state-funded development area, which he thought may bring him more opportunities. This response is indicative of how the shaping of economic development by a consciously and actively visible hand of the state may provide a source of security for young people, even though it was evident that these youths were also facing increasing competition and an 'individualizing force' from the labour market. China's collective economic order still dominates in the key areas of Chinese society (Weber 2018), which may link the individual young lives to the collective and inhibit the further embedding of individualisation. This may be in contrast to the situation in some neoliberal countries in which the heightened sense of precarity experienced by young people in the labour market has been enabled or sustained by the state (Furlong et al. 2018).

**Conclusion**

This paper began with a discussion of Chinese VET and the neoliberal influence on Chinese society. It presented evidence from Chinese VET students on their perspectives of their career prospects. The findings reveal that the students perceived their vocational degrees as barriers constraining their career options, as they might be considered inferior to academic degrees. However, some of the students believed that finding a suitable job came down to the individual's capabilities and personal achievements, rather than to other factors. The findings also show a lack of confidence among the students when facing the labour market, as they tended to passively accept whatever jobs were on the table, rather than mindfully choosing one. Some of the young people considered the credential-based recruiting system to be fair and believed that they deserved to have limited career options or 'no good doors' open for them. They seemed to be actively giving their consent to the hegemonic human capital way of thinking and accepting their perceived "inadequacies" and unfavourable places in the divisions of labour. However, others took a critical stand and refused to give their consent, questioning the legitimacy of the ruling system. The students were also under the impression

that they needed to take responsibility for making choices as 'the chances all come down to us. This individualising force helped to sustain hegemonic control as well as provide the "flexible workers" that the Chinese economy needs under the influence of neoliberalism. However, the perspectives of the VET students also offer evidence that the neoliberal individualisation process to which young people in China are subjected may be inhibited by the collective action of the state.

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