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'They are bad seeds': stereotyping habitus in Chinese VET colleges

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ABSTRACT

VET colleges in China are positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less desirable' academic records. VET students are stereotyped as 'stupid and lazy' youths suffering considerable prejudice in Chinese society. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical insights, this paper investigates the experiences of students in VET colleges and their teachers' perspectives on them. I explore how teachers' stereotyping habitus is practised in VET colleges and how it affects their students' learning experiences. The findings demonstrate that the teachers' pedagogic practices in class impose a designated cultural arbitrary via a hidden curriculum. The students adopted 'passing time' attitudes in class as a response to their teachers' 'misrecognition'. The paper examines how a system of unequal power relations in Chinese VET college is maintained and legitimised, which contributes to the 'transmission' and reproduction of the very culture that has shaped the standing of VET in Chinese society.

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Introduction

Since the start of the Reform Era in 1978, post-secondary vocational education in China has been politically and financially neglected in favour of university expansion (Klorer and Stepan 2015, 4). VET in China, similar to in other countries (Lally and Doyle 2012), has come to be regarded as a poor second choice (Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang 2015). VET colleges are positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less desirable' academic records (Mok 2001; Li 2004). These students are stereotyped by society as being 'stupid and lazy' youths and educational 'failures' (Woronov 2015; Ling 2015). Few researchers have shown interest in the experiences of VET students or questioned the many assumptions at the heart of this discouraging stereotyping (Woronov 2015, 3).

Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical insights, this paper investigates the negative stereotyping of VET students within Chinese VET colleges, presenting new findings from interviews and focus groups with VET students and their teachers. It aims to examine how teachers' stereotyping habitus reinforces unequal power relations in VET colleges via a

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hidden curriculum and how this mechanism affects Chinese VET students' learning experiences. The next section provides a brief positioning of VET within China's education system and societal attitudes to VET students. This is followed by a section discussing the effect on the lives of young people of sorting within educational systems. The theoretical arguments and research methods employed in this study are also presented. This paper's findings focus on teachers' stereotyping habitus, the practice of a hidden curriculum, and students' attitude of merely being in class to 'passing the time'. Finally, the findings are discussed and some conclusions presented.

Chinese VET, VET students, and stereotyping

The focus of this study is on Chinese VET at the post-secondary level (or higher vocational education) attended by students aged between 18 and 21 years old. In the Socialist Era (1949–1978), skill training took place in large work units called *danwei*, the major form of urban employment during the planned economy period (Thøgersen 1990). In those times, graduates of *danwei*-affiliated VET colleges were automatically assigned lifelong jobs in their units; this was known as the 'iron rice bowl' system since the workers' livelihoods were guaranteed over the course of their lifetimes (Unger 1982; Thøgersen 1990). During the Socialist Era, VET used to hold a higher status and enjoyed greater respect in society (Unger 1982). However, since the start of the Reform Era in 1978, 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 the 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 and Woronov 2013). The breakdown of the 'iron rice bowl' system and the major shift in the mode of skill formation has entrenched the belief in people that being a worker or technician offers no job security and a lower social status in China's market economy (Zhang 2008). In this context, there is no good reason why Chinese parents should encourage their only child to go into VET if they have the option of taking the academic path (Stewart 2015). A survey published by Beijing Youth News (cited in Zhang 2008) showed that only 1.3% of the 344 parents interviewed would agree to send their children down the VET route and have them become a factory worker. Similar to the situation in other countries (Di Stasio, Bol, and Werfhorst 2016; Wheelahan and Moodie 2017; Billett 2020), VET in China has come to be regarded as a poor second choice, failing to achieve parity of esteem with academic or general routes (Liu and Wang 2015; Yang 2004; Zha 2012).

In spite of the ambitious intentions for Chinese VET and the financial resources lavished on this educational sector,¹ it is still positioned at the bottom of the post-secondary education hierarchy (Mok 2001; Liu and Wang 2015). The current structure of China's post-secondary educational system can be broken down into three tiers: the first tier (*yiben*), the second tier (*erben*), and the third tier (*sanben*). The first tier consists of the most prestigious public research universities. Provincial and local institutions sit in the middle of the three tiers, acting as the major providers of higher education. VET colleges are largely located at the bottom and focus on vocationally oriented programmes (Liu and Wang 2015). Access to post-secondary education in China is mainly determined by the high-stakes academic National College Entrance Examination (CEE or *gaokao*). 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 are able to recruit the students with the highest exam scores, while 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 at each level (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).

Chinese VET colleges generally offer three-year vocational degrees, which are considered significantly inferior to academic degrees (Hansen and Woronov 2013). Approximately 48% of all Chinese students are streamed into the vocational route (Woronov 2015, 42). It has been observed that China's VET colleges have inadequately trained teaching staff (Shi 2013), poor student progression (Yi et al. 2018), weak links with industry (Liang and Chen 2014; Stewart 2015), and tenuous ties with the needs of the labour market (Cooke 2012). Since the students who enrol in vocational colleges are generally those who have fared worse academically (Li 2004; Mok 2001; Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang 2015), they become stereotyped as 'educational failures' and 'stupid and lazy youths' (Woronov 2015), who are considered to deserve the limited occupational opportunities open to them (Woronov 2015; Ling 2015). They are rendered, in Weberian terms, a 'status group of negative honor' (Weber 1978). CEE test scores have become more than just a quantitative expression of educational achievement; they now condense and represent a young person's very social value. In other words, young people increasingly *are* their grades (Woronov 2015). In China today, studying constitutes young people's primary activity; that is, their only approved activity is the labour they put into their academic work (Qvortrup 1994; Woronov 2015). The product of this labour is manifested in the form of their grades. Therefore, VET students are perceived only and always as failed labourers. The consequent low value of VET students is stereotyped in the form of mainstream mores. It is unsurprising therefore that few have questioned the many assumptions that lie at the heart of these stereotypes or investigated how VET students respond to their uniquely unfavourable social and educational context in China (Woronov 2015, 2). The next section discusses the process of sorting in educational systems and how it affects the learning experiences of young people.

The sorting system and commonsense values

As discussed in the preceding sections, vocational youths in China have been sorted, or, as Côté would describe it, 'weeded out' by the educational system (Côté 2014, 84). This process of allocation or sorting plays an important structural role in the lives of these young people. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the effect of this sorting system as well as the rationale behind it based on previous studies.

In the UK, Hargreaves' (1967) investigation of the 'academic' and 'delinquent' groups at Lumley Secondary School highlighted that the streaming of ability within the school influenced teachers' perceptions and interactions with pupils, which led to the emergence of two polarised pupil subcultures. In the US, Oakes (2005) looked into 'the nearly ubiquitous secondary school practice of separating students for instruction by achievement or ability' in 297 classrooms and how this tracking affected the education of high-school students. Similar to Hargreaves (1967), Ball (1981) studied the effects of streaming pupils

on the basis of their perceived ability level. He demonstrated, in particular, the behavioural differences between two bands and the different school experiences that the banded pupils encountered (1981, 22–52). Ball analysed in detail how band stereotypes were generated by the exam system and how they were fostered by teachers (1981, 36–40).

Investigating the possible reasons behind the sorting system, Apple (2019) argues that certain types of cultural capital – types of performance, knowledge, dispositions, achievements, and propensities – are not necessarily good in and of themselves; rather, they are made so because of specific taken-for-granted assumptions (134). He reminds us that the guiding principles that we use to plan, order, and evaluate our activity – conceptions of achievement, of success and failure, of good and bad students – are social and economic constructs (Apple 2019, 134). Schools act as agents of cultural and ideological hegemony, distributing an effective dominant culture while helping to create people (Apple 2019, 6). Apple advocates that since students are stratified ‘through the application of values and categories to them, it is crucial that we examine these commonsense social principles and values’ (2019, 134). Referring to Gramsci (1971), Apple argues that the economic order ‘creates’ categories and structures which saturate our everyday lives, and intellectuals give legitimacy to these categories (2019, 10). Hence, the sorting within education could be considered the product of ‘the ruling class maintaining control over the means of intellectual production’ (Marx and Engels 1970, 64).

The studies reviewed above are based on the socio-political relations present in the UK and the US. However, there is a lack of research into this social phenomenon in the Chinese context, where negative stereotyping of ‘weeded out’ VET students is prevalent (Woronov 2015). So, what is it like being a VET student at the bottom of the educational hierarchy? And how do the academically focused ‘commonsense social principles and values’ influence these youths’ schooling experiences? The answers to these questions can give us valuable insights into the most personal effects of the sorting system. This paper draws on Bourdieu’s theoretical tools to analyse the unequal power relations in VET classrooms in China today.

Symbolic violence, cultural arbitrary, theory of practice and habitus

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) lay out their model of schooling by incorporating a broader conceptualisation of social control, defining it as a form of ‘symbolic violence’. They hold that ‘every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations’ (1990, 4). Bourdieu and Passeron view the educational system as a vehicle by which the power of dominant groups is legitimated through symbolic violence. This process is accomplished through ‘pedagogic action’ – all pedagogic action is considered symbolic violence since it is the imposition of a ‘cultural arbitrary’ (1990, 5). A cultural arbitrary is the only knowledge or culture that is designated as being ‘legitimate’ or ‘natural’. The authors argue that teachers’ pedagogic work ‘produces more and more fully the objective conditions for misrecognition of cultural arbitrariness, i.e. the conditions for subjective experience of the cultural arbitrary as necessary in the sense of “natural”’ (1990, 37). The sorting system within educational contexts (outlined in the previous section) can be viewed as a pedagogic action that imposes a designated cultural arbitrary to reproduce the structure of power relations within society.

Bourdieu's theory of practice conceptualises habitus as 'a system of structured, structuring dispositions' (1990c, 52). The habitus, according to Bourdieu, is 'a product of history, [which] produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the scheme generated by history' (1990c, 54). It is the basis of schemes of perception, thought, and action (1990c, 54). Teachers take their habitus for granted 'precisely because [they are] caught up in it, bound up with it; inhabit it like a garment' (Bourdieu 2000). In Chinese VET colleges, teachers perceive VET students as 'stupid and lazy' youths or 'failures' as they tend to equate exam results with an individual's value (Woronov 2015). The negative stereotypes that teachers attach to VET students could be considered the products of their stereotyping habitus, which 'ensures the active presence of past experiences' and 'guarantee[s] the "correctness" of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms' (Bourdieu 1990c, 54). Therefore, this study focuses on teachers' stereotyping habitus, which forms a basis for their 'regular modes of behaviour' (Bourdieu 1990a, 77). This particular kind of habitus may function as a 'transforming machine that leads us to "reproduce" the social conditions of our own production' (Bourdieu 1990b, 87).

Bourdieu's key notions of habitus, capital, and field have been employed in studies focusing on the Chinese context, especially in relation to class (Dooley, Mu, and Luke 2019). Through Bourdieu's analytical lens, scholars have investigated the educational choices made by students of different social classes (e.g. Sheng 2016), as well as the experiences of students of rural or working-class background in schools and universities (e.g. Jin and Ball 2019; Li 2013; Mu and Jia 2016). Some have also focused on the predicaments of migrant children (e.g. Mu 2019; Yu 2019) and mobile students (e.g. Dai, Lingard, and Musofer 2019; Wang 2020). Few, however, have taken Bourdieu's theoretical insights beyond considerations of class. In the current study, therefore, the issue that some ways of knowing (academic) are privileged over others (VET) will be critically examined, especially by looking at teachers' stereotyping habitus. My investigation of the subordinate position of VET in China's educational system constitutes an attempt to expand understandings of Bourdieu's theoretical tools to include the influences of socially constructed educational hierarchies. Within these hierarchies, societal attitudes do not discriminate against students on the basis of their socioeconomic status (SES); rather, they discriminate on the basis of whether students follow an academic or a vocational pathway. Hence, instead of using Bourdieu's concepts to study social class, this paper utilises his ideas as theoretical tools with which to examine the reproduction of domination based on other social constructs.

Methods

The full study on which this paper is based consisted of three phases and involved students at two vocational colleges (Dalian College and Tianjin College) in northern China. In each college, a questionnaire was distributed to 100 respondents, who were recruited using the snowballing 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 conducted with nine of these students in each college. The sample was made up of 46% male and 54% female students; 35% of participants 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 individuals were selected on the basis of whether their responses to the questionnaire were ‘information rich’ (Patton 1990, 169), would help me 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). As space limitations here preclude reporting the analysis of the questionnaires, this paper focuses on the data obtained from the interviews and focus groups. During the focus groups and narrative interviews, the participants were asked to talk about their experiences in VET colleges and their perceptions of teachers’ attitudes/expectations. Interviews were also carried out with four teaching staff, selected through convenience sampling, to understand 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), no claims are made regarding their 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).

Findings

Teachers’ stereotyping habitus: ‘they are bad seeds’

Before entering the VET colleges, the students had been pre-selected and sorted based on their CEE scores. They held a particular status within the educational system and their teachers possessed preconceived and institutionalised notions of ‘typical VET students.’ I interviewed four teachers, all of whom had over ten years’ experience of working in VET colleges, to investigate their attitudes towards the students. It was not difficult to identify the ways in which the students are stereotyped just from listening to how these teachers described and characterised them.

Ning started teaching at Dalian College after completing her master’s degree 12 years previously at one of the most prestigious universities in China. On the subject of her students, she said:

Ning (teacher): When I was their age, I worked so hard at university and everyone worked hard. But our students...they only do the minimum amount of work that they are told to do by the teachers. They are always forced to do stuff. We have done everything we can to help them actually. But they are bad seeds. What do you expect us to grow out of bad seeds?

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

Ning (teacher): Actually, 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 or do something else, and thus were more sociable than the academic students.

As can be seen from the above comments, VET students are regarded as passive and idling youths who ‘only do the minimum amount of work’, whereas academic students ‘work hard’ and are always keen to study. Therefore, VET students are viewed as ‘bad seeds’, as indicated by their inferior test scores and their assigning to VET colleges. Even their good social skills are turned against them and portrayed as merely the result of poorly invested time, further verifying their ‘bad seed’ status.

The other two teaching staff I interviewed at Dalian College concurred to some degree with the stereotypical view expressed by Ning above, as illustrated here:

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

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

At Tianjin College, Jia (teacher) reported that her students ‘never seemed to get’ what was delivered in class and had a ‘hard time understanding the content of the textbooks’. It seems that the teachers were inclined to jump from observing the students’ behaviours to forming the general conclusion that this ‘kind of student’ is inferior. From the teachers’ points of view, their students’ behaviour was ‘deviant’ and contravened their expectations of normative student behaviour. Any qualities the vocational students had were automatically associated with or defined by their inadequate academic performance. Ning also believed that the reason for the students being assigned to a vocational college was due to their lack of intelligence:

Ning (teacher): As much as some people like to deny it, it is a matter of intelligence. The College Entrance Exam [CEE] is a test of one’s intelligence. I believe smart kids ought to test well and they would never end up here [at a VET college].

Those who perform well at CEE are viewed as ‘smart’, and, by implication, the VET students are not. This fairly arbitrary demarcation line between students constructs the preconceived stereotypical notions that the teachers hold of their students. Teachers like Ning demonstrably held stereotypical images of the ‘VET student identity’. Once these notions are established, further observations or information are sought to confirm and strengthen their perceptions of VET students’ inferiority.

The practice of a hidden curriculum

Teachers’ stereotyping habitus is not only manifested in their perspectives of their students, but also in their practices of a hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum refers to ‘the tacit teaching of students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out’ (Apple 2019, 13). Students may gain a consciousness of the ‘rule of the game’ through the hidden messages they receive from their interaction with teachers in daily schooling (Wotherspoon 2009). The VET students in this study shared their experiences of being in class and how they perceived their teachers’ expectations.

The distance in class

Xiaoxin highlighted the distance he experienced between teaching and learning, as well as the indifference he perceived in his teacher’s form of delivery:

[...] He is just up there [teaching]. I feel that he may think whatever you do down there is none of my business. I will just mind my own business [teaching] and you can do whatever you want, which doesn’t concern me. If you want to study, then listen and study. If you aren’t bothered, then don’t. (Tianjin College)

Similarly, in Dalian College classrooms, too, there seems to have been a lack of student engagement, but in a different way. Yuehan shared with me her classroom experiences:

I feel like the teaching pace is completely based on the good students' learning progress. You know, those students who are very good at this in the beginning. [The teachers] don't care much about people like me who have rather poor knowledge. In class, they may think if Haibo [one of 'the good students'] understands it, everyone must get it. And they just continue their teaching. But the majority of our classmates are not that good. I am always struggling to catch up.

Guanglu described his exam experiences at Tianjin College:

I never worry about the finals. [The teacher] will always give you some questions beforehand, which are basically the exam questions. If you listen and take a photo of those questions, perhaps memorise them before the exam, then you will pass with no problem at all. Even if you didn't manage to pass at the first try, you can always take them a second time with the same exam questions. And the teacher will turn a blind eye the second time. As long as you fill in all the blanks on the exam paper, you will pass.

As can be seen from the above statements, the VET students thought they could 'pass [exams] with no problem at all', as they were provided with the exam questions beforehand, and a 'blind eye' was turned during re-sit exams. I was interested, therefore, to learn how the students perceived their teachers' expectations of them.

Teachers' expectations

I asked the students what, in their opinion, their teachers expected from them. At Tianjin College, a group of first-year business English students shared their views:

Shizhen: In some other places, passing CET-4 and 6 [College English Test Level 4 and 6] is very common among the students. But here, it seems like a huge requirement for us. Our teachers said, 'Well, for you, you can work hard and try, but you won't pass CET-6 unless you are very lucky.'

Int: What do you think your teachers' expectations are for you?

Yifan: Not so high, I guess. They would be absolutely thrilled if just one of us passed CET-6. I just don't feel like studying for it when I hear them talk like that.

It seems that students like Yifan were discouraged from pursuing the higher-level certificate. Guanglu also talked about his experiences in class:

Guanglu: They [the teachers] indulge us too much. If no one pays attention and we just play all the time in class, they will just let us do whatever we want. They just carry on teaching like nothing has happened. I think this is too much. I guess they just don't have such high hopes for us. As long as we are kept in school safe and sound, it is fine. (Tianjin College)

It seems that the reason why Guanglu complained about being 'indulged' is that, contrary to the popular stereotype of vocational youth, i.e. that they are naturally poorly behaved underachievers, in fact, they wish to behave well in class, to be disciplined by their teachers, and to be expected by them to perform better academically. However, in Guanglu's classes, when his teachers 'just carr[ied] on teaching like nothing [had] happened' when encountering poor behaviour, this led Guanglu to believe that his teachers may never have 'high hopes' for him.

Just passing time

In a disengaging classroom with teachers who ‘never have high hopes’ for them, these students were driven to adopt a variety of ways in which to ‘pass time’:

Int: What do you do when you cannot understand the teachers?

Guanglu: I give up and go to sleep, maybe, play with my phone or laptop, just pass time really. I play with my phone too much, during class, breaks, and back in the dorm.

Xiaoxin: Sometimes, you just want to skip classes and go to an internet café to play online games with friends. I have always thought of myself as being a slow, no school brain kind of student.

(Tianjin College)

In his class, Wei claimed to be among the minority who ‘forced’ themselves to listen to the teacher:

We have 60 students in our programme. Only 40 attended the class that day. Those attending the class were just sleeping, playing with phones, or watching movies. I am sure academic students are never like this. I think they know what they are supposed to do. They have better self-control, take action and always get things done. (Wei, Tianjin College)

Phones appear to be the major source of entertainment for the students during class time. Yuehan disclosed what happened on one occasion when students’ phones were taken away:

There was a time when the college managers were inspecting the classes. They had to ban all phones in class. It was funny to sit in class during that time. [Laughs] Everyone was, like, staring at the teacher in a daze or playing with their fingers because there was no phone to play with. (Dalian College)

Yuehan paints an interesting picture of her class, in which her classmates were ‘staring at the teacher in a daze’ and ‘playing with their fingers’ when they could not find anything else to play with. Perhaps, considering the ways the students are treated in class, their adopting an attitude of trying to ‘pass time’ or sleeping in class would appear a fairly reasonable and understandable response.

Discussion

As illustrated in the previous section, the teaching staff in this study legitimated symbolic violence and imposed a cultural arbitrary (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 5) through their pedagogic actions. The cultural arbitrary here is formed by the academically focused and exam-oriented societal sentiments. These sentiments act to ‘saturate’ our very consciousness and our commonsense interpretations (Apple 2019). The teachers viewed their students as ‘bad seeds’ with minimal motivation, lacking in diligence, and manifesting behaviours deviant from what they considered as ‘natural’ or ‘legitimate’ (i.e. the behaviours of academic students). Similar to the teachers at Ball’s Beachside, the teaching staff in this study also apply ‘labels,’ which in this case are generated based on CEE exam results. The teachers make taken-for-granted assumptions on the basis of these labels, rather than making their

own evaluations of the relative abilities of individual students (Ball 1981). The teachers hold stereotypical images of the 'VET identity', i.e. their 'bad seed' inferior status, based upon a selective perception or incorrect assessment of their students. According to two teachers in the study (Ning and Lianshuang), academic students are 'smart' and 'highly motivated', while VET students naturally tend to 'slack off' and are less intelligent. Here, the symbolic violence is evident in the failure on the part of the teachers to recognise the students' abilities. Through their statements, the teachers made their beliefs clear that VET students lack the 'right' type and 'adequate' amount of academic capital to be high-achievers. According to Bourdieu (1996), social agents' capital that is classified as 'academic' is by no means neutral; instead, it reproduces social and educational hierarchies under the mask of academic neutrality.

The teachers subscribed to a stereotyping habitus according to which any individual differences between students in terms of their ways of thinking or personal interests reflect a vocational/academic divide. Students' efforts or behaviours are only visible if they are academically related (i.e. working diligently towards passing exams). The students are led to believe that only academically related goals are worth pursuing, and achieving these goals is considered 'something they are supposed to do'. Therefore, these students appear to be constantly 'aimless', 'unmotivated', and 'slacking off'. The teachers' stereotyping habitus is structured in terms of these singularly negative characteristics, and the 'VET student' status becomes 'a pejorative label' imposed on these students during their college years (Ball 1981, 37). The VET students' behaviours were interpreted in terms of the status assigned to them and their merits would often be overlooked or misinterpreted (Cohen 1972, 12). Hence, the so-called 'commonsense interpretations' that the teachers made of the students' actions become 'the world *tout court*, the only world' (Apple 2019, 4). Operating within such an environment, teachers develop 'a feel for the game' which frames their classification practices, and there is an assumed 'correspondence between membership of a category [being a VET student] and possession of a particular property [not being good at academic learning], so that knowledge of a person's category strongly influences judgement of him' (Bourdieu 1984, 479).

As Hargreaves argues, teachers possess a set of values or expectations related to how students *ought* to behave (1967, 104). Teachers have learned to expect certain kinds of behaviours from members of different streams. In this case, VET students are viewed as 'bad' students who deviate from the expectations. At Hargreaves' Lumley School, when dealing with 'low-stream students', the teachers tended to withdraw from their students' academic or disciplinary problems and ignore their existence (1967, 103). This phenomenon of teachers *withdrawing* was also observed by the students in my study. As Guanglu recounts, his teachers 'indulge' the students too much, just let them be, and allow them to 'do whatever they want'; at the same time, when students misbehave, the teachers 'just carry on teaching like nothing has happened'. Furthermore, the students were confronted with teachers who tended to hold stereotypical perceptions of their intelligence and abilities; for instance, they noted that their teachers 'do not expect much' or told them that they would pass a test only if they 'are very lucky'. Discussing how the courses were assessed, Guanglu recounted how his teachers would 'turn a blind eye' during exams. The teachers' stereotyping habitus manifested itself in the lack of interaction with VET students, their lack of interest, and their 'lack of recognition' (Reay 1995). The teachers' pedagogic actions capture the spirit of symbolic violence. It is this systematic denial and misrecognition, evidenced in various forms of pedagogic action, that constitutes the imposition of an arbitrary and, hence, justifies

its designation as symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 11–31). As a result of the categorisation process, there were latent effects that were deleterious to the self-concepts and development of the students (Hargreaves 1967, 105).

The assumptions that VET students are ‘inferior’ and ‘failures’ (Woronov 2015) established themselves as a ‘doxa’ in the society, an unquestionable and taken-for-granted orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1990c). The teachers did not break out of these ‘common-sense’ assumptions and practices. Therefore, the VET students developed a sense of their place in the education field, thinking of themselves as ‘slow, no school brain’ kinds of students. As Guanglu stated, [academic students] ‘know what they are supposed to do’ and they ‘have better self-control, take actions and always get things done’. They defined themselves ‘as the established order defines them’ (Bourdieu 1984, 471). The teachers’ stereotyping habitus reinforced their students’ negative behavioural tendencies (e.g. passing time, playing with phones), as well as their increasing awareness of their implied inferiority. Hargreaves terms this phenomenon ‘a self-fulfilling prophecy’ (1967, 106). Chinese VET students are *double failures* due to both their poor CEE scores and their inability to gain entry to higher-tier universities. The VET colleges, as we have seen, accentuated this sense of failure and state of deprivation.

Conclusion

This paper began with an outline of the Chinese system with respect to VET as well as a discussion on the mechanism of sorting within educational systems. It presented evidence gathered from Chinese youths on their experiences as VET students and their teachers’ perspectives of them. Many scholars have applied Bourdieu’s concepts to investigate the role of social structures such as social class and gender in reproducing inequality (e.g. Cui 2017; Reay 2004). This study expands the Bourdieusian theoretical lens to include the unequal power relations manifested in the academic/vocational divide within the educational system.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical insights, I have explored how teachers’ stereotyping habitus relates to the hidden curricula in VET classrooms and the resulting impacts on the learning experiences of Chinese VET students. The findings of this study suggest that the stereotyping of VET students is both societal and individual, in the sense that it acts as a habitus, a system of generative schemes that unconsciously produces and reproduces stereotypical discourses and behaviours through individuals’ ways of talking and doing in the social fields.

VET students in China have been ‘weeded out’ by the current exam system. Given their stereotyping habitus, the teachers considered VET students as ‘bad seeds’, who were by nature less intelligent, lazy, and unmotivated, while they viewed academic students as hardworking and smart. The cultural arbitrary is formed by these academically focused societal sentiments and attitudes, and the taken-for-granted assumption that VET students are inferior. The teachers’ pedagogic actions in class, therefore, imposed a symbolic violence via a hidden curriculum; these practices include failing to engage students in class, ‘turning a blind eye’ in exams, and having low expectations of VET students. In response to their teachers’ ‘misrecognition’, the students adopted a ‘passing the time’ attitude in class. They also internalised the stereotyping habitus, and came to think of themselves as by nature being less intelligent and unmotivated

youths. The paper has examined how a system of unequal power relations in Chinese VET colleges is maintained and legitimised, which contributes to the ‘transmission’ and reproduction of the same culture that has shaped the standing of VET in Chinese society (Apple 2019, 31). The findings of this study highlight the role that the educational system itself plays in defining particular forms of learning (academic) as high status and in helping to create a credentialing process based on the (non-) possession of this academic capital.

Note

1. 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).

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