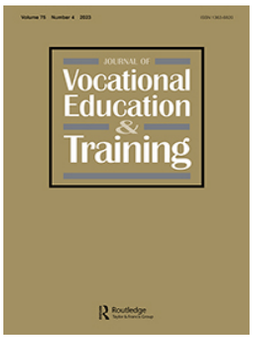

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Journal of Vocational Education & Training

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjve20

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To cite this article: Geng Wang (04 Jan 2022): ‘A cultured man is not a tool’: the impact of confucian legacies on the standing of vocational education in China, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2021.2024590

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2021.2024590

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JOURNAL OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION & TRAINING
https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2021.2024590

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'A cultured man is not a tool': the impact of confucian legacies on the standing of vocational education in China

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ABSTRACT

While enjoying the respect and prestige in some countries, in others, despite being a significant educational sector, vocational education continues to suffer from low status and negative societal sentiments. Vocational education in China has been positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less good' academic records. Addressing the research gap concerning the limited philosophical discourses about the academic/vocational divide from non-Western traditions, this paper seeks to explore the philosophical and historical heritage of the academic/vocational divide and how Confucianism may contribute to this divide and shaped the hierarchy of work in China. The Confucian literati, as 'the privileged other', determined the social rank of 'those who labour with their strength' and 'those who labour with their minds' through the Imperial Examination System. By using institutional logics theory, the paper explores how the legacy of these views may have negatively impacted on the standing of occupations and vocational education in contemporary Chinese society and argues that an alternative philosophical orientation is needed to counter the long-standing consequences for vocational education.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 31 May 2021
Accepted 16 December 2021

KEYWORDS
Confucianism; Chinese vet; confucian legacies; academic/vocational divide; vocational education

Introduction

The practice of dividing the curriculum into academic and vocational aspects and treating the latter as a default for those deemed to be ill-suited to the former is an enduring staple of educational systems (Lewis 1998, 284). Deriving from the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, with their attendant devaluing of practical studies (Curtis and Boultwood 1970; Wilds and Lottich 1970; Hickman 1990), the problems of the vocational/academic divide and the inferior status of the vocational have centuries of history in the West (Silver and Brennan 1988; Hyland 2018).

While enjoying the respect and prestige in some countries, in others, despite being a significant educational sector, vocational education continues to suffer from low status and negative societal sentiments (Billet 2011, 2014; Wheelahan and Moodie 2017). Coughlan argued the 'recurrent

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theme' of low status and investment in vocational programmes is a global problem which defies interpretation against the background of current skills shortages and high youth unemployment around the world (2015). Similar to the situation in other countries (Di Stasio, Bo, and Van de Werfhorst 2016; Wheelahan and Moodie 2017), vocational education in China has come to be regarded as a poor second choice (Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang 2015). In spite of the political ambitions and the financial resources lavished on this educational sector,[1] it has been neglected in favour of university expansion since the start of the Reform Era in 1978 (Klorer and Stepan 2015, 4). Investment in higher education, which began in the 1980s, has been increased and accompanied by significant reforms several times over the decades to meet the demands of economic restructuring (Cai 2013). Whilst higher education has been embraced by Chinese society (Bai 2006, 137), vocational education has been positioned in a disadvantaged place in the educational hierarchy (Zhang 2008), absorbing the 'left-over' students with 'less good' academic records (Mok 2001; Yang 2004; Zha 2012; Liu and Wang 2015). Vocational students are stereotyped as 'educational failures' (Woronov 2015), receiving limited attention and resources from central government compared to academically inclined students in universities (Wan 2006).

Various studies have offered their explanations for the academic/vocational divide and the low standing of vocational education from the perspectives of the structural (e.g. skills training systems and educational systems), the cultural (e.g. social class), and the philosophical (e.g. mainstream western philosophy) (Hyland 2018). Very few of them have moved beyond the borders of western orientation to find systems of thoughts and belief embedded in entirely different cultural values and epistemological system (Merriam 2007). By examining the Confucian views in *The Analects*, this paper endeavours to broaden the current discussion on the academic/vocational divide from non-Western traditions and explores what may be the philosophical and historical causes of this divide and the low social status of vocational education in China.

The institutional logics theory is used as a framework for analysing the connections between the philosophical perspectives and the standing of vocational education in the Chinese society. Institutional logics are considered as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, belief, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 804). The institutional logics theory is influentially useful in analysing the complexities and ambiguities of the education system (Lepori 2016; Cai and Mehari 2015). The following section will discuss the matter of academic/vocational divide. The paper will then provide a brief positioning of vocational education within China's education system, and societal attitudes to vocational students. This is followed with an explanation of

theoretical framework as well as an examination of the Confucian views in *The Analects*. Finally, a discussion of the Confucian legacies in modern China and some conclusions are provided.

The academic/vocational divide

As Silver and Brennan note, 'education and training, theory and practice, the liberal and the vocational – the polarities have centuries of turbulent history' (1988, 3). Hyland (2018) reviewed the various reasons offered to explain the intractability behind this divide from structural, historical, cultural, biological, and philosophical aspects (210–211). In the West, the original source of division could be found in Plato's distinction between 'genuine' knowledge (acquired through rational reflection) and mere 'opinion' (acquired for specific purposes) (Schofield 1972, p. 149–150). In *the Republic*, he explains the different knowledge provided for people of different class. The 'magnificent myth' suggests that God 'added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers; he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest' (Plato and Lee 2003). Similarly, in *the Politics*, Aristotle value disinterested theory above applied practice, which is similar to the vocational/academic discourse in modern schooling (Aristotle 1877). The passing of time merely emphasised the hierarchical and normative distinctions which Plato made. For example, in the UK, liberal education was the education of prestige in Victorian times. The prestige was gained through the concept of 'gentlemen ideal' and its close association with the most powerful political and economic groups in British society (Wilkinson 1963).

Billet (2014) argued that across human history it has largely been 'privileged others' who have shaped the societal standing of occupations and the means of their preparation (2014, 3). These 'others' include variously aristocrats, theocrats, bureaucrats and academics who have articulated and sustained societal sentiments and discourse about occupations from positions of power and/or privilege (Billett 2014, Billett 2011). Studies have shown how 'privileged others' have shaped the form and standing of vocational education by exploring the historical and philosophical tradition in the West (Aldrich 1994; Farrington 1966; Sennett 2008; Billet 2014). However, few scholars have investigated, from a non-Western perspective, how Confucianism, the most dominating philosophy in the Chinese society, formed and legitimated the social discourse about the standing of vocational education in China and identified how these enduring legacies being exercised contemporaneously. This paper aims to help address this dearth of research and broaden the existing discourses on vocational/academic divide beyond the theories familiar in the English-speaking world to non-Western sources and systems. The following section provides a brief positioning of vocational education within China's education system and societal attitudes to vocational students.

Chinese vocational education, vocational students, and stereotyping

In China, vocational education is seen as inferior to academic routes (Yang 2004) and positioned at the bottom of the educational hierarchy (Mok 2001; Stewart 2015). The current structure of China's post-secondary educational system can be broken down into three tiers: the first tier, the second tier, and the third tier. 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. Vocational 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).

The CEE, a high-stakes academic-based exam, is considered as the modern equivalent of the Imperial Examination System,[2] operating as a sorting machine, which categorises the students according to their test scores, the quantitative indicator of the level of their academic learning (Liu 2016). CEE was re-established in 1977 as the main selection criterion to post-secondary education after the ten-year Cultural Revolution (Liu 2013). The academic performance on CEE, instead of political affiliation, became the decisive factor in accessing post-secondary education. Since the students who enrol in vocational colleges are generally those who have fared worse academically (Li 2004; Mok 2001; Yang 2004; 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).

Institutional logics

In this study, institutional logics theory is employed as a framework for analysing the connections between Confucian philosophical tradition and the standing of vocational education in the society. Institutional logics are defined as '. . . symbolic systems, ways of ordering reality, and thereby rendering experience of

time and space meaningful' (Friedland and Alford 1991, 243). That is, institutional logics are composed of the symbolic (such as a set of assumptions, values, and beliefs) and the material (such as practices) that enable as well as constrain social actors when they are accomplishing the organisations' tasks (Ocasio 1997; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012).

For Friedland and Alford (1991), the nuclear family, the Christian religion, bureaucratic state, democracy, and the capitalist market are the essential elements of a contemporary Western society, and each of them has their own logics shaping social actors' preferences, interests, and behaviours. They further theorise their findings and propose that there are six central institutions of one society: family, religion, state, market, professions, and corporation. Each of these logics is comprised of material practices and symbolic constructions that are available for social actors to elaborate. The logic of religion 'attempts to convert all issues into expressions of absolute moral principles accepted voluntarily on faith and grounded in a particular cosmogony' (Friedland and Alford 1991, 249).

For this study, Confucianism could be seen as a prevailing religion logic embedded in the Chinese society (Jia et al. 2017). It consists of sets of culturally and socially constructed symbols and practices governing the social relations in the Chinese society, and these relations further provide sets of meanings that social actors can apply to define their situations and actions. This religion logic legitimises the type of knowledge required for becoming a respected junzi or 'cultured man' as well as their social status in Imperial China. The following section begins with an analysis of Confucian view on 'learning' and its impact on Imperial China. Moreover, Confucian view on labour division and hierarchy of work will be discussed.

Confucianism, learning, junzi, and the Imperial China

Before analysing the reasons behind the minor role vocational education played in Confucian thought (Schmidtke and Chen 2012), it is important to discuss what is learning, what is learnt, and who is learning in the Confucian tradition (Hung 2016, 85). As described in the first sentence of *The Analects*, constant learning will bring pleasure to people: 'Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?' (The *Analects*, Xue Er, 1:1; Legge's translation, 1861). Learning has always been one of the most important issues in Confucianism (Hung 2016). The overall doctrine of Confucian learning is targeted at junzi's self-cultivation (Ivanhoe 2000; Jiang 2006; Kim 2009; Tu 1978, 1985). A junzi (a Superior Man, 'cultivated/cultured man', 'princely' or 'noble' man in Weber's term) refers to the exemplary person in the Confucian doctrine, which requires studying long and hard; exercise care, restrain, and sincerity (Hung 2016). He had attained all-around self-perfection, who had become a 'work of art' in the sense of a classical, eternally valid, canon of

psychical beauty, which literary tradition implemented in the souls of disciples (Weber 1951, 131). Individuals have to engage in self-cultivation in order to be a Superior Man and even Sage, who encourages others to continue to strive for improvement by helping them overcome difficulties (Chen 1990; Schmidtke and Chen 2012). For Confucius, learning is first and foremost task for human beings and the only way to achieve the Superior Man status.

Division of labour: 'Tao' and 'Tool'

What then, for Confucius, should be learnt? In the Confucian tradition, there is a clear divide between 'Tao' and 'Tool'. 'Tao' refers the non-material, metaphysical world, while 'tool' means the material and the physics (Wang 2007). Confucius (the master) said, 'a cultured man (junzi) is not a tool (i.e. a specialist, a tool used for a special purpose). (The *Analects*, Wei Zheng, 3:12, translated by Weber 1951, 160). For Max Weber, this fundamental assertation meant [junzi] was an end in himself and not just a means for a specified useful purpose (1951, 160). The old educational ideal of the Chinese stood in sharp contrast to the functional rationalisation in the manner of European mechanisms (Weber 1951, 160). Ethical or moral knowledge (or the learning of 'Tao') is of the most value and importance, while practical or laborious knowledge (the learning of 'Tool') is insignificant for Confucius (Hung 2016):

> Fan Chi requested to be taught husbandry. The Master said, 'I am not so good for that as an old husbandman'. He requested also to be taught gardening, and was answered, 'I am not so good for that as an old gardener'. Fan Chi having gone out, the Master said, 'A small man, indeed, is Fan Xu! If a Superior Man loves propriety, the people will be reverent. If he loves righteousness, the people will submit to his example. If he loves good faith, the people be sincere. Now, when these things are obtained, the people from all quarters will come to him, bearing their children on their backs—what need has he of a knowledge of husbandry?' (The *Analects*, Zi Lu, 13:4; Legge's translation, 1861)

For Confucius, Fan Chi was considered as 'a small man' for asking about husbandry and gardening. Comparing to cultivating important virtues, such as propriety, righteousness, and good faith, learning the practical skills of farming and gardening is of little significance. Knowledge focusing on maintaining livelihood, with practical and realistic purpose, is being unfairly devalued (Hung 2016, 90). When an officer praised Confucius his versatile skills, which he thought made Confucius a Sage, Confucius said:

> Does the officer know me? When I was young, my condition was low, and therefore I acquired my skills in many things, but they were mean matters. Must the Superior Man have such variety of skills? No, he does not need them. (The *Analects*, Zi Han, 9:6; the author's translation)

For Confucius, skills are just 'mean matters'. A Superior Man or Sage should have 'higher' concerns, therefore do not need acquiring various skills as they are merely 'tools'. Confucius thought being versatilely skilled did not make him a Sage, rather it is a result of him experiencing 'low' condition when he was young.

Hierarchy of work: the aspirants for office and examination

Who is it, specifically, that pursues the Confucian pathway of learning? Learning in China has been made as the yardstick of social prestige in the most exclusive fashion, the stratum of aspirants for office who were educated in Confucian literature, or 'literati' have been the bearers of all 'intelligence' (Weber 1951, 107). Learning has been closely linked with getting into office in the feudal government (Xiong 2011). For twelve centuries social rank in China has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth. This qualification, in turn has been determined by education, and especially by examinations (Weber 1951, 107). In *the Analects*, Confucius encouraged his students: 'the student, having mastered his studies, should apply himself to be an officer' (The *Analects*, Zi Lu, 9:13; Legge's translation, 1861).

Becoming an officer was considered the primary goal of the majority of the students, which was 'the extrinsic motivation' of Confucian education (Hayhoe 2008). The Imperial Examination (or 'keju'), was established in 681 in the Sui Dynasty[3] (Elman 2009), when it was seen as an important recruitment route to the feudal bureaucracy and a pathway to upward social mobility (Liu 2016, 16). Since Sui Dynasty, the curriculum went through drastic changes to accommodate shifts in the ruling ideology, and neo-Confucianism has always been a dominant feature of the curriculum (Dardess 1974). Imperial Examination System included a series of examinations at different levels (Xiong 2011). The entry level of the examination system was the 'Local Graduate' (xiucai) Examination, which was held once a year in individual districts. People passing this examination were called xiucai and were thereby entitled to participate in the 'Provincial Graduate' (juren) Examination, which was held at the provincial level every three years. Juren were qualified for the 'Capital Graduate' (jinshi) Examination, which was held in the capital city, also every three years. The Capital Graduate Examination was at the highest level of the Imperial Examination System. All categories of Chinese officers were recruited from their midst, and their qualification for office and rank depended upon the number of examinations they had successfully passed.

The Imperial Examinations were primarily tests of classical literature and writings such as Confucian philosophy of filial piety, doctrine of meaning, classic Analects and Mencius etc. (Wakeman 1975; Elman 2013). It did not test any special skills, rather test whether or not the candidate's mind was thoroughly steeped in Confucian literature and whether or not he possessed the ways of

thought suitable to a cultured man (Weber 1951, 121). The Cultured man (or Superior Man) strives for universality rather than rational specialisation, which in the Confucian sense education alone provides and which the office precisely requires (Weber 1951, 160). Chinese masses considered a successfully examined candidate and officer was by no means a mere applicant for office qualified by knowledge, who was a proved holder of magical qualities (1951, 128). Confucian philosophers shared an understanding of the functional necessity of social stratification as the key element for social cohesion in Imperial China (Liu 2016, 13). Education was believed to bring an equilibrium, which both justified social stratification and enhanced social cohesion (Ho 1962). Broadly speaking, there were the four main social classes in Imperial China, including the gentry class (the 'literati', or 'shi'), the peasant class ('nong'), the artisan and craftsman class ('gong'), and the merchant class ('shang') (Spence 1999; Fairbank and Goodman 2006). The dominant educational group was the gentry class, who traditionally controlled educational ideology and values. It has been argued that the Imperial Examination system only allowed a small scale of circulation among the elites as the linguistic and academic requirements were unattainable for the majority of peasants (Elman 2013; Ho 1962). Although the peasants were legally entitled to compete in the examinations, the financial and cultural barriers were paramount (Liu 2016, 25). Although the economy during the Tang and Song Dynasties experienced strong growth with advanced technology in printing and ship building, a booming trade in silk and ceramics, the artisans and craftsmen had neither political and legislative power nor sufficient wealth to create a parallel systematic provision of vocational training system (Liu 2016, 19). The training for specialised skills during this period was characterised with individual contractual relations, localised private provision and self-regulation (Elvin 1996; Shiba 1982).

Through the Imperial Examinations System, Confucian philosophy determined the standing of work and capacities of those who work. The Confucian thinker Mencius (Mengzi), who inherited and developed Confucius's thinking, described the hierarchy of work:

> Mencius resumed, 'Then, is it the government of the kingdom can be carried on along with the practice of husbandry? Great men have their business, and little men have their business. . . . Hence, there is the saying, "Some labour with their minds, and some labour with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others; those who labour with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them." This is a principle universally recognised'. (The Works of Mencius, Teng Wen Gong, 5:4; Legge's translation, 1861)

As can be seen from above statement, a strict and codified hierarchy of work was identified by the privileged literati. The great man, 'those who labour with their minds', are at the top, while the little man, 'those who labour with their strength', possessing manual skilfulness, are at the bottom. Therefore, Confucius

(the Master) said 'a Superior Man should pursue Tao, rather than pursuing ways to making a living' (The *Analects*, Wei Ling Gong, 15:32; the author's translation). The rule of the literati, 'the privileged other' in Billett term (2014), created the sharp cleavage between those educated in Confucian tradition who devoted themselves to 'higher' concerns of Tao and the 'uneducated' or 'stupid people' (yu min), who did menial work, as well as demonstrated the gap between different standing of work. The cultivation of the Superior Man did not allow for an equal standing of technical, utilitarian training. Being a craftsman or technical specialist was not the ideals sought for a Superior Man (Schmidtke and Chen 2012, 435). The Confucian value did not seem to support the provision of practical skills in the increasingly sophisticated industry; however, it further alienated the technical skills required by the booming industrial and commercial sector from the purpose and function of education in the society (Liu 2016).

Confucian legacies, the Reform Era, and meritocracy

As Hayhoe and Bastid (1987) state, 'in spite of the dramatic changes in China – political, economic and social, certain cultural continuities remain as a link between historical and contemporary educational interaction' (272). Confucianism may act as such cultural continuities, influencing Chinese society for two thousand years. It may be considered as a religion logic, which is comprised of symbolic constructions (e.g. the division of 'Tao' and 'Tool') as well as material practices (e.g. the selection system of the Imperial Examinations). These symbolic constructions and material practices have been 'accepted voluntarily' in Chinese society (Friedland and Alford 1991, 249).

For more than a thousand years, most officials were selected by the Imperial Examinations System, which tested the applicant's understanding of Confucian ideas and his level of cultivation of becoming 'a cultured man' (Durant 1992). They administered Imperial China and occupied the highest positions in the social hierarchy, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants (Münch and Risler 1987, 23). The Imperial official has evolved into civil servant in contemporary China, and Chinese students are motivated to become civil servants rather than skilled workers (Xiong 2011). The competition for a position in office has become increasingly fierce, as a career as a civil servant is chosen for its high social status, together with the stable income, benefits, insurance, and pension (Xiong 2011; Liu 2016).

The lower status of skilled workers in today's China may be rooted in the hierarchy of work in the Imperial Era as well as the Confucian notion of 'the student should apply himself to be an officer' (Xiong 2011). However, throughout the history of China, skilled workers have not always been treated in this way. During the Socialist Era (1949–1978), skilled workers and vocational education were greatly valued. Vocational education was delivered by large work units (*danwei*), the major form of urban employment during the times of the

planned economy (Thøgersen 1990). In the planned economy, graduates of *danwei*-affiliated vocational schools were automatically assigned to 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). However, since the start of the Reform Era in the 1980s, China's leadership introduced market mechanisms for job allocation after graduation. It removed vocational students from the *danwei* system, forcing them into the newly created open labour market to seek jobs (Lewin and Xu 1989). As a result of both the open labour market and the expansion of higher education, 'educational desires' (Kipnis 2011) in China were transformed, thus greatly increasing pressure on students to gain higher levels of 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. Mid-level managerial jobs, technical jobs, and skilled jobs, which 30 years ago would have been filled by vocational education graduates, are now increasingly reserved for university graduates (Hansen and Woronov 2013). Employers believe that if their staff hold higher levels of educational credentials, this represents higher quality, and therefore a better reputation and status for their company (Zhang 2008).

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 the market economy in China (Zhang 2008). In this context, there is no good reason why Chinese parents should encourage their only child[4] to go into vocational education if they have the option of taking the academic path (Stewart 2015). A survey published by *Beijing Youth News* showed that only 1.3% of the 344 parents interviewed would agree to send their children to vocational education and have them become a factory worker (cited in Zhang 2008).

In the Imperial Era, the Imperial Examination system performed an important social function of meritocracy by inducing the majority of the population – the peasant class – to accept their status as labourers of the land (i.e. 'those who labour with their strength') and believe the selection into office based on merit, intelligence and hard work (Liu 2016, 25). Inherited from the Imperial Era, the system of exam-based meritocracy is still viewed as fair and just (Yu and Suen 2005; Song 2016), and the social respect shown to those achieving exam success is apparent in today's Chinese society (Kipnis 2011). Students regard the exam system as a form of sacred and fair competition, as well as a means to success (Song 2016). Similar to the social respect given to the successfully examined candidate in the Imperial Era, achieving excellent CEE performance is assumed to be the evidence of merit, which is considered to prove the overall quality of a person (Kipnis 2011). 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 (Woronov 2015). Under the influence of the academically focused, exam-driven societal attitudes, vocational students, at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, are considered to be 'stupid and lazy', 'failures', and 'bad students' (Ling 2015; 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).

How to proceed? Reform and the alternative philosophical orientation

There is concern in China, despite the reported success of the economy (see Clark, Pinkovskiy, and Sala-i-martin 2017), that the vocational education and training (VET) system is not meeting the country's industrial needs and that reform of the system is long overdue (State Council 2017a; Stewart 2015; Klorer and Stepan 2015), particularly in the context of the future impact of technological changes (World Bank and State Council China 2019 xxi). The past few decades have witnessed a series of expansive reforms of China's VET sector (State Council 2005, 2017b, 2018, 2019), aimed at addressing the country's skills mismatch and shortages of skilled labour (State Council 2017b). 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[5] (State Council 2017a). Apart from the initiatives to reform, positive social sentiments and attitude towards vocational education and skilled workers need to be promoted. In 2016, Premier Li mentioned the term 'craftsmanship spirit' in Government Work Report (State Council 2016), aiming to promote the standing of vocational education and creating parity of esteem. Craftsmanship spirit refers to the dedication craftsmen give to their work in order to make it as perfect as possible, and the essence of craftsmanship spirit is careful and rigorous attitude towards skilled work (Xiao and Liu 2015).

Being a craftsman himself, Mo Tzu (476–390) is one of few ancient Chinese philosophers advocating the craftsmanship spirit (Wang 2018). Although disappeared at the beginning of Han Dynasty (202 BCE), the philosophy of Mo Tzu has been recently celebrated by Chinese educators and policymakers for his emphasis on the importance of technical education for peasants and artisans (Schmidtke and Chen 2012). His work *Mo zi* consists of the knowledge of natural sciences, technology, and military. He appreciated the value of skilled workers:

> Mozi said: Supposing it is desired to multiply good archers and good drivers in the country, it will be only natural to enrich them, honour them, respect them, and commend them; then good archers and good drivers can be expected to abound in the country. How much more should this be done in the case of the virtuous and the excellent who are firm in morality, versed in rhetoric, and experienced in craftmanship -

> since these are the treasures of the nation and props of the state? They should also be enriched, honoured, respected, and commended in order that they may abound. (*Mozi, Exaltation of the Virtuous*, 8:8:4, Mei's translation)

The skilled labourer such as archers and drivers should be respected and honoured by the society as they are 'the treasures of the nation' and 'props of the state'. Unlike focusing on metaphysical world of 'Tao' through academic/literary learning in Confucianism, Mo Tzu emphasised the importance of hands-on practical experiences when mentoring his apprentices. He stated, 'though a scholar should be well learned, he must first of all exhibit good action' (*Mozi, Self-cultivation*, 2:2:1, Mei's translation). Mo Tzu is also considered as the first apprenticeship mentor in Chinese history and an inspiration for the development of modern apprenticeship in China (Xu 2019).

The Confucian literati, the gentry class, were regarded as qualified officers as they have studied long and hard in Confucian literature and they possessed the ways of thought suitable to 'a cultured man' (Weber 1951, 121). The Imperial Examination system and the status of gentry class have been legitimated by Confucian tradition, the prevailing logic of religion in Chinese society. However, the academically focused, exam-driven societal attitudes need to be challenged, while skilled workers and vocational education should be valued and respected. Institutional transformations are therefore associated with the creation of both new social relationships and new symbolic orders (Friedland and Alford 1991, 250). The philosophy of Mo Tzu, as a set of institutional orders, may provide the ends to which individuals' behaviour should be directed as well as the means by which those ends are achieved. It could 'generate not only that which is valued, but the rules by which it is calibrated and distributed' (Friedland and Alford 1991, 251).

Contrary to the Confucian tradition, Mo Tzu's philosophy provides social actors with a set of social norms that celebrate the value of skilled workers and focus on the learning of practical skills. Confucius and Mo Tzu each has a central logic that constrain both the means and ends of individual behaviour and are constitutive of individuals, organisations, and society. However, 'while institutions constrain action they also provide sources of agency and change'. The contradictions inherent in the differentiated set of institutional logics provide individuals, groups, and organisations with 'resources for transforming individual identities, organisations, and society' (Thornton and Ocasio 2008, 101). 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 2017a). The challenges presented by the 4th Industrial revolution, as a new institutional context, provides opportunity for agency and change. It may signal an institutional change from a social setting once dominated by the institutional logics of the exam-driven, academically focused attitudes to one greatly influenced by the logics of 'the craftsmanship spirit' promoted by Mo Tzu (State Council 2016).

Conclusion

This paper explores how Confucian ideas may contribute to the academic/vocational divide as well as a hierarchy of occupation in Imperial China by presenting evidence from *The Analects*. It provided new findings that address the gaps in the literature concerning the limited philosophical discourses about the standing of vocational education from non-Western traditions. Although the expansion of higher education (Klorer and Stepan 2015) and poor training quality (Li and Sheldon 2010) may also be the factors influencing the low social status of vocational education in China, the primary focus of the paper is the philosophical and historical causes of it.

The findings reveal practical knowledge and skills have been unfairly devalued by Confucius and his criteria of becoming junzi (Superior Man). The Confucian literati, as 'the privileged other' (Billet 2014), determined the social rank of 'those who labour with their strength' and 'those who labour with their minds' through the Imperial Examination System. The paper also demonstrated how the Confucian legacies appear to be enduring to this day in terms of the standing of skilled workers and the perceived fairness embedded in exam-based meritocracy. One's academic success has been associated with his or her competence and value by commonsense logic (Zhang 2008). Confucianism is considered as a prevailing religion logic embedded in the Chinese society (Jia et al. 2017), which consists of sets of socially and culturally constructed symbols and practices governing the social relations in the Chinese society. It legitimises the type of knowledge required for becoming a respected 'cultured man' and the hierarchy of work in Imperial China. Institutional logics theory has provided useful tools for making sense of the connections between Confucianism and the standing of vocational education in the society.

The alternative philosophical orientation, such as the philosophy of Mo Tzu and his craftmanship spirit, is needed for ameliorating the long-standing the academically focused, exam-driven societal attitudes. Mo Tzu's celebration of skilled workers and emphasis on practical experiences could be useful for enhancing the societal esteem of skilled workers and vocational education. Although it devalues skilled workers and vocational learning, Confucian ideals such as benevolence, righteousness, integrity, and social responsibility could be drawn upon in developing a highly skilled workforce (Xiong 2011).

Notes

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 (World Bank Group, and the Development Research Center of the State Council, P. R. China 2019).

2. The Imperial Examination (or 'keju') was established in 681 in the Sui Dynasty (Elman 2009), when it was seen as an important recruitment route to the feudal bureaucracy and a pathway to upward social mobility (Liu 2016, 16). Liu (2016) illustrated some shared similarities between CEE and the Imperial Examinations System in terms of governance and standardisation. Both systems were designed and operationalised by the central government with some exceptions in the local CEE. They were also both large-scale standardised selective tests, which involved strict measures against cheating. The quota system was adopted in both examinations, which exhibited contradiction with meritocratic selection (91).
3. It was not until Ming Dynasty was there a systematic develop of educational provision in imperial China which was fully integrated into the progressive Imperial Examination system (Ho 1962; Elman 2013).
4. The purpose of one-child policy (1979–2015) was to limit the great majority of family units in the country to one child each (Ren and Edwards 2017).
5. 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, Hou, and Wu 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 2017a). 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).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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