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# Unwelcome Stranger to the System: Vocational Education in Early Twentieth-Century China

**Abstract**:
Both in China and internationally, educators and policy makers claim that vocational education and training (VET) is essential for the sound economic development of a country and the physical and social well-being of its population. However, China looks back upon a century-long history of rejection when it comes to popularising VET, despite attempts, both in the present and in the past, to invest in its implementation. Much literature attributes this lack of success to the failed, or distorted, transfer of Western educational models or simply to policy drift.

The article approaches this history of rejection by tracing back the original Chinese encounters with Western style vocational education. After an introductory discussion of different scholarly attempts at explaining failed transfers of VET, I look at how this transfer took actually place when VET was first introduced to China. Therefore, the focus will be on the first decades of the twentieth century and a group of Chinese actors who were pivotal in importing VET models from abroad and building up a nation-wide vocational education programme (primarily members of the *Chinese Association of Vocational Education*). I will argue that vocational education, when introduced to China from abroad, was embedded in an existing framework of systematic and widely practised discrimination and segregation of the population. Therefore, it was less the Westernness of VET that made it undesirable to many Chinese, but its specific – and specifically Chinese – integration into existing practices of allocating cultural capital.

**Keywords**: vocational education, Republican China, educational transfer, educational segregation, social control

## Introduction: the puzzling rejection of vocational education in China

Vocational education and training (VET) lies at the interface of industrialisation, economic development, and an individual's livelihood and socialisation into working life. It is no surprise therefore that propagators of VET attempt to capitalise on its multi-sector character and present vocational education as an indispensable means for modernisation. China is no exception here; many scholars argue, often with patriotic undertones, that success or failure in adapting education to new technological and

economic developments decide the fate of the country as a whole (see e.g. Sun 2011). Vocational training of "specialised, technically adept and useful talents" and "deploying them for the modernisation and reconstruction [of the country]" is presented as an "urgent task" (Sun 2004, 34).[1] Thus, individual development and the maximum use of individual potential are strategically tied to the strength of the nation. This view has been reiterated by Chinese policy makers as well, and recent heavy rhetorical and real investment in the development of vocational education seems to reaffirm this standpoint.[2] For the years 2010 to 2012, Chinese policy makers have launched an initiative to reform and innovate vocational education in order to adjust it to current changes and needs, and fit it into the 2010-2020 ten-year plan for educational development (MOE 2010). Most recently, vocational education has been presented by policy makers as the solid base for the evolving knowledge economy and the key to technical innovation (MOE 2011a), and it is considered a useful instrument to "improve the capabilities and particular advantages of the people's livelihood" as well as to "satisfy the need of the society's members for pluralistic learning and holistic development" (MOE 2011b).

Historically, these urgent calls for building up a functioning system of vocational education are not new, but can be traced back into the late nineteenth century. At the time, many intellectuals and politicians saw China threatened by extinction if it did not rapidly modernise to meet the challenges posed by Western colonialism. Or as the famous political reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) expressed it, "the struggle for survival is nowadays the biggest question on the globe" (cited in Liu 1997, 71). Consequently, Chinese reformers of the early twentieth century launched an industrialisation programme in order to become competitive in an

increasingly globalised economy. However, their contemporaries criticised that Chinese industrial products continued to be lower quality than the European and North American products against which they were hoping to compete. This became poignantly obvious at international industrial exhibitions, which prompted influential industrialists like Mu Ouchu (1876-1943) to diagnose his country's contributions as "miserable and ridiculous" (Mu 1928, 605): where other countries displayed quality and innovation, he complained, the Chinese participants dabbled with low-quality product copies.

Vocational training seemed to present a remedy to China's poor performance in its own modernisation and the world economy.[3] Education as such was ascribed a key role in leading to national salvation, as "knowledge alone can save us from destruction, and education is the means to secure knowledge" (the reformer Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), cited in Wang 1961, 396). To achieve this end, education was endowed with two functions. On the one hand, it would teach useful knowledge and thus break with the ancient tradition of examination-oriented rote learning. In 1905, the traditional examination system was abolished, and around the same time, educationists entered a debate on 'pragmatism' in education (on John Dewey's influence on China, see Schulte 2011). On the other hand, education was to create a new social individual who would contribute to building up a modern nation. The movement for vocational education happened at the same time as intellectuals and activists sought to unite the population, and often the two aims – vocational training and a united nation – were carried forward by one and the same person.[4] Vocational education offered itself as a way to provide up-to-date, applicable knowledge to the wider population, but also to overcome problems like unemployment, poverty, and

ensuing social upheavals in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The two slogans "education for saving the country" (*jiaoyu jiuguo*) and "industry for saving the country" (*shiye jiuguo*) were successfully merged into "vocational education for saving the country" (*zhijiao jiuguo*) (see also Schulte 2008).

Given the urgency that Chinese educators and policy makers expressed, and continued to express in the decades to follow, with respect to building up a system of vocational education, why is it that the Chinese populace, up to the present day, has continuously rejected the vocational programmes that have been designed for them? Why have these programmes, in the past and into the present, failed to convince the targeted groups of their worthiness (for contemporary China, see e.g. Hansen and Woronov 2013)? To answer these questions, I will first discuss in which ways educational research has tried to explain the failed transfers of (mostly Western) VET models. I will then offer a different explanation by looking at what actually happened when Western models of VET were first introduced to China. Drawing on my own research on early twentieth-century China, I will analyse how pivotal Chinese actors (all of them members of the *Chinese Association of Vocational Education*), in their attempts to systematically implement VET, envisaged the role of vocational education in Chinese society. It is my argument that it was due to these initial imageries that VET was not greeted with enthusiasm on the part of the Chinese population. As will be discussed in the last section, these imageries did not change profoundly in the decades to follow – an observation also made by other research that takes a more close-up look at VET in contemporary China (Hansen and Woronov 2013).

## Vocational education in China: happy import or doomed transfer?

The perspective of failure has been employed in different ways in academic research. For many scholars, both in China and internationally, the failure of VET programmes in China can be attributed to a sort of time lag. While the programmes have been designed for a modern (market) economy, China is seen to be lacking both in extent and type of its modernisation. This critical assessment has surfaced both historically (e.g. Wei 1928) and following China's Open Door policy in the 1980s (e.g. Wu 1988). The underlying assumption is that once China has reached a sufficient degree of industrialisation and modernisation, the country would also successfully take over a modern model of vocational education. This expectation is much in line with the modernisation paradigm and its conception of an inevitable evolutionary process from non-Western, traditional to Western, modern societies (see e.g. McCarthy 2009). It has also informed much of the development work that international agencies (such as the World Bank) have carried out in the developing countries, including China (see e.g. the critical report in Middleton, Ziderman, and Van Adams 1993).[5]

Others have explained the failure of VET programmes by diagnosing poor implementation. From this perspective, it is less that the country is in need of being changed than the VET programmes themselves, which have to be fine-tuned in order to fit the local context and become successful in the long run. Again, this critique has been voiced both in the past (Shu 1925) and in the present (e.g. Lai and Lo 2006; Zhang 2009). Currently, the discussion of the technicalities of today's vocational education and training dominates Chinese-language publications on the topic, and also pervades Chinese discussions on reform (see e.g. Jiang 2011).

Some scholars have taken the argument to a more general level and maintain that the idea of vocational education is doomed to fail as long as the Western model is imposed upon non-Western societies. Keith Watson (1994, 85), for instance, has pointed to the general problem that "Western paradigms have shaped and influenced their [the developing countries'] educational systems and thinking about issues such as economic growth and development and the best use of modern technologies". He notes that vocational education has turned out much more successfully when countries had developed their own indigenous approaches (such as in South Korea, Taiwan, or Singapore). Some educators in 1920s China anticipated these calls for indigenous systems by aiming for vocational programmes that "fit Chinese society" (Shu 1925, 6) and did not just "completely copy foreign ideas" (Wei 1928, 531), and again this was echoed in the late 1980s (and subsequently) through attempts to design a "vocational and technical education system with Chinese features" (Zou 1988, 238).

Drawing on my own research on the beginnings of VET in China, I argue that these explanations can only partially account for what happened when modern (Western) vocational education models were first introduced in China. Vocational education in China was not simply a foreign model that was forced upon an incompatible host; nor was it only a matter of time until China, lagging behind in modernisation, would be able to successfully implement vocational education. Rather, vocational education was, already at the time of its systematic implementation in the 1920s, embedded in an existing framework of widely practised discrimination and segregation of the population. Therefore, it was less the Westernness of vocational education that made it undesirable to many Chinese, but its specific – and specifically Chinese – integration into existing practices of allocating cultural capital.

I will therefore expand Philip Foster's argument about the importance of larger social structures for the success or failure of vocational education (1965). In his seminal contribution, he discards alienness (or legacies from colonial times) as the decisive factors that have caused the failure of vocational education in Ghana. Rather, he finds fault with the naive assumption that people's aspirations and choices (such as opting for or against vocational training) can be changed through schooling, because the reasons for certain choices are grounded in larger social and economic structures. Schools, he argues, "are remarkably clumsy instruments for inducing prompt large-scale changes in underdeveloped areas" (144). He continues:

> Aspirations are determined largely by the individual's perception of opportunities within the exchange sector of the economy... The nature of educational instruction has little to do with the process, and the schools are unfairly criticized for creating a condition for which they have not been responsible – except insofar as they turn out too many graduates.
> (151; see also the discussion in King and Martin 2002)

Rather than criticising the African demand for academic education (as opposed to vocational education) as "irrational" (145), so Foster, one should see it as "a remarkably realistic appraisal of occupational opportunities" (145).

While economic considerations were clearly motivating popular resistance against vocational education in China, I argue that it was above all the socio-cultural implications and representations of VET programmes that drew negative responses from parents and students. When vocational schools actively started to thwart the aspirations of their clientele, students chose to either opt out of vocational training, or to attempt to transform the schools. At a time when mass demonstrations heralded the advent of science and democracy,[6] the vocational education movement distanced itself explicitly from the more radical demands of the demonstrators. Rather, the

common approach within the VET movement was to promote social change through educating, not revolutionizing, the society. The pivotal actor within this movement was the *Chinese Association for Vocational Education* (CAVE), which was founded in 1917 by Huang Yanpei (1878-1965) (on the association, see Schulte 2008). Its aim was, though not unanimously, to replace social mobility, the quintessential aim for pursuing an education in imperial China, with social tranquillity. To be sure, the VET movement was not part of the archconservative or the pronouncedly elitist forces within Chinese society, who in turn accused CAVE of vulgarising education. However, in a vein that could be best described as 'progressive conservatism', the movement was the driving force to build up vocational education as a social-engineering response to educational expansion in the early twentieth century: to safely and productively store away the masses who aspired to climb up the social ladder through education in an increasingly non-agrarian economy.

The powerful and moulding influence of socio-cultural representations on vocational education is not unique to the Chinese context but can also be confirmed from a comparative perspective. Jürgen Schriewer and Klaus Harney (1999) have pointed out how different socio-cultural, political, economic, administrative, and symbolic systems have led to diverging patterns in vocational education and training in France and Germany, while Thomas Deissinger has analysed these dynamics for the German and British cases (Deissinger 1994). In a more recent study, Verónica Oelsner (2012) shows how Argentine political and economic elites conceive of vocational education as a welcome instrument to steer the masses away from academic schooling and into work-related training. Both Argentine and Chinese educators and policy makers, as discussed in a comparative study by Oelsner and

Schulte (2006), turned to vocational training solutions from abroad, but integrated, adapted, and transformed these Western (and Japanese) educational models differently, according to what they perceived as their country's respective needs.

The following sections illuminate how these adaptation and transformation processes, which I call sinicisation, are played out in the Chinese context, particularly so after the founding of the Republic in 1912.[7] I will concentrate on those actors who played a key role in the VET movement, namely the members of the above-mentioned *Chinese Association of Vocational Education* (CAVE). This association comprised influential politicians, educators, (modern and traditionally trained) merchants and industrialists, and journalists (the above-quoted reformer Liang Qichao and industrialist Mu Ouchu being two of them).

## Sinicisation in progress: integrating vocational education into a system of social discrimination

Already the different terms that were used in China to translate 'vocational education' give a first hint at what kind of social realities reformers envisioned behind 'vocational education'. At the beginning, in the late nineteenth century, the term 'industrial education' (*shiye jiaoyu*) pointed to the training of (technical) experts as the core of vocational education.[8] China was to launch a grand programme to transform an agrarian, traditional society into an industrial, modern nation (see Liu 1997, 34-35). Around the founding of the Republic in 1912, the term 'vocational education' (*zhiye jiaoyu*) gradually replaced 'industrial education', indicating a shift of interest from the training of experts to questions of 'livelihood' and mass education. Vocational education was to provide a solution to the 'social question' – to provide for

the massive numbers of those who could not continue their education after primary school (or who *should* not continue lest they become graduates with useless degrees) and who were then graduated into unemployment (Huang 1916, 78).

Thus, a more elitist and narrow notion of vocational education was replaced by a type of vocational education whose core concern was the masses and the question of their subsistence (*shengji wenti*).[9] Shifting the contents of vocational education from the expertise of a chosen few to education for the masses had far-reaching consequences: from the moment of its 'invention', vocational education was conceptualised as a dead-end in terms of social mobility. This was mirrored in the first blueprints for reforming the educational system (1902 and 1903), which arranged normal and industrial schools as educational choices with no further upward perspective: the first to train teachers for primary and secondary school; the second to train personnel for filling occupations within agriculture, industry, handicraft, and commerce. Consequently, the industrial schools were constantly measured against their general education counterparts and judged to be of the lowest quality, while at the same time charging fees (Qin 1925). It was a popular joke to replace the two characters for 'industry', *shiye*, by quasi-homophones denoting 'unemployment', calling the respective institutions 'schools for the unemployed' (Yu 2000, 97). Most graduates from industrial schools did not even intend to start working upon graduation but planned to attend other, general, schools (Huang 1913).

Vocational education came into being with a mission which to many sounded more like a sacrifice: to make people accept industrial manual labour as a decent way to earn a living; and to keep people from acquiring 'useless' knowledge with the sole purpose of attempting to attain the position of a government official. In quantitative

terms, vocational education profited from an expansion in education at the beginning of the twentieth century, but was not able to increase the percentage of total students educated; real changes were more happening outside the school, through other forms of vocational training.[10]

At that time, VET activists continuously blamed school graduates for their reluctance to cross two cleavages: first, to even consider an occupation that was (partially) manual; second, to move into rural areas to pursue a job (see e.g. Shu 1928). The growing urban-rural divide was in fact a problem that modernisers had failed to foresee, probably due to their own detachment from the countryside (Bastid 1987). One consequence of the modernisation programme was that these expensive plans were mostly realised only in the cities, leading to an even larger gap between urban and rural regions. The VET movement aimed to reach across these social and regional cleavages, and assembled a powerful alliance of intellectuals, educators, policy makers, and representatives from industry, handicraft, and commerce.[11] However, the agents in the movement (albeit not all of them) did not set out to erase existing inequalities but used VET as a means to come to terms with them. This came along with the mission to civilise and control the population (thus in a way replicating within the country the quasi-colonial oppression that China had experienced during the encounter with the West). In contrast to the more technically oriented 'expert' or 'industrial education', 'vocational education' was *not* conceived as anything more than providing graduates with a way to earn a basic living – something that most people who were interested in attaining an education and capable to afford it would try to surpass.

The shift from elite to mass education upon the founding of the Republic in 1912 (re)built vocational education as a force of preserving, or creating, social and moral order. By establishing vocational schools, which were to replace more informal training modes, the future workforce was to acquire good virtues and the ability to endure bitterness and hardship (as stated by CAVE in Jiaoyushe 1920, 4). The students, so Huang Yanpei, the above-mentioned founder of CAVE, should learn how to "believe in a profession" (1923, 1). It was the task of VET to weed out the bad psychologies of students, who preferred books to reality, disdained common or lower professions, and found work either too troublesome or too tedious. For Huang, it was less the profession that played a role but work itself – and the individual's socialisation into it. Even the traditional apprenticeship system, which was largely criticised for its lack of transparency and rules, was attractive to some CAVE members in that it taught its students how to be humble and endure difficult situations (Pan 1923).[12]

The original motto of the VET movement was "to give work to the unemployed and to give joy to those working" (Huang 1931, 143). However, this joy was less about individual fulfilment but about the joy to serve society. CAVE member and journalist Zou Enrun (alias Zou Taofen; 1895-1944) dedicated an entire article to the "real joy of a profession" (Zou 1924), which would enable an individual to pay back his or her debts to society. Others legitimated the prioritisation of service to society over individual fulfilment by pointing to the emergency situation of the nation. Jia Guanren, a pedagogue and agent in educational policy, explicitly conceded that "in such a situation, the wish that everyone who has work derives pleasure [from this

work] cannot be realised" (Jia 1933, 1). Thus, the changed conception of vocational education clearly led to a de-individualisation.

This was not the sole interpretation of vocational education, to be sure. There were members who imagined a vocation as the expression of one's nature and, consequently, of an individual's self-cultivation (cf. Liu 1997, 96). There were also critics who were opposed to the ideas of both narrowing vocational education down to a mere means to survive and expanding vocational education to the extent that it stood for life itself. For example, the famous intellectual and educator Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946), also a CAVE member, mockingly called these conceptions the "principle of clothing and eating" (*yishizhuyi*) and the "principle of life" (*shenghuozhuyi*). He proposed instead to employ a principle of "creating value" (*shenglizhuyi*), both in a material and social sense (Tao 1918). However, most of his contemporaries interpreted value creation from an overwhelmingly moral perspective: vocational education, as opposed to e.g. mere technical training, was to cultivate and moralise the future workforce.

From the interpretation of 'vocation' as something material – being able to eke out one's living – it was only a small step towards the valorisation of 'vocation': assigning a specific material value to each vocation. This created hierarchies of professions, each with their own material value and corresponding life style. Vocational education was to teach each student his or her proper life style – that is, the life that he or she could afford. Due to the different speed of modernisation in different parts of the country, the gap between desire and fulfilment had become larger and larger in Republican China. If one wished to be at peace with oneself – the basis of social peace – then one had to curb one's "material desires" (Huang 1929, 4).

Vocational education as an instrument to confine unrealistic desires was a common thread in the discussion and was extended also to include women: as much as it should provide for those who could (or should) not continue their general education, it was also to put women who otherwise would become too educated and fastidious in their appropriate place; this would amount to a danger for both family and state (cf. Liu 1997).

Modernity, with all its luxuries, lures and temptations, was seen as potentially destabilising as students were continually exposed to material goods that they would never be able to afford (Shu 1925). Therefore, vocational education was to teach moral values to counter these desires: modesty and honesty, patience and endurance, and persistence (Jiang 1928). At the same time, vocational education should generate a basic prosperity, which, however, should never lose its proportions and degenerate into unaffordable luxuries. Manual labour was cherished as a way to support the "principle of diligence" (*qinlaozhuyi*): it was seen as the best method to engage the student actively and make him accept diligence as "his natural duty" (Zhuang 1915, 164-165).

Foreign countries also provided important resources that helped actors frame and legitimise vocational education. The United States was used to emphasise the disciplinary, socialising character of vocational education, e.g. through references to (vocational) schools for Black Americans. In addition, sport activities and psychological tests imported from the United States were seen as powerful tools to morally integrate the individual into society. Vocational guidance, also adopted from the United States, was to ensure that the individual found his or her proper place in society and thus achieve social peace. An improper profession was seen as a source of

chaos and upheaval; thus, rather than helping an individual find the 'right' profession, vocational guidance was to adjust each individual to the social circumstances (see e.g. Wei 1928; Liu 1925).

To both propagators and critics of social segregation, Germany served as *the* example of a vertically tiered educational system where vocational and general education represented different social statuses. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), CAVE member and first minister of education in the new Republic, who had studied in France and Germany, was in strong favour of the German vertical system, which in his view was the most capable of all systems when it came to separating those who studied further from the masses who were to receive specific vocational training. He clearly prioritised general over vocational education, comparing the former to a house and the latter to a room within this house (Cai 1921). Cai and many of his colleagues working for the pilot vocational school in Shanghai (founded by CAVE in 1918) also stressed the hereditary aspect of a profession and expected the younger generation to continue – while modernising – their parents' occupation (Minguo Shiba Nian 1929).[13]

Their fellow members and counterparts in industry reiterated this view by stating that "common vocational education can only produce common, passive human resources [*rencai*] of lower and middle rank" (Mu 1928, 604-605). Thus, their thinking was deeply engrained by the idea of hereditary intelligence and social reproduction. Also the above-mentioned reformer Liang Qichao saw vocational education as a convenient means to unmask the illusion that through education, everyone could move up to the highest strata. Educational expansion as such, without the vent of vocational education, only reinforced this lie in his eyes:

> Chinese education has not yet rid itself of the examination system. Although the schools today make formally use of modern textbooks, [its students] are in spirit still chasing the posts of government officials... As long as education has not expanded, there exist farmers, craftsmen, and merchants; however, as soon as it expands, the farmers, craftsmen, and merchants all want to become government officials – can such countries exist in the world [where all are government officials]?
> (Liang 1962, 955)[14]

Thus, most propagators of VET practised a principle of, in the words of Stoler and Cooper (1997), incorporation and differentiation: while all Chinese, as citizens of a united nation, should be included into education and civilisation efforts, they should not be exposed to the same contents lest it made them unwilling to return to their dull lives afterwards.

## Support and resistance by devocationalisation: watering down the original programme

Regardless of whether propagators pushed for vocational education or the targeted clientele balked at it, VET underwent a process of devocationalisation: aims and motivations not directly related to professional training were moved to the fore. On the supporters' side, VET was devocationalised as an instrument to (re-)stabilise society; on the reluctant receivers' side, VET was constantly pushed towards general education.

Social stability – or 'peace'/'tranquillity' (*an*) – dominated the discussion on vocational education (see e.g. Huang 1929; Zhuang 1912; Jia 1914). At its heart lay an utilitarian argument in that a general accumulation of happiness would lead to a happy society: if vocational education was mass education (*qunyu*), and if education was of use to the masses (*liqun*) – and vocational education was considered useful and

practicable – then the masses, in their satisfaction, would constitute a community and nation (Jiang 1918, 15). Again, foreign educational systems served as models how to turn "peasants into Frenchmen", to borrow Eugen Weber's (1977) famous terming. Several educationists pointed to the example of the French revolution and its ideals of social responsibility (see e.g. Cai 1912; Wang 1920b).

At the receiving end, in contrast, the targeted clientele tried everything to water down vocational education. Already Reardon-Anderson (1991, 55), when judging the impact of the first training schools that were attached to the above-mentioned Jiangnan and Fuzhou Shipyards, notes that the "students were interested mainly in stipends, spent most of their time preparing for the civil service exams, and left school at the earliest opportunity." Those who did graduate from a vocational school often used the degree to pursue a profession that was different from the ones targeted in their programmes. As one CAVE member remarked, more than two thirds of graduates from agricultural schools – which constituted half of all vocational schools – became primary school teachers (Guo 1925). Moreover, eighty per cent of agricultural schools were to be found in the cities, not in rural areas where they would have been needed (Huang 1922). On an inspection trip through Jiangsu Province, the above-mentioned member and journalist Zou Enrun found out that the majority of graduates from vocational schools moved on to higher education institutions, thus undermining the idea that vocational education should serve the poor and ensure their livelihood (Zou 1925).

Even the pilot school of the *Chinese Association for Vocational Education* could not avoid the fate of devocationalisation. The school was founded in 1918 in Shanghai, and their founders reiterated their aim of "giving work to the unemployed

and giving joy to those working" (Jia 1933, 1). In its constitution, the school addressed those who "have no possibility to study further " (*shengxue*) (Jiaoyushe 1920, 11). The building was erected in the South-West of Shanghai, a district characterised by widespread poverty and high unemployment. At the beginning, training subjects were offered that corresponded with the area's job specialisations: carpentry, metal works, and production of enamel and buttons. Within only a few years, however, this curriculum changed into mechanical engineering, civil engineering, and business and commerce. By 1925, the metamorphosis was complete (Minguo Shiba Nian 1929). The reason for this was less due to a sudden improvement of the area's socio-economic situation than to the fact that more and more families from the middle and even higher strata sent their children to this school, as its teachers and programme had earned a high reputation in and beyond Shanghai.[15] Students were thus automatically part of an influential, Shanghainese and nation-wide, network, which eased their job search upon graduation considerably.

These trends of devocationalisation have also been observed with regard to other vocational schools in China. For example, Margo Gewurtz (1978, 173) comments on a vocational school in Tianjin, which was supposed to provide vocational training to future fishermen, that "the advanced fishing course included three-dimensional geometry, spherical trigonometry, and experimental physics." What's more, the school was situated too far away from the sea so that students could not even practise their acquired skills.

## Conclusion: blaming by not naming

The lasting difficulty with naming vocational education – and its constant renaming and puns at its expense – reveals the troubles it has been associated with. This continued in communist times when vocational education was relaunched as 'spare-time education' (*yeyu jiaoyu*). Vocational education had to cope with critique from left and right: on one side, intellectuals subscribing to a democratisation of society accused it, justly, of a tendency to pacify large parts of the society and thus block social change; on the other, representatives from the upper strata and old elites called Huang Yanpei, the above-mentioned founder of the *Chinese Association for Vocational Education*, a good-for-nothing (or literally: a "rice-bucket pedagogue", *fantong jiaoyujia*), who was erroneously indulging in an "educate to eat" strategy (*chifan jiaoyu*; nearly homophone to 'teacher education'). Others ridiculed Huang as "Dr Enamel" (*falang boshi*), alluding to Huang's fifth vocational education project, an enamel factory in Shanghai (all cited in Wang 1983, 52).

Over-optimistic hopes in vocational education as a cure-all remedy for all of China's problems (rather than a last resort, as it were) did not help. On the contrary, passages such as the following enhance the downfall of a programme that simply promised too much:

> Through [vocational education], man cannot only solve his existential problems, but it can foster in each individual capabilities full of life and increase the production capabilities of the society, the country, and the world; all this is covered by [vocational education], therefore it not only concerns agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, and schools, which transmit the capabilities to produce, but a part of vocational education is also the solution to the problems of workers, farmers, the unemployed, and the economy, down to the question of demilitarisation, all these [sectors] should not neglect vocational education.
> (Yang 1928, 730)

The pedagogue Wang Maozu (1891-1949), himself a member of CAVE, warned repeatedly against elitist and anti-democratic tendencies within the movement. Much in contrast to his colleagues, he blamed the separation of general and vocational education for leading to a "caste system" (Wang 1920a, 5). He also used foreign countries as models or anti-models: while he considered the United States a "good example of equality" in education, he referred to Germany as a "good example of inequality" in education (Wang 1920b, 2).

However, most of his allies conceived of vocational education as a top-down project that was designed by the elites for the masses. Disparagingly at least in retrospective, the movement's leader Huang Yanpei even presented vocational education as a charity project: to contribute to this project would help to gain a clean conscience vis-à-vis all those who produced "food, clothes, and life"; to support vocational education would mean to pay these strata back for their hardship and troubles (Huang 1929, 2). In a still earlier article, tellingly, he mentions "compassion" with the lower strata as the basic motivation for propagating and pursuing the project of vocational education (Huang 1921, 61). Understandably, the targeted population was reluctant to voluntarily let themselves be placed at the receiving end of this charity project.

Thomas Curran (2005) employs a perspective of 'failure' when discussing the vocational education movement in Republican China. He blames the modernisers for their "inability" to take into consideration the needs of the rural population when designing their educational programmes. Furthermore, he contends that most modernisers "failed to appreciate the vitality of [the] native educational tradition" (252) and that "they tended to accept Western models more or less uncritically" (261).

I would argue, in contrast, that most educationists were clearly aware of popular needs but intended to use vocational education in order to transform these needs, discipline and re-educate the populace, and thus break the cultural resistance towards non-academic careers. The educationists' vision was not simply taken from the 'West'. Rather, vocational education propagators made strategic and rather eclectic reference to the West in order to legitimise their own actions. Educators such as Huang Yanpei were clearly aware of the importance of context, as the following passage indicates:

> If one asks how one should do vocational education, then one has to ask the other way round: what kind of vocational education do you want to do? At which place to you want to train what kind of people? ... This is like clothes: clothes that have been made for Mr Zhang Three will only fit Mr Zhang Three, and as far as Mr Li Four, Wang Five and Zhao Six are concerned, it is not so that these clothes will not fit in any case, but they don't automatically fit all people, so it is best to first take measure of Mr Li, Wang and Zhao, and go on from that.
> (Huang 1933, 2)

However, this context sensitivity does not mean that the context was respected *per se*. Rather, it was to be modernised along lines that ran counter to the imageries of the population. Later critics such as Shu Xincheng, himself a member of CAVE, emphasised the destructive character of this project. He blames those in charge for not asking "why Japan could copy Germany"; instead, they wanted to "destroy Chinese history within the shortest time possible, to destroy the social environment, and to turn a micro-structured agrarian society into a society determined by industry and commerce" (Shu 1925, 3).

In the end, in the course of the 1920s, the VET movement lost its impetus. Officially, vocational education subjects were now integrated into general education; in reality, they were slowly dissolved in an overwhelmingly general curriculum. On the one hand, this was a creeping concession to the clientele, who were not interested

in vocational education. To run schools that nobody would choose to attend, if he or she had a choice – especially when it came to expensive equipment – was too costly an option to pursue any further. On the other hand, the growing political ideologisation and streamlining of society towards the end of the 1920s did not make vocational education a priority.

In the subsequent decades, after the Communist take-over in 1949, vocational education experienced ups and downs which were clearly dependent on prevailing political ideologies. The conventional interpretation goes that Maoist, 'irrational' policy phases obstructed the establishment of vocational education while more technocratic, 'rational' policy phases provided a more favourable environment for its installation. While this is not completely misreading the different development (or contraction) phases of vocational education in China, I propose nonetheless to take a closer look at what the more 'irrational' policies were attacking. Struggles like the Cultural Revolution, on the one hand, capitalised heavily on the popular discontent with persisting social hierarchies and inequalities. Credos such as that every nurse could become a doctor or every worker an engineer did not only assail class society as such, but also the mechanisms of educational segregation that reproduced these classes.[16] On the other hand, vocational education could regain impetus when social hierarchies were consolidated again. In the educational field, this restoration showed in the increasing positive correlation between socio-economic background and prestige of educational degree, such as graduating from an elite university (cf. Li 2006). Vocational education as a vent to educational expansion, as has been argued in this article, has once again become a desirable reform option to redirect the masses from their climb up the social ladder. In light of recent historical experiences with

these reform options and their socio-cultural implications, it is no surprise that the masses choose to stay away from vocational schools – if they can afford to do so, that is.

## Notes

[1] If not indicated otherwise, all translations from Chinese are mine.

[2] Critics, however, point out that the actual funding of vocational education by the Chinese government, despite its claims to commit itself to the expansion and improvement of vocational education, is not sufficient and has a clear bias towards financing general education (see e.g. Bing 2011).

[3] Institutional beginnings had been the schools attached to shipyards and factories. The training schools that were attached to the Fuzhou Navy Yard and founded in 1867 are generally considered the beginning of modern vocational education in China (see Huang 1931, 133). Also the Jiangnan Arsenal, founded in 1864, hosted technical training schools (see e.g. Meng 1999). Together, the shipyard schools offered "the most complete technical education available in nineteenth-century China" (Reardon-Anderson 1991, 54). Schools for foreign languages (such as the Tongwenguan founded in Beijing in 1862) prepared the ground by translating important works from the natural and engineering sciences.

[4] Actors tested corporate ways of governing (see e.g. Schulte 2012), but also forms of local self-government (see e.g. Kuhn 1975) as the basis of a modern, healthy nation. A famous representative who was also a member of CAVE was Zhang Jian (1853-1926), who built up the model society of Nantong, with a modern industry, welfare, and schools (see Shao 2004).

[5] At a more general level, Shmuel Eisenstadt (1999) has countered this perspective with his concept of 'multiple modernities', which sees deviations from the Western norm not as 'traditional' by default but as different types of modernity. In education, it was, on the one hand, anthropological approaches (see e.g. Anderson-Levitt 2003) and, on the other, system theory approaches (see e.g. Schriewer and Martinez 2004) which have pointed to the necessity to understand local educational developments on their own terms.

[6] This was the case particularly during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, when people demonstrated for a thorough democratisation of society and the abandoning of restrictive traditions. Metaphorical protagonists were Mr Science and Mr Democracy.

[7] The findings presented here are part of a larger research project on social representations VET patterns in China, Argentina, and India, funded by the German Research Foundation between 2004 and 2012 and based at Humboldt University, Berlin.

[8] The term *shiye* refers originally to professions that are rooted in reality and in the practical world, and deal with "concrete occupations" (Bastid 1988, 20).

[9] As outlined in the introduction, the utilisation of vocational education as an instrument to solve social problems has also been noted with regard to the Argentine case (see Oelsner 2012). This was concurrent with a biologisation of the populace: people's bodies as such were moved to the forefront and manipulated as resources crucial to the survival of the nation; on hygiene campaigns, see Schulte (2009).

[10] Statistics taken from Huang (1931), Sun (1927), and Shu (1928); see discussion in Schulte (2008, 77-85). Other forms of vocational training included a web of vocational counselling which spread across the country. Also, in the 1920s initiatives

were launched to bring vocational education to the countryside. They targeted test zones that sometimes comprised several thousand participants (Minguo Shiba Nian 1929). Setting aside the previous focus on vocational schools, spare-time activities for farmers were arranged, alongside moral and hygiene campaigns.

[11] This amalgamation of different forces in society was novel. The inherent political or religious ideology was less important: the *Chinese Association for Vocational Education* hosted Christians, Buddhists, and agnostics; monarchists, anarchists, and nationalists, as well as supporters of various warlords; on the detailed profile of the movement, see Schulte (2008, 165-174).

[12] In another article, Pan indulges in outright student bashing: "The temperament is too strong, their looks too haughty, they do not observe polite manners, do not take over responsibility, do not accept orders, do not respect material resources, do not endure bitterness." (Pan 1925, 4) Others ridiculed the students who "think that schools are places where one reads books, and that one can become successful and wealthy through reading books." (Sun 1927, 204)

[13] Even today, Cai Yuanpei's ideas are used to legitimise the channelling of the majority of youth into vocational schools since vocational education is presented as "the education for massification" (Huang and Xu 2011, 222) – in other words, vocational education is formatted as a response to educational expansion.

[14] Originally published in January 1917 in the journal *Jiaoyu Gongbao* 2, 4.

[15] Statistics about the social and professional background of parents from the relevant years support this claim; see Schulte (2008, 246-249).

[16] This reveals fascinating parallels with the Peronist period in Argentina, when politicians and educators sought to re-arrange vocational education around the new image of the worker (see Oelsner 2013).

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