# SHIFTING ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION OF SECONDARY VOCATIONAL SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CHINA

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# Shifting Aspirations and Social Reproduction of Secondary Vocational School Students in China

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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**Abstract**

In recent years, the Chinese government has vigorously promoted the development of vocational education in an effort to produce a large number of highly skilled workers and thereby improve employment, enhance educational equity, and support the transformation of the country's industrial structure. Rural youths and their families expect vocational education may also help enhance their social status. However, most rural secondary vocational school students continue to enter the service and manufacturing industry after graduation, adding to a low-end labour force. Why does vocational education, which is intended to help students achieve upward social mobility, fail to do so? What are the processes and mechanisms behind this social phenomenon? What is the role of students' agency, especially their aspirations, in the process of social reproduction?

Guided by MacLeod's and Zipin's theories, I conducted 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a secondary vocational school in Yunnan Province in order to explore students' lived experiences and any changes in students' aspiration due to school practices. Through participant observation, in-depth interview, and documentary data, I focused on how rural students navigate the meritocratic educational system, exploitative labour regime, and rural-urban divide.

My findings revealed that students had three main aspirations in the early stages of entering vocational school: students hoped to gain a higher academic credential, to learn skills, and to obtain opportunities to work in big cities. However, these aspirations underwent changes during vocational schooling. Regarding the first aspiration, students' experiences in internships made them aware of the limitations of their vocational education credentials. Under the influence of achievement ideology, students tended to blame themselves for their limited personal development and assumed there must be other ways to achieve success. Instead of aspiring to gain a higher academic credential, students began to aspire to obtain any seemingly useful qualifications that would allow them to make money as soon as possible. While showing some resistance, they remained optimistic about their future. Second, influenced by growth ideology, students' aspiration to learn skills also changed. Students came to believe that through vocational education they learned *zuoren*, or improved their

interpersonal skills and accumulated work and life experiences, which was regarded as helpful for obtaining and succeeding in future jobs. Students learned the importance of enduring hardship and failure, and thus they began to accept the reality of building a career. Third, students did maintain their aspiration to find opportunities in big cities rather than in their hometown; in short, students consistently aspired to find a better life elsewhere. Achievement ideology and growth ideology blurred the boundaries between success and failure, current reality and future expectations, and prompted students to accept the uncertainty of life caused by structural deprivation. Accordingly, students constantly adjusted their aspirations to obtain self-consistency.

The study illustrates the proclivities, expressions, and practices of students in vocational education. On the one hand, students actively sought ways out of their current realities while flexibly adjusting their strategies and aspirations to cope within a social structure with extremely limited opportunities; on the other hand, under the influence of mainstream ideologies, students consistently failed to grasp the causes of individual plights, which diminished their ability to process their discontent and suppressed their resistance. By exploring the content, characteristics, and influencing factors of students' aspirations, the thesis argues that structural determinants reproduce the social inequality in this disadvantaged population specifically by shaping students' aspirations – and more importantly, students' capacity to aspire.

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## List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| CPI | Consumer price index |
| EQ | Emotional quotient |
| NCEE | National College Entrance Examination |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualification |
| RSSS | Regular senior secondary schools |
| SVS | Secondary vocational school |
| SHSEE | Senior High School Entrance Examination |

**Glossary of Terms**

| | |
|---|---|
| *bianzhi, 編制* | "the establishment", usually refers to the number of established posts in a unit, office, or organisation |
| *chiku, 吃苦* | "eating bitterness", or enduring hardships |
| *chuang, 闖* | to break through, or doing something with great perseverance and passion |
| *dagong, 打工* | "working for the boss", or "selling labour", connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages |
| *danwei,單位* | "work unit", or a group that constituted a form of social, cultural, economic, and political organization in Maoist China |
| *quasi-employment internship, 頂崗實習* | students in the internship doing the same work as real workers |
| *guanxi,關係* | interpersonal relationships |
| *hukou,戶口* | a system of household registration in China |
| *hun, 混* | to drift along and waste time |
| *li, 禮* | initially a religious sacrifice, but has come to mean ceremony, ritual, decorum, rules of propriety, good form, good custom, etc., and has even been equated with Natural law |
| *shehuiren, 社會人* | people who quit school and go out to work in early adolescence |
| *suzhi, 素質* | "quality", both of an individual's inherited (nature/genetic) and acquired (nurture/learned) characteristics |
| *wang zi cheng long, 望子成龍* | expecting the child to become dragon |
| *yanli, 眼力* | having the ability to recognize what needs to be done for others and offering help in advance before it is requested |
| *zuoren, 做人* | making oneself a human being or, simply, doing personhood |

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Coming to the Question

This section introduces the puzzle that the thesis attempts to solve. In recent years, the Chinese government has made great efforts to improve the impact of vocational education, updating training models and promoting young people's access to vocational education. Students and their families expect that vocational educational could allow them to achieve upward mobility. Given these circumstances, it is surprising to find that students who choose to invest money and time in secondary vocational education are still limited to the lower end of the labour force and tend to reach a social class no higher than that of their parents. As this phenomenon is very important to the living conditions of a large number of students and their families, as well as more broadly to China's educational equity and social justice, some important questions need further clarification and discussion.

### *1.1.1 The State Attaches Importance to Vocational Education*

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the state has implemented a series of measures to promote the development of vocational education. In terms of *the scale of education*, the State Council has clearly focused on secondary vocational education, maintaining a roughly equal focus on secondary vocational education and secondary regular education while striving to expand the scale of higher vocational education (Ministry of Education, 2002; State Council of China, 2002a). As a result, from 2004 to 2010, the enrolment of secondary vocational schools (SVSs) has expanded year after year, with these schools covering cities and villages across the country (Jiping Wang, Liu, & Wang, 2013). By 2019, China had 10,200 SVSs. The enrolment was about 6 million, accounting for 41.7% of the total enrolment in secondary education. There were 15.76 million students receiving vocational school education, accounting for 39.46% of the total number of students in secondary schools (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

In terms of *education funding*, the state's financial investment in vocational education has generally increased annually. In 2013, China's total investment in vocational education

was approximately RMB 345 billion, nearly three times the 93.9 billion investment in 2005, with an average annual growth rate of 18%. The percentage of vocational education in the national fiscal education funds has gradually increased, with an average annual growth rate of 25% (Yan Chen, 2014). The average public financial budget of vocational education per student has also increased substantially. In addition, the state has invested various special funds to support the construction of infrastructure and model schools for vocational education (Ministry of Education, 2014).

In terms of *resource allocation*, the state has promoted the cooperation of eastern and western, urban and rural schools to utilize advantaged educational resources in the eastern areas and change the backwardness of vocational education in the western and rural areas (Y. Cao, 2010). Since 2005, the State Council, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Education have successively issued policies to establish a vocational education aid system through which the central and local governments subsidize vocational education for students from poor families and rural families (Ministry of Education, 2005; Ministry of Finance & Ministry of Education, 2006). In 2007, the state began to implement a tuition-free system for agricultural majors in vocational education that gradually expanded to a free system for all of secondary vocational education (State Council of China, 2007, 2010).

In terms of *training mode*, the state has vigorously promoted the combination of study and work, emphasizing school–enterprise cooperation. In 2005, the State Council required schools to closely liaise with enterprises, strengthen students' social practice, and reform the traditional lecture-centred training model (Ministry of Education, 2005). In recent years, the Ministry of Education has repeatedly emphasized the integration of education and production, holding up school–enterprise cooperation as the basic training model of vocational education (Ministry of Education, 2016b, 2018). At present, China has established 1,400 vocational school–enterprise cooperation groups. More than 30,000 enterprises have participated in vocational education and cooperate with schools; this extensive network has carried out multiple modes of training such as tailor-made training programmes and modern apprenticeships to improve the quality of talent training (Ministry of Education, 2019a).

All of these aspects reflect the state's intention to attach importance to vocational

education and accelerate its development. A large number of policy documents demonstrate that the state hopes that vocational education can serve several social and economic functions. First, the state hopes to promote employment and improve people's livelihood through vocational education. At present, domestic and foreign economic risks and challenges have increased significantly, which have inevitably impacted employment and the labour market; thus youth employment is an especially challenging task (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2020). The state expects that vocational education could stay more aligned with market demands and use various forms of employment-focused education programmes to help students successfully find jobs and realize their personal value (W. Zhao, 2012, May 20). Second, the state hopes that the development of vocational education could lead to the realization of educational equity. The vast majority of vocational school students come from rural and urban families with financial difficulties. The development of vocational education directly affects what education these children can receive and is closely related to their future employment and living standards (Jintu Yang, 1997). In 2014, President Xi Jinping issued instructions on accelerating the development of vocational education, stating that "it is necessary to increase support for vocational education in rural areas, ethnic areas, and poverty-stricken areas, and strive to give everyone a chance to excel in life" (Ni, 2014, June 24). Third, the state also hopes to advance poverty alleviation through the development of vocational education and thereby maintain the legitimacy of the ruling party. Vocational education, as the type of education most closely related to economic and social development, is intended to serve the goal of building a moderately prosperous society; it is regarded as the vanguard of education for poverty alleviation and the fastest and most effective way to alleviate poverty (Ministry of Education, 2019c). The state expects students from poor areas to acquire employment skills when receiving vocational education so that these students can break out of intergenerational poverty and change the situation of the entire family (Ministry of Education, 2019a). Finally, with the trend of industrial transformation and upgrading in China, which has included the replacement of manual labourers by robots in enterprises, there is a structural labour shortage everywhere; the state hopes that vocational education could increase the training of much needed skilled personnel (X. Lu, 2014, March 24). Especially since 2015, the training goal of vocational education has been closely linked with the state's

call for “craftsmen of the nation” (Y. Lin, 2016). The state is relying on vocational education to train a large number of highly skilled personnel in order to lay the foundation for China to become a manufacturing powerhouse and achieve the national goal of “Made in China 2025” (D. He, 2016, February 29).

### *1.1.2 What Rural Students and Families Expect from Vocational Education*

Rural and low-income groups constitute the main body of SVS students. In 2007, more than 90% of the students in secondary technical schools, SVSs, and secondary professional schools came from low-income families (Pan et al., 2007). Most students’ parents are farmers, workers, and self-employed businessmen. Half of the students’ families have a per capita annual income of less than RMB 3,000 (J. Wang et al., 2013). In 2012, students with rural *hukou (*戶口, *household registration*) still accounted for 82% of the total number of students, and students from the central and western regions accounted for nearly 70% of the total number of students enrolled (J. Wang et al., 2013). Vocational education represents an important opportunity for them to achieve upward class mobility (Jintu Yang, 1997).

The previous section briefly described the state’s emphasis on vocational education and its expectations for vocational education to serve multiple social functions. Regarding what students and their families expect from vocational education, pre-existing research has provided less description and analysis. However, a rough picture has emerged: rural families expect their children to change their social status through education (Kong, 2010; D. Li, Liu, & Hu, 2013; Jingyi Ye, Zhang, & Wang, 2017).

Secondary education has two different tracks: vocational education and academic education. Most parents hope that their children will take the academic track and enter a university, so as to gain a good job and enjoy a good life (Y. Xie, Li, & Jin, 2019). Most students have similar educational hopes (X. Feng & Ge, 2017; R. Liu, Chang, Liu, & Shi, 2018). However, when a gap arises between reality and ideals, students and their families fall back on contingency measures and strategies: if students find it difficult to advance through regular senior secondary school, they turn to vocational education to acquire a specific skill for the purpose of getting a good job (C. Yang, 2014). Students in this position still expect to

find a job with high social status and good development prospects; this expectation does not change because of receiving vocational education (Wanhong Li & Lu, 2003). Moreover, compared to attending regular senior secondary school, pursuing higher education through vocational education provides a more flexible path because the process of receiving vocational education is able to be accompanied by employment (C. Yang, 2014). In addition, a child receiving vocational education can reduce the financial pressure on a family, which also makes vocational education an appealing option to students in rural areas or those with poor family economic conditions (Y. Li, 2019).

On the whole, existing research has suggested that choosing vocational education does not mean that students or their families have given up on the possibility of upward mobility. Rather, this choice suggests an adjustment made along the path toward this same goal. In short, rural students and their families expect vocational education to help them achieve changes in social status.

#### *1.1.3 The Prospects of Vocational School Graduates*

Researchers have noticed a concerning trend: despite the state's emphasis on vocational education and decades of investment, SVS students still face the dilemma of poor employment opportunities, low employment quality, and limited career development space. After graduation, most students entered labour-intensive positions in the service industry and manufacturing industry, becoming low-end labourers similar to their parents (X. Li & Zhao, 2016). In other words, their social position did not improve significantly compared with the social position of their parents.

There are many structural reasons behind this phenomenon. First, employment opportunities for SVS students are limited. Compared with developed countries, China has not only a division between primary and secondary labour markets, but also more complicated forms of employment, with significant distinctions between positions with or without *bianzhi (編制, the establishment)*, contract and temporary workers, personnel agencies, and labour dispatch (C. Guo, 2004; Z. Yan, Song, & Liu, 2014). The primary labour market includes professional and technical personnel, business managers or administrative officials, office personnel and other positions, all of which require relatively high academic

qualifications and professional skills. For example, in the National Public Servant Exam in 2021, most positions required applicants to have a bachelor's degree. The positions that accepted a junior college degree accounted for less than 5% of the total positions, and SVS graduates are completely excluded from this exam (State Administration of Civil Service, 2021). In contrast, the secondary labour market is characterized as having "low wages, bad working conditions, unstable employment, and little opportunity for advancement", and it is flooded with a wide variety of employment forms such as temporary workers, labour dispatch, and positions without *bianzhi*. Most SVS graduates with low educational level and insufficient skills could only enter the secondary labour market (Z. Yan et al., 2014). A survey in 2019 showed that 71.8% companies placed SVS graduates in front-line positions such as operation, sales, and production (Ouyang & Bu, 2020). In addition to academic credentials, rural *hukou* is an important factor restricting entry into the primary labour market. A survey in 2006 showed that in the primary labour market, 95.18% of workers had urban *hukou*. Even in the secondary labour market, workers with urban *hukou* occupied dominant positions such as technicians, managers, and office workers, while workers with rural *hukou* were mainly unskilled workers and service workers (M. Qiao, Qian, & Yao, 2009). Another study based on the Chinese General Social Survey further revealed that urban *hukou* not only facilitated the entry of workers into public-owned work units, but also gave them an advantage in terms of wage attainment (Zhong & Qu, 2019).

Second, the income of SVS graduates has remained low. Although official data showed that the employment rate exceeded 95%, research has indicated that the quality of employment among SVS graduate has also remained low. These students mainly enter first-line labour-intensive positions that offer low wages (Xing, 2010). An official report showed that 30 million secondary vocational graduates entered the production line between 2007 and 2011 (J. Wang et al., 2013). In 2011, 53% of SVS graduates entered the tertiary industry, 39% entered the secondary industry, and nearly half of the graduates had a starting monthly salary of less than RMB 1,500 (J. Wang et al., 2013). The average starting salary for secondary vocational graduates was about RMB 2,000 in 2013, which was equivalent to the income of migrant workers (X. Li & Zhao, 2016). In 2016, about 50% of SVS graduates had a

starting salary of less than RMB 2,000 (Secondary Vocational Education Research Team, 2017). In 2019, a national survey showed that the employment of SVS graduates was mainly concentrated in manual labour-oriented industries, and the older the graduates, the more likely they were to be forced to leave their jobs. Their average salary was less than 60% of the average level of urban workers, and more than 25% of graduates earned less than RMB 3,000 per month (Ouyang & Bu, 2020).

Vocational graduates, like migrant workers, also lack access to the social insurance otherwise stipulated by law. In 2009, only 60% of the companies in Shanghai paid three insurances and one housing fund for their employees, and this package was the maximum offered by any company (S. Chen, 2012). In less developed areas, the coverage of social insurance is even worse. For example, a survey conducted in Sichuan and Shandong in 2014 showed that only 46.3% of SVS graduates had signed formal labour contracts, and of the graduates who had signed one, 16.7% were labour dispatches. The remaining (i.e., 37%) signed no formal labour contract at all. In terms of social insurance, 18.2% of the respondents had no social insurance, and only 23.8% had three insurances (X. Zeng & Wang, 2018). Official data in 2016 revealed that 11.32% of SVS graduates across the country had not signed labour contracts, 15.39% had no social insurance, and only 31.56% had three insurances (Secondary Vocational Education Research Team, 2017).

Finally, even though most SVS graduates do obtain a job after graduation, employment among SVS graduates is unstable. This situation is related to various shortcomings of their employment, such as low wages, poor social welfare, and poor career prospects. Due to the low mobility between the two types of labour markets, SVS graduates often job-hop, rarely achieve promotion, and have limited room for career development (X. Li & Zhao, 2016). A survey in Shanghai showed that 42% of SVS graduates changed jobs at least once within a year in 2009 (S. Chen, 2012). Another survey found that, in the same year, more than half of the SVS graduates in Xinjiang had changed their professions within 6 months, and less than 10% had stayed in their original position gained after graduation for four years or more (Qiu, Sun, & Ma, 2014). Other provinces such as Shandong, Jiangsu have reported similar findings (Z. Cui, 2012; G. Liu, 2015; Xia Zhao, 2014). In 2019, a national

survey revealed that barely more than a quarter of SVS graduates have worked in their original positions for less than one year, and that less than a quarter of graduates have worked for more than three years at the same work organization.

The existing research shows that the current employment situation of SVS graduates is not optimistic. Most of them only manage to enter the secondary labour market, where they engage in low-income and unstable jobs; these jobs make it difficult for them to obtain the status of urban residents, let alone to become new workers who can navigate between urban and rural areas. Vocational secondary education has hardly fulfilled the expectations of rural students and their families about changing their social status. This failure poses a very important question: how does vocational education and training reproduce social inequalities in China?

## 1.2 Research Background

In this section, I describe the macro social environment in which students live, which is the starting point for my research. It was observed that unfair social mechanisms exist in economic, political and cultural fields, and contribute to students' social reproduction.

### *1.2.1 Economic Take-off and China's Labour Regime*

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has integrated into the global capitalist system, allowing foreign capital to enter and providing investors with a large number of cheap labourers. China has gradually become the world's factory and is famous for its economic miracle (Pun, 2005). China's manufacturing industry's share of the world outputs increased from 2.7% in 1990 to 19.8% in 2010, with China ranking first in the world, and the country has maintained this ranking ever since. Also in 2010, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) placed second in the world, up from 11th in 1978. Hundreds of millions of migrant workers have taken part in this market-oriented industrialization process (Y. Guo & Huang, 2014). With the rapid trend of privatization, the iron rice bowl of the *danwei* (單位, *work unit*) system was broken, and the labour market and a new system of flexible and contractual employment were developed. The conditions of production in the factory have changed, and the intensity of labour has increased (Taylor, 2000). In line with the expansion and accumulation of capital, the state has introduced policies to keep the wages of migrant

workers at a relatively low level and to restrict workers' rights to associate and strike (F. Chen, 2016). Since the early 2000s, in partial response to workers' protests, the state has raised minimum wages to attempt to improve workers' lives and boost domestic consumption. However, in the nearly 20 years since the late 1980s, the ratio of migrant workers' wages to formal workers' wages continued to decline, reaching a minimum of 48.5% in 2008 (L. Feng, 2013). On the whole, migrant workers suffered from low wages, prolonged working hours, repressive management, occupational diseases and injuries, and unstable employment (Pun, 2004).

In the past decade, the proportion of migrant workers engaged in the tertiary industry relative to manufacturing has increased. By 2019, the total number of migrant workers reached 291 million, and the proportion of migrant workers engaged in the tertiary industry was 51%, which exceeded the proportion of migrant workers engaged in the secondary industry, which is 48.6% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020c). Migrant workers transferred from positions in low-end manufacturing industries to low-skilled and manual labour-based positions in the service industry, such as food delivery, accommodation, catering, and retail. However, transferring from the secondary to the tertiary industry does not necessarily mean a significant improvement in work conditions (P. Zhang, Zhang, & Yuan, 2019). Migrant workers still face problems such as informal employment, high labour intensity, long working hours, lack of rights protection, and limited promotion opportunities (S. Li & Wu, 2020; Z. Shi, 2017).

At the same time, due to the restrictions of the *hukou* system despite some relaxation, migrant workers must deal with not only a large disparity in starting salary compared with urban employees, but also a low salary growth rate, which leaves a considerable number of migrant workers unable to achieve the same wage level as urban employees throughout their lifetime (X. Chen & Xu, 2014). In urban life, migrant workers are treated as second-class citizens and cannot enjoy the same rights and social welfare as urban citizens. They lack equal access to medical, educational, and cultural resources, and they face discrimination and social exclusion (K. W. Chan, 1996; L. Shi, 2008).

Researchers have critically pointed out that the rapid growth of China's economy has

in part benefited from systematic and harsh exploitation of migrant workers. This exploitation is embedded in a labour regime jointly promoted by the state and capital since the market reform and opening up. This labour regime uses coercive workplace discipline to squeeze value from migrant workers in the labour process to support the development of industrialization and urbanization (Bieler & Lee, 2017; A. Chan & Zhu, 2003; Leong & Pratap, 2011). To ensure continued low cost of labour and to maximize capital accumulation, the regime further excludes migrant workers from urban life by maintaining an institutional structure and social order wherein migrant workers are viewed as inferior to urban citizens (C. C. Fan, 2007; Friedmann, 2005; Tang & Yang, 2008). This Chinese labour regime is likely what rural SVS students must wrestle with throughout their internship and employment.

### *1.2.2 Developmentalism and Social Stratification*

In 1978, the Communist Party and the state decided to shift their focus to the economy and modernization upon realizing how poor the social conditions were after the Cultural Revolution. During this shift, developmentalism ideology gradually formed (J. Yu, 2010). Economic growth came to be regarded not only as the central task but also as the most important and urgent political need. Developmentalism ideology profoundly affected China's major transitional policies, development direction, and people's production and lifestyle (Zhaotian He, 2010). It was believed that once economic conditions were improved, problems in other areas would be solved. In terms of the fiscal system, a high proportion of the total fiscal expenditure was spent on production in order to directly promote the growth of material production. Regarding the appointment of cadres, up to present day China's economic performance has become increasingly important in cadre assessment, and GDP growth has become the primary pursuit of governments at all levels in the country. This new approach to assessment contrasts starkly with the previous emphasis on political elements and political consciousness as the gold standard for cadre assessment (J. Yu & Shi, 2008).

For decades, developmentalism has contributed to fast-speed economic growth, innovation and technological upgrading, and poverty reduction but also brought about many social problems (Jingzhong Ye & Sun, 2012). Researchers have criticized developmentalism for pursuing one-dimensional development rather than balanced and coordinated development

across multiple fields and values. Developmentalism seriously ignores the humanist dimension, alienating the practice of development in a way that runs contrary to human freedom and emancipation (P. Huang, 2000; Jirong Yang, 2010; Guangjun Zhang, 2009). Especially since the 1990s, the state has pursued the path of neoliberalism, adopting a series of policies to further improve the level of marketization and privatization, adjust the distribution system, and prioritize efficiency (So, 2014). Under the guidance of this development model, social differentiation is no longer regarded as a violation of socialistic principles; rather, it is accepted and even encouraged as a necessary process of modern development (Meisner, 1999). The reform of policies has allowed the market to present new life opportunities for individuals; the state has encouraged people to seize this chance to achieve self-development, improve their living standards, and accumulate wealth (Whyte, 2010). The principles of generating income and increasing efficiency have guided the organization of not only the economic field but also the fields of medicine, public health, housing, education, and culture, among others, influencing public service delivery in various sectors; the result is great variation in the content and quality of the public resources accessible to different regions and groups (Qin, 2020).

One of the consequences of developmentalism has been the rapid widening of the income gap between classes in Chinese society. The overall Gini coefficient and the Gini coefficients between rural and urban areas rose from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and the characteristics of these Gini coefficients were highly consistent with the reform trajectories (Y. Cheng, 2007). From 2003 to 2016, the Gini coefficient never fell below 0.46 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017), which exceeded the internationally recognized warning line of 0.4. In addition, the income gap between different sectors is wide. For example, among urban non-private organizations in 2019, the industries with the highest average annual wages are information transmission, software, and information technology services, while the industries with the lowest average annual wages are agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery. The average annual salary of the former is about four times that of the latter (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020a). Meanwhile, the income gap between different positions is also quite large. Taking enterprises above designated size in the eastern region as an example in 2019,

the average annual salary of middle-level and above management personnel exceeded RMB 180,000, which was about 1.5 times the salary of professional and technical personnel, 2.3 times that of clerical staff, and nearly 3 times that of social production, living services, and manufacturing staff. In addition to wage income, property income such as rental income and investment income from financial assets are also important factors driving the expansion of the income gap among residents (Ning, Luo, & Qi, 2016).

The widening income gap between urban and rural residents has also exacerbated social inequities (Y. Xie & Zhou, 2014). After 1990, the increase in rural residents' income was significantly lower than that of urban citizens' income; in the following fifteen years, the absolute income difference between urban and rural residents increased by nearly eight times (S. Li, 2007). Moreover, urban residents enjoy great advantages in social insurance, public housing, subsidies, and other public services, compounding the expansion of the urban-rural income gap (S. Li & Luo, 2007).

With the drastic transformation of the economic system and rapid social differentiation, China's class consolidation has become more apparent in the past decade (C. Zhang, 2019). People with vested interest have begun to consolidate the benefits and advantages obtained in the reform, social openness has declined, and opportunities for intergenerational mobility have decreased (L. Li, Shi, & Zhu, 2018). Influenced by factors such as the *hukou* system, social capital, and educational resources, the tie between children's social class and their parents' social class has increased, and therefore the upward mobility of young people from disadvantaged families is hindered (Z. Xiong, 2013). Upward social mobility has grown slowly, while downward mobility has become faster, and there are cases of downward mobility of the middle class and marginalization of the underclass. Class boundaries have also become clearer, and sharper distinctions have emerged between manual and non-manual workers and between workers with or without *bianzhi* (Gu, 2015). In such social contexts, SVS students who come from families with lower socio-economic status and have less access to socio-political resources are more likely to stay at the bottom and find it difficult to move up.

### *1.2.3 Mass Migration between Undeveloped and Developed Areas*

In the early stage of reform and opening up, China implemented an urban-biased development strategy; as coastal regions were encouraged to develop first, development in those places is more advanced than in the inland regions. From the 1980s to the 1990s, national policies were greatly tilted towards coastal regions; special economic zones were established in coastal regions, which helped with opening to the outside world, and domestic and foreign capital, natural resources, and professional talents were transferred to coastal areas (Jie Liu, 2003). During this period, the state also gradually adjusted its policies on labour mobility, allowing the rural labour force to migrate in an orderly manner under regulation (Hougang Li, 2012). Attracted by the opportunities brought about by the rapid development of coastal areas and large cities, a vast number of rural labourers began to leave their villages. The structure of central and western provinces as labour-exporting areas and eastern coastal areas (especially Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta) and developed cities as labour-importing areas began to take shape (Guan, 1997).

By the 2010s, the imbalance of regional development in China had become obvious. At the beginning of the 21st century, the central government moved to implement a series of strategies to rejuvenate the central, western, and northeast regions; despite some improvement, under the influence of accumulative conditions such as industrial agglomeration, foreign investment, and technological progress, the overall disparity between the inland regions and the developed eastern regions did not drastically narrow (Jun Liu & Xu, 2010; Yan Wei & Gong, 2012). Moreover, as fierce market competition has only intensified, local governments and enterprises in eastern regions are pursuing economic benefits, making it is difficult to respond to the national call to help the development of the inland regions (J. Zhang & Gao, 2019). The huge differences in economic development have only compounded the imbalance in public services, social welfare, and infrastructure construction (Zhiyan Sun & Hou, 2019).

Data from the 2010 national census showed that the general trend of the migrant workers flowing to the eastern coastal regions remains unchanged, with the eastern regions absorbing 52.9% of the country's total migrant labourers, far more than the number of the central, western or northeastern regions. Since 2015, China's annual migrant population has

remained at around 240 million, which is equivalent to one of every six people being a migrant worker (Central People's Government, 2019). The main purposes of migration are to obtain employment opportunities, increase income, and accumulate human capital (Y. Ma, Chen, & Shi, 2018). On the one hand, with the commercialization of agricultural production and daily necessities, farmers have entered the market system in pursuit of monetary income (Jingzhong Ye, 2011). On the other hand, both official and capital forces have encouraged farmers to complete the task of modernization. Both at the economic level and at the cultural level, rural areas have been deprived of value by the modernization process aimed at urban development (H. Yan, 2005; Jingzhong Ye, 2012). At present, a wish to escape from agriculture and leave the countryside has become common in rural communities, and leaving home to work has become a habitual choice of rural young people (Jingzhong Ye & Wang, 2018).

Rural migrant workers face many obstacles in trying to find better opportunities even though they are accustomed to urban employment (Qian & Zhu, 2018). While they make great contributions to the development of the cities, many local governments are reluctant to increase local public finances to provide them with wages, social welfare, and public services on par with locals (X. Qiao, 2019; Ziduo Sun, 2005). Their social reproduction has been referred to as "a type of separation": they work and make money in cities, but their wages are often not enough to move all of their family members to the city. Their reproductive labour such as supporting the elderly, raising offspring, and caring for children's education generally takes place in rural areas, where the cost of living is lower than in the big cities (Yuan Shen, 2006). Rural family members have to travel frequently between urban and rural areas, suffering from unequal access to citizenship rights and interests and, not rarely, mental health problems (Guangsheng Zhang & Tian, 2018). Due to long-term inequitable resource allocation, large-scale rural labour migration between developed and underdeveloped regions continues today. After entering the urban labour market, rural vocational school students are likely to have to travel between their workplace in cities and their hometown in the countryside.

### 1.3 Literature Gap and the Purpose of the Study

To gain a deeper understanding of the dilemma of social mobility for SVS students, we need to look into the social contexts that shape vocational education and the learning environment of these students. Previous studies have paid very limited attention to secondary vocational education and SVS students from a sociological perspective. Research has mainly described the social phenomenon of vocational school students struggling as rural youths or migrant youths having difficulty in escaping the social class of their parents. Some studies have analysed the role of the state, family, education system, schooling, and other structural factors in social reproduction (Liang, 2009; X. Ma, 2014; X. Yan, 2013; X. Zhou, 2015). However, these studies have two limitations. First, few of these studies have provided sufficient understanding of the processes and mechanisms of social reproduction, lacking in particular any detailed analysis of the vocational education that students receive. Vocational education has rich practices and internships and involves many social roles, all of which could have a complex impact on students. Second, these studies have largely failed to examine the role of students' agency in perpetuating social reproduction. Existing literature has mainly focused on student resistance in schools and factories, perceiving that resistance as the main manifestation of students' agency (Pun & Koo, 2019; Woronov, 2012; Yinghui Zhang & Zhou, 2020; X. Zhou, 2015). Some studies have noted that the attitudes and logic behind the resistance of disadvantaged youths in China are distinct from the counter-school culture observed in Western classic studies; however, these researchers have not examined how these attitudes and logic are shaped by important social forces such as vocational education (Ling, 2015; X. Zhou, 2011). More importantly, the existing literature has paid insufficient attention to students' experiences and feelings during their studies and internships, ignoring their aspirations for a better life.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to study the mechanisms of social reproduction among rural youths receiving secondary vocational education and the role of these youths' agency in this process under the influence of the social structure. Compared to previous studies, my study on SVS students highlights the following three aspects:

First, rather than viewing rural students as passive individuals who are driven by

structural factors, this study holds the view that they are rational and creative subjects. This research provides an in-depth look at the students' visions, insights, and coping strategies as they constantly negotiate with the various external constraints they encounter in their studies and internships, especially when they find that reality is inconsistent with the beliefs they hold.

Second, this study further analyses why vocational education, which was expected to help students achieve upward mobility, has thus far failed to do so. I will elaborate on the skills, knowledge, and perceptions that teachers and administrators provide to students and what impact these factors have on students.

Third, this research does not merely observe and identify students' disobedient behaviours, nor does it interpret resistance as the main form of student agency. This study focuses instead on digging deeply into the subjective perceptions of students in their studies and internships; while reflecting on students' agency, the study analyses which of these perceptions may lead to a weakening or even dissolution of resistance.

Guided by the three aspects mentioned above, this study focuses on students' aspirations about education, future careers, and their prospects after graduation. It illustrates what factors changed these aspirations and how the changes influenced the students. The thesis argues that structural determinants reproduce the social inequality in this population by shaping students' aspirations and, more importantly, students' capacity to aspire.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

First, this research will offer insight into the agency of rural youths and SVS students in China. Taking a single SVS in a county in Southwest China as a case, this research reveals how rural students navigate the meritocratic educational system, exploitative labour regime, and rural-urban divide, and how they adjust their imagined future and actions towards that future to reflect their subjectivity, enthusiasm, and creativity.

Second, my project intends to address the gap of social reproduction research in educational sociology. Through field materials, this research demonstrates that in-depth analysis of the contents and changes of students' aspirations is important for understanding

the process and mechanism of social reproduction and, in turn, for gaining a new perspective of social inequality in this population. The findings suggest that the social mechanism of inequity in contemporary China may be covert because the relationship between aspirations and structural factors may be different from the relationship in a Western context, as indicated by previous studies focusing on Western populations. In addition, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on vocational education and the underlying ideologies, student experience, and student feelings in education; the study may thereby illuminate how students negotiate the meanings of success and growth in the course of their learning and internship experiences.

Finally, this study stresses the significance and urgency of adjusting policies related to vocational education and improving specific teaching practices. The findings challenge the misguided faith in policy and previous research claiming that disadvantaged groups' failure to achieve social mobility was due to their lack of aspirations. It is critical for the state, schools, rural communities, and academia to increase their awareness of vocational students' capacity to aspire. Policymakers and decisionmakers must provide better resources and environments and more equal opportunities for development to disadvantaged youth groups, including rural vocational school students.

### 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis contains eight chapters. Chapter 2 systematically reviews the literature that guides this study. First, it introduces studies on schooling and social reproduction, reviewing the classic structure–agency dichotomy and reflecting on the limitations of these two approaches. Second, the concept of aspiration is introduced as a conceptual bridge of structure–agency dualism. The definition of aspiration and influencing forces such as family, school, and dominant discourses are further elaborated, and two competing perspectives on aspiration among disadvantaged youths are introduced. Then I review the previous literature on the role of aspiration in social reproduction; this literature underlies my key argument, which is that the interaction between the practices of social agents and the structure of society needs to be fully considered when exploring the mechanisms of social reproduction. Third, I review the research about how social reproduction impacts Chinese SVS students; in doing so,

I identify the research gap concerning the agency, particularly the aspirations, of these students. Based on the review of existing studies, I finally put forward the three research questions. These questions examine the contents of the students' aspirations, how the aspirations change during the schooling process, and the role that the aspirations play in reproducing social inequality. The theories from Macleod and Zipin are elaborated to form my analytical framework for exploring these research questions.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology. I use ethnography to explore students' lived experience and aspirations in schooling. I present the field site, which is a secondary vocational technical school in a county in Yunnan province, southwestern China, including the historical development of the school and my research participants. After a detailed discussion of my role as the researcher, I define and elaborate how I carried out participant observation, conducted in-depth interviews, and collected documentary data. I also outline Wolcott's three steps of description, analysis, and interpretation, which I used to analyse the data. Then I describe my methods to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, that is, its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I discuss the possible influences of my personal background and position on my ethnographic research process and results.

Chapters 4 to 7 present the results of the research, detailing the aspirations of the students and how those aspirations have been affected by school practices. Chapter 4 presents the three main aspirations that students had for vocational education: they wanted to gain a good academic credential, learn useful skills, and find an opportunity to work in a big city. Then this chapter analyses parents' permissive attitudes in the process of students choosing vocational education and forming these aspirations. Realizing that their children may struggle to achieve upward mobility through the academic track, parents regarded vocational education as a helpless choice. I describe the characteristics of students' aspirations and explain the reasons for the formation of these aspirations. Similar to their parents, students perceived themselves to be the product of a failed and divided education system, so students' aspirations were not especially ambitious, but more passive and restrained. This chapter ends with an analysis about the relationship between students' specific aspirations and students'

situation and overall desire for a better life.

The next three chapters, Chapters 5 to 7, illustrate how each of the three aspirations of the students changed while the students attended vocational education and the possible reasons why. Chapter 5 outlines the changes related to the first aspiration, that is, the aspiration to obtain a higher academic credential. To begin with, the chapter describes the contradiction that the students experienced in vocational education. On the one hand, teachers instilled achievement ideology in the students, insisting that everyone can find a good job through hard work. On the other hand, the students found that secondary vocational education could only grant them access to low-level positions such as assembly line operators. It was almost impossible to reach managerial positions, which require a higher degree. Then I present the students' subjective understanding of this contradiction, the students' resulting resistance, and their adjustments to the aspiration. After experiencing the contradiction, many students showed self-abandoning resistant behaviours (such as not listening in class or not following classroom rules) out of frustration. The students did not question the logic of achievement ideology. Instead, they generally attributed the bad situation to themselves and believed that they should or should have worked harder. Moreover, they believed that there were still possibilities for achieving success. These alternative possibilities prompted the new aspiration to obtain any qualifications that might let them make money as quickly as possible. By presenting how the students negotiated within the meritocratic education system and the hierarchical workplace system, this chapter demonstrates how achievement ideology hindered students from understanding the mechanism of social inequality and predisposed them to retain optimism about the future.

Chapter 6 focuses on the second aspiration in my analysis: to learn skills. The beginning of this chapter describes another paradox. Namely, in the early days of schooling, students expected to learn skills through vocational education; however, because the students generally ended up learning only basic skills at the operator level, the students ceased to believe that learning skills was important. I endeavour to unravel this paradox as I detail the students' experiences, particularly the unfavourable circumstances in the school and in the workplace where they had their internships, such as poor training equipment, short learning

time, and mismatch of job positions and majors. It is reasoned that these obstacles impeded students' mastery of skills. More importantly, students' attitudes towards and understanding of learning skills underwent a fundamental change after these unpleasant experiences. The importance of learning other "things" increased and became their new aspiration. Next, I describe the three main "things" the students thought they had acquired through vocational education. First, they learned *zuoren (做人,doing personhood)*; in other words, they became more disciplined, more polite, and developed habits and attitudes that were more in line with the requirements of modern enterprises. Second, they improved their interpersonal skills, including language skills and emotional intelligence, which were also beneficial to their performance at work. Third, they accumulated more work and life experience, which they felt allowed them to make better preparations for the future. In this process, growth ideology was internalized by students. The emphasis on growth made the students more aware of the need to endure hardships and failures, hence more likely to conform to and accept the cruel reality.

Chapter 7 goes beyond school to examine students' uncertain and shifting aspiration to leave their hometown and work in a big city. Students were encouraged to work in big cities by both the school and their rural community, as it was believed big cities would offer better life opportunities. However, students' experiences in internships made them aware of the obstacles to working and living in big cities, such as the high cost of living, the lack of social capital or useful networks, and the heightened sense of rootlessness or displacement they were likely to experience. At the same time, students were also driven by social forces that made them consider returning to their hometowns. For example, they were unwilling to engage in low-end and repetitive jobs in the city. The growing discourse about returning home to support mass entrepreneurship made them consider starting their own businesses in their hometown. The need to take care of their families and the emotional and financial support the students received from their families also motivated them to choose jobs close to home. The geographical restrictions of the majors they chose also affected their choice. These factors all influenced students' decision to stay in their hometown or seek work in a big city. After dissecting the experiences and perceptions of students who were caught between urban and rural areas, this chapter argues that achievement ideology and growth ideology blurred the

boundaries between success and failure, reality and future, and prompted students to conform to and accept the uncertainty of life caused by structural deprivation, forcing the students to adjust their aspirations constantly in order to obtain self-consistency.

Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, summarizes the key empirical findings of the study. This chapter sheds light on the interaction between structural factors and individual agency, and it examines how this interaction perpetuates the reproduction of social inequality for rural students. The chapter summarizes the structural disadvantages of vocational education and highlights how achievement ideology and growth ideology pervade educational practices and thereby impact students. Both ideologies provided explanations for the collapse of students' original aspirations and created new hopes and goals for them. Moreover, the chapter illustrates students' proclivity, expressions, and practices in terms of aspiration and resistance. On the one hand, students actively sought to escape their current situation and flexibly adjusted their strategies and aspirations despite being in a social structure with extremely limited opportunities; on the other hand, the students constantly failed to question the causes of their individual plights, which diminished their ability to process discontent and suppressed their resistance. By exploring the content, characteristics, and influencing factors of the students' aspirations, the thesis argues that students' weak capacity to aspire may be an important reason why students are struggling to change their social status. The notion of capacity to aspire is key to understanding the mechanism of social reproduction among rural SVS students. Finally, practical implications and recommendations for future studies are provided based on the findings of this study.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews major structural approach theories of education and their effect on reproduction of social inequality. Due to the determinism of the structural approach, researchers have turned to individual agency, particularly in resistance to educational practice. After summarizing the strengths and limitations of resistance theory, this chapter introduces and highlights the importance of the concept of aspiration, which is "a conceptual bridge over the theoretical rift of the structure-agency dualism" (Macleod, 2009, p. 22).

In the second section, this chapter reviews the concept of aspiration, as well as two perspectives on aspirations of disadvantaged youths. The first perspective is a deficit view that holds that the aspirations of disadvantaged young people are relatively weak, hindering their upward mobility. This perspective has been refuted by researchers who have suggested an alternative perspective that the aspirations of disadvantaged young people are not weak, though it does not necessarily lead to proportionately high educational attainment due to numerous structural constraints. The chapter then summarizes structural factors that shape and influence aspirations, including family, school, and discourses. This chapter then reviews the existing literature on the role of aspirations in social reproduction. For most disadvantaged young people, aspirations alone might not be sufficient to allow them to move upward under the influence of structural constraints. However, in order to understand the complex mechanisms of social reproduction, it is necessary to fully consider the awareness and deliberation of the social agent, as well as the coexistence and interaction of practice, action, and structure.

The third section presents the literature on social reproduction among Chinese SVS students. Studies have found that the vast majority of SVS students replicate the conditions of their parents after graduation and enter the secondary labour market, which is characterized as low-paid, unstable, and lacking in social security. Structural constraints from schooling, the education system, family, and country play a vital role in facilitating social reproduction. Moreover, in the face of these constraints, students are have been seen to resist, and not cooperate with, the schools and enterprises. These resistance behaviours reflect students' agency and creativity. However, the resistance is often expressed as self-abandonment after

they realize that they are unable to move upward. This resistance is also lacking counter-school culture. With the combination of structural factors and self-abandonment, students cannot escape the outcomes of social reproduction. Aspiration is rarely studied among Chinese SVS students and little is known on its role in social reproduction.

Finally, three research questions look into the original aspirations at the beginning of the vocational education, the changes those aspirations undergo during schooling and the influencing factors involved, and the role of aspirations in social reproduction among Chinese SVS students. MacLeod's (2009) analysis of regulation of aspiration and Zipin et al.'s (2015) three types of aspirations are introduced to formulate the analytical framework, offering a useful perspective for answering the research questions.

## 2.1 Schooling and Social Reproduction Theory

### *2.1.1 The Rise of a Critical Paradigm in the Sociology of Education*

Whether education can change the destiny of students is an issue discussed in the sociology of education. In the three decades following World War II, the field of educational sociology was dominated by structural functionalism, which posits that education maintains social order and allow society to function more effectively through socialization, social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation (Demaine, 1981; Mercer & Covey, 1980; Schildkraut, 2005; Schneider & Silverman, 2010). Researchers have been optimistic about the role of education and argued that education had become an important bridge for intergenerational mobility; the influence of family background factors had been reduced (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Heaton & Lawson, 1996). In the 1960s, along with the Black, Women, Minority Movement for social recognition in Western society and concerns about equality, functionalism theorists were challenged and regarded as blind to social stratification, contradictory interests, and class exploitation, being considered conservative in politics (Blackledge & Hunt, 2019; Wexler, 1976). Some surveys have found that, for minority groups, the opportunities provided by schools fail to lift them out of poverty and widespread discrimination; that is, education cannot narrow the achievement gap between different groups (Jencks, 1988; Marsden, 2005).

The debates surrounding the function of education have stimulated a systematic reflection on the research agenda; other schools in mainstream sociology have begun to develop, and adopted a more critical position. Some researchers have adopted Marxist theories on reproduction, arguing that the goal of schooling is to perpetuate the social relations of capitalism (Esgin, 2013; Shimbori, 1979). Other researchers have focused on the more complex, subtle relationship between education and power, seeing education as helping to perpetuate unequal social relations through culture and language. The analyses vary but have shared that education directly maintains or reproduces capitalism (Blackledge & Hunt, 2019), rendering students of their respective class backgrounds to obtain jobs, positions, and status similar to those of their parents (Kurt, 2015).

In general, social reproduction theory holds the view that schools are not places where students get equal opportunities, instead perpetuating social inequalities, and analyses how social inequality is reproduced from one generation to the next and how education may contribute to this process, generating new approaches for studying education and its links to social inequality (Booher-Jennings, 2008; Hill, Macrine, & Gabbard, 2008; Liston, 1988).

Educational inequality refers to access to education and conditions not being equally distributed among different groups, with disadvantaged groups having fewer opportunities. Social reproduction refers to the fact that education transmits social inequality across generations.

### *2.1.2 Theories on Structural Factors and Education*

#### 2.1.2.1 Deterministic Approaches in Social Reproduction Theories

Deterministic approaches emerged following the application of Marxian social and political theory in the field of education. Althusser (1971), a key representative of structuralist Marxism, points out that the school is the executor of class domination, assigning different knowledge and dispositions to students of different classes through ideological practices, Soon after, neo-Marxists from France, the United States, and Latin America also noticed the close relationship between education and the economic field and drew a similar conclusion that the education system contributes to the reproduction of capitalist ideals (R. A. Morrow & Torres, 1995). These authors further applied Althusser's theory to the analysis of the role of

school, arguing that education is a direct reflection of capitalist values and production relations and that schools educate students based on their families' social standing (Howell & McBroom, 1982; Paulston, 1995). These ideas are collectively referred to as the "Correspondence Principle", which represent the social reproduction perspective that had a profound impact on the sociology of education and informed numerous studies in the following decades (Gottesman, 2013; D. L. Swartz, 2003). Well-known theorists of Correspondence Principle include Bowles and Gintis (1976), who, in their seminal book *Schooling in Capitalism America*, argue that there is correspondence between schools and the capitalism system; that is, schools could assign children to different division of labour positions and classes, allowing class hierarchies to be rationalized. This research laid the foundation for the study on the relationship between social division and class reproduction, as well as the dominated group's acceptance of control and domination (M. Apple, 2013b).

Influenced by these studies, Apple (2013) focused on the connection between social reproduction and macro-systems and introduced the hegemony theory of Gramsci and Williams into the discussion of education and social reproduction. Apple (2013) emphasized the need to examine the three major components of the education system, namely school organization, knowledge, and educators, and how are they influenced by the structure of social power. Apple also explored the role of actors' life world, consciousness and common sense assumptions in maintaining unequal social relations (Mahmoudi, Chadegani, Eghbali, & Amini, 2015). He pointed out that the dominant class does not impose a culture and ideology on the dominated, but instead maintains power relations by absorbing and transforming the culture of the dominated class (M. Apple, 1978).

Compared with the above studies that emphasize the factor of economy and class, Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory presents a more complicated, nuanced relationship between education, power, and the reproduction of inequality. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) went beyond the analytical framework of the Correspondence Principle by exploring the specific mechanism by which school education has led to social reproduction and examining how social structure influences the individual agency (Collins, 2009; Reay, 2004). The authors noticed that the dominant class in modern society tends to use symbolic violence,

which means that this class indoctrinates a specific meaning into the dominated without revealing the power relationship, which ensures that the dominated group would accept the definition of the social world that is in line with the interests of the dominant (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). From this perspective, school is a symbolic institution that spreads the dominant culture, and pedagogic work is an activity that continuously conveys symbolic violence, shaping the habitus of the educated. The concept of habitus, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), refers to an integrated system of durable, transposable attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions that are internalized in individuals (Nash, 1990). The habitus of the descendants of disadvantaged groups is developed in highly limited sources of socialization, meaning that it is not conducive to their upward mobility and integration into upper classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In sum, Bourdieu's major contribution to social reproduction in education involves highlighting the role of culture in perpetuating unequal class relations: school education uses cultural reproduction to consolidate the dominant power of a class with a valuable culture, and the possession of economic capital alone does not necessarily play a significant role (D. Swartz, 2012).

Another key approach to social reproduction has drawn attention to the role of language and communication in family and schools (Bernstein, 1971, 1986). Bernstein's linguistic code theory suggests that there are systematic differences in the way in which families of different classes use languages because they have different positions in the social structure and different social relations. For example, the middle class uses elaborated codes, in which the language has greater variation in both syntax and vocabulary and provides more possibilities to express individual thoughts and feelings. In contrast, the working class uses restricted codes, in which the language structure is simple, the vocabulary is repeated, and the meaning expressed in language that is much less easily understood by people outside of the group (Bernstein & Henderson, 1969). Bernstein (1971) further contended that the different languages formed in a family may cause children to develop different attitudes towards schooling. For example, working-class children are used to public language that lacks logic and is full of short imperative sentences, whereas middle-class children usually use formal language characterized by a gentler tone and conditional statements. However, school

teaching predominantly uses formal language, making it challenging for working-class children who are only able to express public language (Berstein, 1971). The different perceptual orderings brought about by the two language forms directly affect students' experiences in school and further affect their educational achievements (Bernstein, 1970).

#### 2.1.2.2 Limitations with the Theories that Focus on the Structural Factors and Social Reproduction

Starting from the works of Bowls and Gintis, deterministic perspectives in social reproduction theory have received significant criticism (Giroux, 1983; Levinson & Holland, 1996). First, when explaining why schools reproduce dominant social relations, early studies follow Marx's classic idea that the schools, as part of the superstructure, rise out of the economic structure of society, which has always been theoretically controversial and aroused discussion (Au, 2006). The deterministic theorists have heavily emphasized the effects of class differences, particularly the differences in material resources on the perpetuation of inequality. It is assumed that there is a direct correspondence between the needs of the capitalist economy and the outcomes of education, which have been criticized as too deterministic, mechanistic, linear, and lacking of an in-depth, detailed analysis of the process leading to the reproduction of social status (S. Davies, 1995a; Hogan, 1979).

Second, critics have argued that early critical research had not fully considered the independence and complexity of the education system (Giroux, 1980), and the lack of insight into the education system had prevented researchers from transcending the diagnostic analysis of the idea that education reproduced inequality (J.-H. Wang, 2018). They treat the school as a black box that could be easily manipulated by external structural forces and conclude that the inevitable outcome is maintaining the status quo, ignoring the potential of activist teachers and professionals to change the system. As a result, these researchers were biased in their theoretical explanations and pessimistic about educational practice (Demaine, 2003; Gleeson, 1978). Later researchers have noticed that the education system has relative autonomy, and the internal structure, institutions, rules, and practices of the education system should be taken into account when considering social reproduction (M. Apple, 1980; Berstein, 1971). Moreover, a substantial component of the power in the educational field is based on cultural

capital, and those who only possess economic capital may not succeed in achieving power in the school system (Nash, 1990). The education system exerts an independent influence on the reproduction of unequal class relations, and the existence of schools means that the capitalist economic institution is not the only driver of social class stratification (Tunnell, 1978).

Finally, deterministic approaches neglect discussions of agency. Therefore, the theorists have failed to show how the school simultaneously serves as a cultural site for maintaining, and resisting, the values and beliefs of the dominant class. Researchers have been unable to adequately explain why some students from disadvantageous backgrounds achieve upward mobility (Giroux, 1980, 1983; MacLeod, 2009; P. E. Willis, 1977). In the research, class and social reproduction occur entirely according to the will of the elites, while the lower class has no agency at all and is at the mercy of the dominant class in achieving outcomes unfavourable to their own development (Willis, 1977). For example, although Apple has repeatedly emphasized that the school does not uniformly indoctrinate consciousness that serves the interests of the dominant classes among students (Weis, McCarthy, & Dimitriadis, 2006), his theory of hegemony has been criticized as being overly deterministic as if the ideological control were so thorough and powerful that the dominated could not even feel the oppression (M. Apple, 2014). In terms of Bourdieu, critics have asserted that Bourdieu equates culture with capital, arguing that the role of culture was only to help its possessors pursue higher material and symbolic returns (Shirley, 1986; P. E. Willis, 1977). However, the culture of actors is also likely to be appropriated by the dominated class as a resource to resist the hegemony of the dominant class (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003; Gorder, 1980). Giroux (1983) and other scholars (Gorder, 1980) have also criticized that Bourdieu portrayed the habitus as shaped by the educational experiences in learners' early years, during which they can only inherit the original class status, ignoring many other possibilities of actors in practice (Giroux, 1983; Gorder, 1980). Similarly, Bernstein et al.'s research on linguistic reproduction had a number of limitations, such as overlooking the subjectivity of young people and underestimating the influence of teachers on school education (Everhart, 1983; McNeil, 1983).

### *2.1.3 Agency, Lived Culture, and Resistance*

Researchers have broadened their conception of the relationship between education and economy by looking into the school as a place of resistance, conflict, and struggle (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003). Scholars have attempted to introduce micro-level interpersonal interactions into the analysis, focus more on the relative autonomy of school and the lived culture of students, and understand the relationship between actors' consciousness and macro-level social inequality (Gewirtz & Gribb, 2003), constituting another main approach that develops from Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions in education (McGrew, 2011).

#### 2.1.3.1 Theories on Counter-school Culture and Resistance in Education

Resistance theory emphasizes the role of agency in reproduction and emerged after a series of studies that examined social and cultural reproduction in schools, transcending structural determinism in existing studies (Fernandes, 1988). Resistance theory takes the concept of conflict and resistance as a starting point to explore how agency manifests under structural constraints and provide a rich body of literature that understands the complex relationship between school education and mainstream society (Giroux, 1983). The central view of resistance theory is that, instead of passively accepting the dominant ideology through curricula and rules in schools, students take actions to oppose those powers that strengthen systemic inequalities, although these actions often lead to the reproduction of their own class status (M. Apple, 2013a; Harshman, 2013).

*Learning to Labor* by Willis (1997) is a widely cited foundational text in resistance theory and provides a model for the study of students' agency (Gordon, 1984). The subjects of the study were 12 white male students (Willis referred them as the "lads") with working-class origin in an industrial town in the United Kingdom. The ethnography in the first section of the book depicts the students' resistance behaviours in detail and provides an in-depth description of the working class's response to the capitalist schooling (S. Davies, 1995c). The "lads" expressed boredom and resistance to academic values and daily school practices by engaging in smoking, drinking, absenteeism, etc., dismissing the authority, norms, and academic requirements of the school, and despising students (i.e., "ear'oles") who abided by the rules and the teachers. However, when the participants mocked "ear'oles" and resisted

the authority of teachers, they also rejected mental labour. As a result, they could only leave school early and engage in physical labour in the same way as their parents, repeating the fate of the working class (Willis, 1977).

Willis (1977) further analysed the reasons for the participants' resistance behaviours. Because the participants' parents and neighbours inherited a working class social position, they did not believe that the school could provide opportunities for upward mobility. As a result, the participants felt that it was meaningless to perform well and study hard. In this way, the counter-school culture developed by students is rooted in the penetration of their position in the society and the function of the education system in reproducing unequal social relations. However, due to internal limitations (such as the acceptance of the social division of labour, sexism, and racism) and external limitations (such as the existence of dominant ideologies), the participants could only achieve a partial penetration of education and society. This partial penetration did not offer greater political possibilities, instead making participants willing to join the working-class labour force, thus maintaining the existing social structure and social relations (Willis, 1977). Through the notions of penetration and limitation, Willis found the paradox that students' resistance to the cultural hegemony of the dominant class contributed to social reproduction (Apple, 2013).

Willis (1977) has made significant contributions to the field of social reproduction in two ways, the first of which is highlighting the need to study culture as a relatively autonomous agent and stressing the important role of cultural reproduction in class reproduction (Trondman & Lund, 2018). The second way involves deepening and expanding the theory of reproduction by emphasizing human subjectivity. Willis' (1977) ethnography found that actors could creatively respond to the world of life inside and outside the school, and that their resistance was born of human agency. At the same time, he also points out that cultural penetrations are repressed and distorted by internal and external limitations, and unable to realize the full potential or conduct political articulation. In this sense, Willis does not abandon Marxism or reproduction, instead offering a more in-depth elaboration of the complex mechanism of reproduction (McGrew, 2011).

Informed by Willis, many studies have focused on working-class youth with different backgrounds in North America and Europe. These studies have used qualitative methods to understand the relationship between youth resistance and power and the process of contested reproduction (S. Davies, 1995c; Foley, 2010; Gordon, 1984; Trondman, Lund, & Lund, 2011). For example, McRobbie (1978) extended the resistance theory to women, arguing that working-class women were in different situations from men because they faced the dual oppression of capitalism and the patriarchal system. McRobbie studied a group of working-class female students in Birmingham, observed their lived culture, and describes in detail how they developed different forms of resistance. The findings reveal that girls observed the unattractive future of working-class women from their surroundings, making them disinterested in their schoolwork and indulged in visions of romantic love. The counter-school culture not only made girls unlikely to enter higher education and reproduce their subordinate position in class relations, but also reproduced their subordinate position in terms of gender relations. Another similar study was conducted by John U. Ogbu (1978), who attaches importance to the influence of culture on the process and outcomes of the schooling of minority students. He found that minorities who voluntarily immigrated to the United States were more optimistic about their future opportunities and more willing to accept the values of the dominant group, meaning that they aspired to achieve academic success. In contrast, the long-oppressed involuntary minorities in U.S. society perceive limited opportunities for upward mobility and were more likely to oppose the goals of schooling as a means of resisting dominant values. The difference in cultural identity resulted in different attitudes and behaviours in school, and the two groups of minorities obtained different academic achievement (John U. Ogbu, 1987). These studies have broadened and deepened resistance theory to provide fascinating, rich texts to compare the manifestations and consequences of student resistance under different social conditions so that we can obtain a better understanding of how specific social structures and the actions of disadvantaged groups constrain their opportunities of success.

In China, resistance theory provides a useful perspective to understand educational inequality. In order to more accurately understand the mechanism of social reproduction

among the disadvantaged youth, it is necessary for researchers to answer the following questions:

In schooling, what did the students express and penetrate?

In the process of reproducing social position, what roles did their agency and the specific institutional environment play?

#### 2.1.3.2 Limitations of Theories on Resistance

In studies exploring students' resistance to school authority, researchers have found that resistance theory has some limitations. First, there is a lack of clear criteria on what behaviours may be identified as resistance. Researchers have tended to see students' various disobedient behaviours as resistance, which confuse many behaviours with different causes, consequences, and political meaning (Giroux, 1983; Hargreaves, 1982). Critics have argued that it is necessary to pay attention to the intentions behind the behaviour and distinguish between destructive and disobedient behaviours caused by the emotional transition of adolescence or lack of academic ability and those behaviours that consciously challenge the authority and inequality in the education system (Kingston, 1986). Giroux (1983) argues that the concept of resistance should not be turned into a vague category that indiscriminately encompasses all confrontational behaviour. Identifying resistance behaviours should be based on whether students are critical of social oppression, and whether their actions are driven by the pursuit of social justice. Based on this criterion, Solorzano and Bernal (2001) categorized oppositional behaviours into four types, pointing out that reactionary behaviours should not be classified as a form of resistance due to the lack of criticism of the oppressive condition. When analysing resistance in the context of Chinese education, it is also important to avoid considering all oppositional behaviour resistance.

Second, as Walker (1986) argued, some studies have only focused on the positive aspects of resistance behaviours, romanticising resistance and equating these aspects with individual liberation. Giroux (1983) added that some studies have only identified student resistance in the education system yet assumed that hope for changing the unequal situation exists without examining the intentions and motivations behind these behaviours and the consequences that the behaviours produced. This over-optimistic idea of resistance ignores

the negative aspects of counter-school culture (S. Davies, 1995b). Researchers have observed that the resistance culture of disadvantaged young people is fraught with elements of racism and patriarchy, and their peer relationships are characterized by hierarchy and competition. Therefore, the resistance behaviours of working-class children should not be directly regarded as part of leftist resistance. More importantly, the over-optimistic attitude towards resistance makes it difficult to consider the resistance practices and educational practices that are conducive to enhancing the educational system and promoting human liberation (Giroux, 1983). It has been argued that not all resistance is progressive; only transformational resistance that pursues human liberation has the potential to change the structure of unequal opportunities (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Apple (2013) used Gramsci's theory to further argue that good and bad sense may co-exist in the meanings and practices of actors. The purpose of educational practice is to help students develop good sense, guide them to a deep understanding of social inequality, and think about how to engage in non-reproductive resistance (P. McLaren, Fischman, Serra, & Antelo, 1998).

In addition, the existing body of research has understood resistance as a key manifestation of agency (McFadden, 1995). In fact, students do not necessarily adopt the resistance that is often referenced in classic research (such as skipping classes and talking dirty), though it is not implied that learners lack agency. For example, a survey of three schools in Wales found that the vast majority of working-class children there did not accept the school values but did not resist, deciding simply to conform to the norms of the school. This conformity was also a kind of resistance (P. Brown, 1987). Solorzano and Bernal (2001) also argued that the distinction between resistance and conformity is not clear-cut: although self-defeating resistance includes criticism of oppressive social conditions, it cannot help students to change the reality of being oppressed. Although conformist resistance does not show opposition to authority, it increases the opportunities for students to move upward and avoid the outcome of social reproduction. In short, students' agency is not necessarily expressed through resistance. The rigid use of the framework of resistance/conformism dichotomy is not conducive to a deep understanding of students' behaviour and its consequences (Bucholtz, 2002).

Many studies have found the resistance of young people in China does not adhere to the logic of counter-school culture found in Western countries (A. Kipnis, 2001a; John U. Ogbu, 1978; X. Zhou, 2011). The resistance of Chinese students does not necessarily target the authority and educational inequality of teachers and schools. For example, Kipnis (2001a) found that China's social and cultural background makes it difficult to form counter-school subcultures. The disrespect for teachers, dissatisfaction with the education system, hostility to peers who perform well in school, and cheating on exams may not be manifestations of counter-school culture, instead indicating the high value placed on academic performance and credentials (A. Kipnis, 2001a, 2001b). Therefore, it is necessary to transcend the Western-centric paradigm of counter-school culture to interpret students' resistance. Researchers should uncover the underlying causes of behaviour, analyse the relationship between these behaviours and dominant values, and develop explanations and theories that explain national or local conditions (Bucholtz, 2002; P. L. McLaren, 1985).

The above reflections on resistance theory suggest that it may be reckless to make certain theoretical deductions and inferences simply through manifestations of students' resistance. There is no necessary connection between resistance behaviours, reflections on social inequality, the possibility of liberation, agency, and counter-school culture. The inadequacy of existing research has motivated researchers to explore the consciousness, needs, and motivation underlying resistance behaviours and seek new analytical concepts to more accurately understand the agency of disadvantaged youths.

#### *2.1.4 Aspiration as an Analytical Tool to Understand Agency*

Among the research on the social reproduction of disadvantaged youths that attributed to Willis, Jay MacLeod's (2009) seminal work *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* provides an accurate description of the resistance behaviours in a group of young white men (who were referred to as "hallway hangers", because they often hang around in the school hall) in a high school:

> The Hallway Hangers are not of the view that success in school is irrelevant but rather that the odds of "making it" are simply too slim to bet on. In what can be likened to a cost-benefit analysis, the Hallway Hangers, much like Willis's lads,

> conclude that the possibility of upward social mobility is not worth the price of obedience, conformity, and investment of substantial amounts of time, energy, and work in school. (p. 106)

MacLeod (2009) observed that the participants refused the achievement ideology by working hard to achieve upward mobility because they were aware that there was little chance of upward mobility in reality. The high school students adopted deviant attitudes and behaviours, such as defying the school system, withdrawing from extracurricular activities, hanging around in hallways after school, smoking, drinking, and using drugs. MacLeod (2009) also compared the Hallway Hangers to the "lads" in Willis (1977) by using the conscious notion of resistance and the analytical framework of penetration and limitation (McGrew, 2011). However, MacLeod (2009) introduced the concept of *aspiration* in his research and groundbreakingly analysed its role in social reproduction to understand students' agency. An in-depth exploration of aspiration could bridge the gap between structure and agency, which was essential in understanding social reproduction:

> The interface between the cultural and the structural is critical to our understanding of social reproduction. To capture this relationship, the agency-structure dualism must be bridged by an analysis of the interpenetration of human consciousness and structural determinants. Macro models that demonstrate the extent to which status is inherited and quantitative studies that measure how educational, occupational, and income structures mediate the effect of class origins are not enough. Such projects merely set the context for beginning to wrestle with the real issues of how social structures capture agents' minds and control their attitudes and how individuals resist and succumb to the inertial pressure of structural forces. Aspirations provide a conceptual link between structure and agency in that they are rooted firmly in individual proclivity (agency) but also are acutely sensitive to perceived societal constraints (structure). (MacLeod, 2009, p. 139)

As discussed in the previous section, the explanatory power of resistance theory is inadequate in the study of identity, agency, and subjectivity of young people, though it provides valuable insights into articulating the mechanism of social reproduction. Resistance

behaviours are not necessarily manifestations of the students' agency, and their agency is not necessarily reflected through resistance. Therefore, researchers should examine subjective factors when studying resistance behaviours (P. L. McLaren, 1985). This examination requires a deep exploration of the students' experiences and feelings, as well as the interpretation and meaning-making of experiences in schooling and internships, for example. In particular, when continuous resistance behaviours ultimately lead to the reproduction of students' class position, it is necessary to pay more attention to "how domination reaches into the structure of personality itself" and uncover "the genesis and operation of those socially constructed needs" (Giroux, 1983, p. 288) that tie people to larger structures of domination. Compared to resistance, the concept of aspiration requires paying attention to students' subjective ideas, needs, and desires, which may provide a new, illuminating perspective key in understanding the complexity of social reproduction.

Influential theorists such as Willis and Bourdieu are aware of the importance of aspiration but do not elaborate on its role in social reproduction. In (1977) *Learning to Labour*, Willis describes two groups of working-class boys: the "lads" who adopted a counter-school culture and the "ear'oles" who conformed to the requirements and ideology of school. It may be argued that the main difference between the two groups is the difference in aspirations. Although Willis does not explicitly use the term "aspiration", students' attitudes and behaviours towards education and careers could be seen as manifestations of their aspirations and constituted important factors in their social reproduction. Similarly, Bourdieu suggests that the relationship between subjective expectation and objective probability significantly affects the dropout rate, attitudes towards the education system, and work and success among working-class children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). He also argues that aspirations are not constructed by individuals alone, instead being affected by their perceived opportunities and possibilities of achieving the aspiration, "agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us''' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 64). In addition, several important theoretical tools of Bourdieu have inspired researchers to analyse the formation of aspiration (L. Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007; Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Hart, 2012; Tranter, 2012). Zipin et al.

(2015) discussed the relationship between aspiration and *habitus* and state that aspirations are deemed to be grounded in individual's biological and historical conditions and *habitus*, which is defined by Bourdieu as a set of acquired dispositions, are produced by structures and generate practices. Furthermore, Hart (2016) argued that Bourdieu's theory of capital (e.g., social capital, cultural capital) aids in understanding the resources that may be transformed into aspirations and capabilities.

Inspired by MacLeod's (2009) research, a growing number of researchers have paid attention to the role of aspirations in social reproduction among disadvantaged youths (Gale & Parker, 2018; Gilbertson, 2017; Stahl, 2015; Suh, 2018). The following section systematically reviews the existing literature on aspiration, its influencing factors, and its relationship with social reproduction.

## 2.2 Aspiration: Concept, Formation, and its Relationship with Social Reproduction

### *2.2.1 Conceptualizing Aspiration and Agency*

Aspiration has been widely studied in social sciences, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, and economics, among others. In the field of sociology of education, Quaglia and Cobb (1996) define aspiration as an "ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work towards those goals" (p. 15). This definition is consistent with that provided by MacLeod (2009), who suggested that aspiration "reflects an individual's view of his or her own chances for getting ahead" (p. 15). For lower-class youth, the content of their aspirations seems to have a clear focus, lying in "individual self-enrichment: to scramble up the social ladder and become middle-class" (Jones, 2011, p. 10).

T. Bernard and Taffesse (2014) described three characteristics of aspirations. First, aspirations are future oriented. All goals and desires need to be achieved at some time in the future rather than offering immediate gratification. Second, aspirations are motivators, which encourage individuals to invest time, energy, and money to realize their goals. Therefore, aspiration is different from concepts such as idle daydreams or wishes. Third, the objects that individuals aspire to are usually multi-dimensional, such as wealth and social recognition. Although many studies have addressed aspirations related to career and education, G. Brown

(2011) found that young people's aspirations also include important goals, such as safety, emotional security, and happiness.

### *2.2.2 Two Perspectives on Aspirations in Disadvantaged Young People*

There are two opposing perspectives on the aspirations of the disadvantaged population. The first perspective has been widely accepted by governments in the United Kingdom and Australia and posits that young people with socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds have relatively low aspirations. The lack of aspiration is believed to be caused by personality defects, such as laziness and absence of self-motivation (Harwood, McMahon, O'Shea, Bodkin-Andrews, & Priestly, 2015). The low aspirations lead to low educational participation and academic attainment, ultimately resulting in relatively limited achievement in adulthood (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Marjoribanks, 2003, 2005). Under the influence of the aspiration deficit model, the government tends to implement policies to increase the aspirations of disadvantaged young people in order to promote upward mobility. Therefore, aspiration has been transformed from a private concern to a public concern, requiring intervention from government and schools, particularly for disadvantaged young people who are considered to lack aspiration (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Gale & Parker, 2015a; Spohrer, 2011; St. Clair, Kintrea, & Houston, 2013).

These "aspiration-raising" policies are supported by existing research, which have found that aspirations in young people are significantly related to attainment in the future. For example, a national representative sample in the United States shows that students with high and stable educational aspirations are more likely to continue with education (L. Liu, 2009b). In addition, young people with higher aspirations also have stronger self-development motivations and higher educational attainment than those with low aspirations (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Gutman & Akerman, 2008). Many longitudinal studies have found that high aspirations during adolescence significantly predict high social status and achievements (such as good employment and high wage) in adulthood (Goodman, Gregg, & Washbrook, 2011; Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Schoon & Polek, 2011). These studies have provided support for the implementation of "aspiration-raising" policies.

The government's assumption that the low achievement of disadvantaged young people is attributable to the lack of aspirations has been criticized by sociologists. First, many studies have found that socially disadvantaged young people also have high aspirations for professional careers and higher education compared to their more advantaged peers (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008; Harrison & Waller, 2018; McKendrick, Scott, & Sinclair, 2007). For example, Baker et al. (2014) found that, in a survey of 1,745 14-year-old students, "the vast majority of students, including those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, hold high aspirations for pursuing further academic credentials" (p. 526). Another study that interviewed 490 students, parents, teachers, and community members from areas with significant deprivation found that even individuals from poor communities had high aspirations. However, these aspirations were not enough to make their goals concrete and obtainable (St. Clair et al., 2013).

Second, high aspirations do not necessarily lead to high achievements for disadvantaged young people as the policies expected. Researchers have the term "aspirations-attainment gap" to describe this phenomenon, which refers to discrepancy between people's aspirations and their actual educational and career attainment (Roderick, 2006; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). For disadvantaged young people, realizing that their aspirations are more difficult than their more advantaged peers means that a larger aspirations-attainment gap exists in disadvantaged youths (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000; Trusty, 2002).

Several factors may account for a larger aspirations-attainment gap in disadvantaged young people. One possible explanation is that disadvantaged young people lack sufficient economic, social, and cultural capital to realize their aspirations (Allen, 2014; G. Brown, 2011; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). The second explanation may be attributable to the cumulative disadvantages among underprivileged young people. The relationship between aspirations and attainment is affected by cumulative advantages and disadvantages. Privileged young people gain more cumulative advantages over time, whereas underprivileged groups encounter more disadvantages. The cumulative advantages and disadvantages eventually lead to disparity in attainment between privileged and underprivileged young people (DiPrete &

Eirich, 2006). The third explanation is that the disadvantaged young people have a weak "capacity to aspire." Social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2004) argued that capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed in society, though all groups in society aspire for a good life; he regarded the capacity to aspire as a kind of navigational capacity. The advantaged population in society "have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbors" (p. 69), meaning that they have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. In contrast, the disadvantaged groups "have a more brittle horizon of aspirations precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this navigational capacity" (p. 69). Appadurai (2004) went on to describe the weak capacity to aspire among disadvantaged groups as follows:

> If the map of aspirations (continuing the navigational metaphor) is seen to consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again. Where these pathways do exist for the poor, they are likely to be more rigid, less supple, and less strategically valuable, not because of any cognitive deficit on the part of the poor but because the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and refutation in regard to the future are limited (and this may well be one way to define poverty), it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively less developed. (p. 69)

Aspirations "are embedded in cultural, social, historical and political contexts, with their norms, behaviours, and beliefs" (Marzi, 2016, p. 9). Achieving attainment and upward social mobility depends on individual capital, cumulative advantages, and capacity to aspire in these contexts.

Third, the aspirations of disadvantaged young people also present the characteristics of being unstable and volatile. In a longitudinal study of educational aspirations trajectories of young people aged 13-16 in England, young people from higher-class family backgrounds are

more likely to maintain high and stable aspirations (McCulloch, 2017). Young people from less well-off families are more likely to modify their aspirations downwards over time (Croll & Attwood, 2013). Based on Appadurai's idea of navigational capacity, Gale and Parker (2015b) used "tour knowledge" and "map knowledge" to explain why the aspirations of the disadvantaged people are easy to modify. In the process of climbing the social ladder, disadvantaged people have tour knowledge and rely on guidance from a specific tour guide, meaning that their knowledge of the terrain is restricted by the specific tour. When encountering obstacles and learning that current tour cannot provide guidance, these young people have to choose another tour: that is, to change their preferences or aspirations. For example, a secondary vocational school student wants to be an architect after graduation, but his vocational education is not enough to get an architect qualification certificate. Therefore, this student chooses to work on a construction site and become a low-end construction worker. In contrast, the advantaged groups with map knowledge are more familiar with social terrain and fully understand the various methods to reach the chosen destination. Therefore, when they encounter obstacles, these advantaged individuals do not need to change the tour because they are "able to create new routes and to improvise alternatives" (p. 148). For example, if the SVS student continues junior college education under the guidance of teachers or professionals and enters a university to study architecture, he will be closer to his aspirations as an architect. Therefore, the disadvantaged and the advantaged students may have similar aspirations for education, career, and life at the beginning. If obstacles are encountered in this pursuit, the advantaged individuals have more resources, maintain a relatively stable aspirations, and continue to move toward the chosen goal. In contrast, disadvantaged groups may lower their aspirations because their pathways are blocked or if they have no more attractive option. Research has found that young people who can maintain stable and high aspirations or increasing aspirations are more likely to complete high school and have a higher total household income (Jungeun Olivia Lee, Karl G Hill, & J David Hawkins, 2012a).

In addition, the government's aspiration-raising policy is considered a neoliberal discourse. Scholars have criticized this discourse for holding disadvantaged individuals responsible for their upward social mobility and attributing the failure of upward mobility to a

lack of adequate aspirations. This neoliberal policy ignores the role of social structures and underestimates the impediments that inequality of opportunities places in their way (G. P. Brown, 2013; Spohrer, 2011). By advocating for this neoliberal aspiration-raising policy, policymakers are exempted from their responsibility to promote social justice and alleviate the "social suffering" (Bourdieu, 1999) of the disadvantaged. The disadvantaged also tend to believe that their lack of motivation and aspirations leads to a failure to achieve upward social mobility and blaming themselves (Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015). Moreover, the aspiration-raising discourse implies that young people with high aspirations should go to university, while those with low aspirations can only enter vocational schools or directly do low-end jobs. In this way, a hierarchy of value of education and employment is established, bringing stigma and bias to vocational education (Sellar, Gale, & Parker, 2011; Southgate & Bennett, 2014).

In summary, the disadvantaged youth does not align with the view that failure to achieve upward social mobility is due to low aspirations and a lack of motivation. In the process of realizing aspirations, underprivileged groups generally experience more obstacles from the highly competitive, exclusive social structure. These individuals might, therefore, hold unstable aspirations and may have to regulate or lower their aspirations, ultimately leading to failure to achieve expected attainment.

### *2.2.3 The Formation of Aspiration*

As a belief and motivation system held by individuals, aspirations are shaped by a number of factors. Studies have found that individual factors, such as academic performance, attitudinal, and personality factors (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy), significantly influence people's education and professional aspirations (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Gemici, Bednarz, Karmel, & Lim, 2014; Parsons, Frieze, & Ruble, 1978). In essence, aspirations are formed from "interaction and in the thick of social life" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67), which are deeply embedded in cultural, social, historical, and political contexts, and not just "an individualist psychological register" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 229). When studying the social processes of young people's aspiration, Riddell (2010) provided an in-depth analysis of the social contexts of these young people lives, and

suggested that family, school, and dominant discourses circulating in the media and society played a crucial role. The following sections introduce the influence of family, school, and discourse on aspirations.

#### 2.2.3.1 Family

Families, particularly parents, play a crucial role in the formation of children's personalities and socialization (Maccoby, 1994; Pomerantz & Thompson, 2008). In the development of the educational aspirations and occupational aspirations of young people, role models, guidance, and encouragement from parents also play a significant role (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001; Middleton & Loughead, 1993; Whiston & Keller, 2004).

First, research has found that parental expectations, values, and aspirations could actively shape the aspirations of children (Berrington, Roberts, & Tammes, 2016; Chowdry, Crawford, & Goodman, 2011; Pomerantz & Thompson, 2008; C.-L. Wu & Bai, 2015). Parents' low aspirations for their children made their children have low aspirations about their future, which further affected their children's future development. Gemici et al. (2014) found that, compared with students whose parents did not expect them to go to university, students whose parents had high expectations were four times more likely to complete high school and 11 times more likely to enter university. Chinese parents, not unlike their Western counterparts, have high expectations for their children to achieve upward social mobility via education (Wuying Zou, Anderson, & Tsey, 2013). Even parents with low socioeconomic status have high educational expectations for their children (Y. Zhou & Liao, 1997). There is an idiom in Chinese of "expecting the child to become dragon" (*wang zi cheng long*, 望子成龍), which means that parents hope their children can become part of the elite (Leung & Shek, 2011). Parental aspirations and expectations may differ in rural and urban areas. Research has found that the educational expectations (e.g., length and level of education) of rural parents were lower than those of urban parents (Y. Li & Wang, 2019). In addition, the past decade has witnessed a resurgence of the idea of "learning has no value" because the educational return for rural residents has declined (Z. Li & Wang, 2014; X. Zheng, Sun, & Lu, 2019).

Under the influence of parental expectations and the idea of "learning has no value", rural young people may develop relatively low career and educational aspirations.

Second, parents' educational background has an influence on children's aspirations. Children whose parents have a high level of education develop higher achievement-related aspirations and more concrete action plans (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009). In contrast, young people from lower-class families are less likely to continue their studies and aspire to begin a professional career than their higher-class counterparts (Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

A number of studies have aimed to explain how children's aspirations were shaped by their parents and based on parents' education level and aspirations (Davis-Kean, 2005; J. R. Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997). Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" provides a useful tool to explain the formation of aspiration. Habitus is "the embodied, internalized version of the corresponding structure of the field in which agents exist" (Bouzanis & Kemp, 2020, p. 4). Every family has their own habitus, which is shaped by factors such as parents' social class and educational background (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Parents from advantaged social backgrounds are able to provide their children with an environment with more physical, cognitive, and emotional stimulation, as well as more accurate, motivating beliefs and visions about their future education and careers. Under the influence of family habitus, children tend to acquire dispositions similar to those of their parents (Ingram, 2011).

#### 2.2.3.2 School

Similar to family, school is an important venue for students to socialize and shape their aspirations (Kathryn R. Wentzel, 2015). The contents of courses, lecturing methods, the projects and opportunities provided by the schools and the role model of adult teachers may shape students' perceptions of educational and career opportunities, which may foster or alter their aspirations (Baer, 1999; Corbett, 2000; Riddell, 2010). Khan (2012) analysed the mechanisms through which the elite class replicate their privileges in one of the most prestigious high schools in the United States. The school made an effort to inculcate the expectations and aspirations of the elite to the students:

> St. Paul's students arrive at school at the beginning of their adolescence with the expectation placed upon them that they can learn 'the central ideas in the Western

> tradition.' They are expected to figure out how to navigate a wide variety of texts in a variety of ways, from poetry to drama to prose, through literary and historical perspectives, identifying universal themes throughout each. They are asked to think about these ideas in their historical context and to make transhistorical connections between the ancient and the modern. And through this they are asked to continually think through the heady themes of reason, evolution of culture, virtue, heroism, and the divine. Students are asked to make the impossible possible, and they are encouraged to believe that the grand sweep of the world is knowable to them. (p. 155)

Schools' resources have impacted students' aspirations. In schools with fewer resources and opportunities, disadvantaged students are likely to encounter more social and structural constraints in the process of achieving academic and professional success. These negative experiences and missed opportunities in schools also reduce students' aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Šabić & Jokić, 2019).

Peers also play an important role in shaping aspirations in school contexts. Young people spend time with their peers and form various small groups, carrying out various activities and sharing similar values within these groups (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Kindermann, 2007). Peers' academic performance, socioeconomic status, and aspirations may enhance or reduce individual aspirations (David-Kacso, Haragus, & Roth, 2014; Dickerson, Maragkou, & McIntosh, 2018). The impact of teachers in students' aspirations should not be ignored. Rural young people from the bottom of the society have difficulties in interacting people with higher education backgrounds outside of schools, meaning that teachers are the most accessible resource (Bergem, 1990; Lareau, 2011). The expectations and attention from teachers may help disadvantaged individuals enhance their aspirations and compensate for the detrimental effects of their families' socioeconomic status (Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Van den Broeck, Demanet, & Van Houtte, 2020).

The school constitutes a field that shapes students' aspirations. The active component that plays a role in this field is "institutional habitus", which refers to "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001, p. 1). Institutional habitus is created in the complex interaction of

the positioning of the school (vocational or general high school), historical development, and the individual habitus of previous and current teachers and students. Institutional habitus provides "a 'semi-autonomous' means by which class, raced, and gendered processes are played out in the lives of students" (Reay et al., 2001, p. 2), also affecting the development of aspirations in young people.

#### 2.2.3.3 Discourses

Young people are immersed in discourse on lifestyle, consumption, and entertainment (Kenway & Bullen, 2008). Discourse is a set of systematic statements used actively by social agents to legitimate concepts, attitudes, and values, produce meaning, constitute knowledge, and shape subjectivity and power relations (Lessa, 2006; Weedon, 1989). Discourse is a carrier of ideologies that are "acquired, confirmed, changed and perpetuated through discourse" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 115). Ideology is a relatively stable, fundamental belief system taken for granted by social members. Ideology, therefore, has the power to guide people to think and behave in a specific way (M. Apple, 1979).

Discourses that carry specific ideologies have a profound influence on the aspirations of students. These discourses, which hold assumptions and attitudes about action or inaction, shape the habitus of young people and provide them with a series of vocabulary and patterns that describe and explain experiences (Riddell, 2010). MacLeod (2009) found that the American society in the 1990s circulated the belief of achievement ideology, which asserted that "success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability. Individuals do not inherit their social status; they attain it on their own" (p. 3). The black young people that were interviewed held a strong belief in achievement ideology and that education could help them succeed on the labour market and achieve upward mobility. Thus, these students formed aspirations of earning higher education qualifications and become a member of middle class.

Interestingly, the working-class boys (the "lads") in the research of Willis (1977) were also exposed to the mainstream ideology that education could lead to a better job and the possibility of climbing the social ladder, but these young men thought hard work was meaningless and that they would only ever obtain jobs similar to those of their parents after

graduation. Therefore, these young men did not develop aspirations about receiving higher education and getting white-collar jobs (P. E. Willis, 1977). The two studies suggest that the aspirations that young people hold in their micro-social contexts are not necessarily in full accordance with what the discourses in those contexts intend to convey. Therefore, when understanding the role of ideology in shaping aspirations, the social position and environment of the students should be considered.

In contemporary China, there are dominant discourses that encourage the pursuit of success, fame, and fortune, such as those of self-development after the reform and opening up, and "the Chinese dream" that has been widely promoted over recent years (Peters, 2017). These discourses underlie ideologies that appear to connect middle-class Chinese and Westerners to "a common set of core values," tending to "share many of the same aspirations and dreams" (H. H. Wang, 2010, p. 12). However, it is unclear whether disadvantaged young people are affected by the prevalent mainstream ideologies and develop high aspirations. Research has found that educational return was relatively low for families with poor economic conditions and social capital (W. Li, 2016). When rural parents and young people observe this situation based on the narratives and experiences of the surrounding people, they may realize that education does not necessarily bring more benefits in terms of upward social mobility; therefore, the aspirations for receiving education may be levelled (A. Xie, 2017). Whether SVS students are able to obtain rewards of receiving education, as well as whether they believe in the achievement ideology, needs be studied further.

Aspirations are constantly influenced and shaped by family, school, and ideological discourses. Under the influence of these forces, some people's aspirations are relatively stable, while those of others may fluctuate (up or down) (Y. Gao & Eccles, 2020; Jungeun Olivia Lee, Karl G. Hill, & J. David Hawkins, 2012b). The changing trajectory of aspirations may play an active role in attainments, further leading to upward mobility or social reproduction.

#### *2.2.4 Aspirations and Social Reproduction*

Regarding aspirations, Beuret (2011) observed the following:

> There are competing versions of hope in a given society, but there is also a hegemonic form to hope. For us, living in a becoming-neoliberal world, that

> hegemonic form is aspiration. Not aspiration in the sense to aspire to greatness in some heroic Greek sense, or something romantic and colourful. No, for us aspiration has a particular hue and tint – it means social mobility. It means a better job, more money, more things and a higher rung on the career ladder.

However, it is necessary to be cautious about the role of aspiration in social reproduction. The role of aspirations in upward social mobility may not be as significant as expected, particularly for disadvantaged young people. When examining the factors contributing to social reproduction, an important aspect, namely social structure, needs to be incorporated. Specifically, social structure includes an individual's social class, family background, socioeconomic status, school background, opportunity structure, markets, etc.

Quantitative research has provided evidence that structure and aspirations interact to influence individual educational and occupational attainment. One perspective is the *socialization model*, which suggests that structural factors (such as socioeconomic status) have a profound influence on individual's interaction between other important factors (such as parents or teachers). Aspirations are formed and shaped during these interactions, which, in turn, determine future attainment (Robert, 1980; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970). In other words, although aspirations are born of human agency and important factors in reproducing inequality, they are restricted and determined by structural determinants. Another perspective is the *allocation model*, which posits that structural factors determine the resources that individuals can allocate. These resources then determine the individual's attainment. In this model, attainment is determined by structural factors rather than an individual's aspirations. Aspirations may fluctuate under the influence of structure and play an insignificant role in attainment (Kerckhoff, 1976, 1984). Both models suggest that social structures play a determining role in individual attainment and the social reproduction of inequality.

Qualitative studies have shed light on the role of aspirations in social reproduction under the constraints of structural factors. For example, Hoskins and Barker (2016) interviewed 32 students aged 16-18 and asked them about their aspirations for the future and their perceptions of the influence of family background on these aspirations. Regarding personal and professional happiness, many respondents, including those from disadvantaged

groups, hoped to reproduce the family milieu that they experienced in their childhood to re-experience this happiness. The author inferred that "these aspirations for personal happiness may be an obstacle to social mobility. Indeed, in all of these accounts social reproduction is inferred. These participants are not seeking to move beyond their parents' occupations in terms of objective status" (p. 13). Another ethnographic study explored social reproduction among Mexican migrant children and the role of aspiration in said social reproduction (Suh, 2018). The migrant children lived in a town on the Mexican border close to California; their families had been able to settle down, and the opportunities for access to schooling had largely improved. Most young people acknowledged that they could enter higher education through formal schooling., and their aspiration was to have a higher salary and live a better life in the United States. However, the labour market in the community was extremely restricted, which meant that the people that they knew eventually worked in local companies, which reduced their motivation to continue their education. These children's aspirations, therefore, changed from making more money to gaining respect among local gangs. After graduating from elementary school, these students were engaged in the same jobs as their parents, working for agro-corporations as inexpensive labour in Mexico. Suh (2018) argued that "the shifting aspirations amongst migrant youth throughout their childhoods reveal the ways in which mechanisms of social reproduction and cultural resistance unfolded in their everyday lives" (Suh, 2018, p. 125).

The ethnographic study by MacLeod (2009) provided a more detailed, vivid illustration of the role of aspiration in social reproduction. Immersed in achievement ideology, black young people (the Brothers) from more disadvantaged backgrounds had higher occupational aspirations than their white counterparts (Hallway Hangers). The black young people believed that education could allow them to break through the restrictions imposed by disadvantaged family backgrounds and race and achieve upward mobility. These individuals also strongly believed that they needed to take responsibility for achieving these aspirations. Eight years later, MacLeod returned to the school to interview these young people in their early adulthood and found that most of these black youths had not realized their aspirations. In the post-industrial economy era, the United States changed from a manufacturing economy

to a service-based economy; few employment opportunities remained for blue-collar workers and undereducated inner-city young people. Moreover, their families had been unable to provide them with enough social and cultural capital, and these black young people also experienced discrimination and racism in the job market. Under the influence of these structural constraints such as economy, culture, and race, most black young people achieved the same status as their parents. Their original aspirations were also regulated, and MacLeod called these regulated aspirations "levelled aspirations".

Interestingly, aspirations could may still have some effect even when the influence of structural constraints is tremendous. Some can break through the constraints of structure and achieve upward mobility. Overall, the Brothers had more opportunities than the Hallway Hangers. The Hallway Hangers experienced worse life situations, such as alcoholism, unemployment, drug addiction, and even imprisonment and could only enter the secondary labour market where "wages are lower, raises are infrequent, training is minimal, advancement is rare, and turnover is high" (p.171). In contrast, some of the Brothers started university and eventually crossed the threshold into the middle class. One of the subjects, Derek, entered the prestigious Barnes Academy because of his personal aspirations and academic success. The school immersed him in affluent white culture, provided him with a superior education and opportunities, and prepared him to go to the top of the social hierarchy. Macleod believed that, if the Brothers had no strong aspirations, their living conditions might be worse than those of Hallway Hangers because racism represents a significant barrier on the labour market.

When discussing the factors that facilitate the reproduction of social inequality, MacLeod (2009) concluded that "all three levels of analysis—the individual, the cultural, and the structural—play their part in the reproduction of social inequality" (p.255). MacLeod (2009) further analysed the different influences of the three factors (i.e., agency, culture, and structure) as follows:

> Although all three levels have explanatory power, the structural one is primary because it reaches down into culture and individual agency. The culture of Clarendon Heights—with its violence, racism, and other self-destructive features (as well as its

> resilience, vitality, and informal networks of mutual support)—is largely a response to class exploitation in a highly stratified society. … To be sure, individual agency is important. Causality runs in both directions in a reflexive relationship between structure and agency. Structural constraints on opportunity lead to levelled aspirations, and leveled aspirations in turn affect job prospects. Contrary to popular belief, structure is still the source of inequality. (p.255)

MacLeod (2009) is not overly optimistic about the individual's strategy, initiatives, and the possibility of achievements. However, acknowledging structural constraints does not imply that aspirations are not worthy of attention. To understand the mechanisms of reproduction, it is important to fully consider the awareness and deliberation of the social agents, the coexistence, and the interaction of practice, action, and structure (M. S. Archer, 1995).

To conclude, the relationship between aspirations and social reproduction is complicated and requires further research. On one hand, aspirations are shaped and restricted by structural factors, and their role in upward social mobility may be limited. On the other hand, some individuals with stable, high aspirations can break through obstacles and move upward, reflecting the complex creativity of agency. Moreover, in the background of urban-rural disparity, severe inequality between the rich and the poor, and large-scale population migration in the transitional China, the role of aspiration in social reproduction may be different from that found in Western societies and should be explored further.

## 2.3 SVS Students as Disadvantaged Youths: Social Reproduction and its Formation

This section introduces the social reproduction among Chinese SVS students. I then review the structural factors that prevent students from moving upward, which is followed by students' agency, including resistance and aspiration, in the process of social reproduction. Finally, I summarize the limitations of existing research on SVS students.

### *2.3.1 Social Reproduction among SVS Students*

Studies have found that the social position of SVS students has not improved significantly compared to that of their parents. This social phenomenon has attracted the

attention of researchers over the past two decades. X. Zhou (2015) conducted interviews and collected questionnaires in six secondary vocational schools distributed across different regions (namely INCLUDE THE REGIONS/CITIES/PROVINCES HERE) in an attempt to determine whether vocational education contributes to social reproduction or social mobility. Although SVS students expected to learn skills and improve their abilities in school, they were usually passing time at school and not optimistic about their employment prospects due to their weak academic basis and low levels of teaching and training at schools. After graduation, these students can only work in companies or factories as unskilled or low-skilled workers. Zhou suggests that the poor situation of SVS students is caused by a combined interaction of the teaching philosophy of vocational schools, which emphasizes disciplines over skills, enterprises' demand for cheap and obedient labour, and the local government's permissiveness to the profit-seeking behaviour of schools and enterprises in order to maintain social stability and promote economic growth. Finally, in this study, secondary vocational education was not an effective way to promote the upward mobility for the second generation of peasants, instead playing an important role in class production.

Some other studies on SVS students have drawn similar conclusions. X. Ma (2014) conducted a one-year ethnography in a vocational high school located in a county in central China. The *alienation* of vocational education was caused by the combined influence of the education system, economic structure, and local society. Ma points out that the vocational school plays a role similar to a prison because it is primarily responsible for managing rural youth and ensuring their safety, rather than providing them with a pathway for upward mobility. In another vocational school in Beijing that recruited children of migrant workers who graduated from junior high school, Liang (2009) found that the educational system put the migrant children on a different educational track from urban peers. Specifically, whether they returned to the countryside or stayed with their parents in the city, it was difficult for these children to enter regular senior secondary schools for further education. While teaching them certain knowledge and skills, vocational education restricts migrant children to the position of low-end skilled workers. The vocational education continuously turns the second generation of migrant workers into low-level workers.

Ling (2015) and Y. Xiong (2010) focused on the experiences of migrant children in cities receiving vocational education. Both researchers conducted studies in Shanghai and found that migrant children were diverted to vocational education, which was regarded as inferior based on the restrictions of the *hukou* system. Ling acknowledged that migrant children are not passive victims: they have newfound opportunities to learn and play before entering the labour market full-time and develop new social relationships in the city. However, due to the increasingly fierce competition in the hukou system and the labour market, these children eventually "followed their parents in becoming an underclass of China's citizenship regime" (Ling, 2015, p. 131). Y. Xiong (2010) argued that entering vocational education introduces an invisible hand that pushes students on a trajectory similar to that of their parents.

Compared to studies that have focused on the educational processes and interpersonal interaction in schools, Yan (2013) emphasized the field of production. She conducted her ethnographic study in an economic and technological development zone in Hangzhou city in Jiangsu to explore the education and labour processes of industrial workers with secondary vocational education backgrounds. The findings suggest that education and guidance about knowledge and skills, personality qualities, and class consciousness shaped rural youths into ordinary operating workers needed by the manufacturing industry, allocating individuals from the bottom of the society to the bottom of the production system. In this way, unequal social relations are reproduced, and the existing social structure is maintained.

Goodburn (2020) found that all types of secondary education, including vocational education, failed to help migrant children living in Shenzhen to achieve upward social mobility. She found that these children had four educational trajectories after graduating from junior high school: entering secondary vocational schools; private migrant secondary school; local state academic high school; or returning to their hometown to continue their education. However, regardless of the kind of education that they chose or the kind of career aspiration that they may have had, they had the same pathway after finishing their studies, namely ending up in precarious, low-skilled service work in cities.

Since the mid- to late-1990s, income and wealth inequality in Chinese society have broadened, and the trend of class solidification has intensified (Sutherland & Yao, 2011; D. T. Yang, 1999; Ming Zhang, Zhang, & Tu, 2016). As Goodburn (2020) argued, different types of education can hardly help students transcend their families' social class. A growing body of studies have reached the consistent conclusion that Chinese education is no longer a booster for disadvantaged young people to change their destiny, but a field that constantly reproduces unequal social structure (Y. Liu, 2013; C. Wang, 2007; Y. Xiong, 2015). As part of the education system, vocational education is also considered to have the function of social reproduction of inequality. The argument of SVS students reproducing their parents' social condition after graduation has become commonplace.

### *2.3.2 Structural Determinants of Social Reproduction*

The upward mobility of SVS students is constrained by a number of structural factors. In addition to schooling, existing literature has also examined the role of the education system, family, and the state in reproducing inequality. This section reviews the literature on these structural factors. Currently, the research on social mobility and social reproduction among Chinese SVS students is scarce. As the main sources of SVS students are disadvantaged young people, such as rural and migrant youth at the bottom of society and face similar structural factors in the process of upward mobility, this review also includes literature on migrant and rural youth to shed light on the social reproduction among SVS students.

#### **2.3.2.1 Schooling**

Vocational schools are an important venue for SVS students to gain skills and cultivate core competencies. However, a number of studies have noted that the knowledge and skills provided to students in secondary vocational education are limited, making it difficult for them to become highly skilled (Liang, 2009; X. Yan, 2013). Schools have many problems in teaching, such as lack of training equipment, poor teaching ability, and disconnection between teaching and production (X. Zhou, 2015). These problems have also been observed by many researchers from the pedagogical field (D. Chen, Fu, & Pan, 2019; Yi et al., 2018; Z. Zhao & Liu, 2019). Moreover, the research has placed emphasis on the discipline of students' attitudes and conducts in an attempt to ensure that students have the

personality and qualities required by a qualified worker to meet the expectations of enterprises. By analysing courses, rituals, and norms at schools, Yan (2013) found that schools replicate the social relationships in the enterprises by emphasizing the importance of observing discipline and obedience to the leadership, promoting blue-collar culture and enhancing students' identification with their upcoming careers, performing assessment and evaluation across various areas to make the students comfortable, and embracing the selection mechanisms of survival of the fittest. Meanwhile, schools strictly regulate the daily activities of students to ensure their safety with teaching instead taking a back seat (X. Ma, 2014).

As part of schooling, quasi-employment internships are required by the state to help students improve their skills in practice. However, these internships help to train students to become skilled professionals. Since the market reforms, companies have experienced massive benefits due to the low wages and low welfare of their employees, particularly a large pool of rural migrant labour. Companies utilize docile, cheap labour provided by vocational schools and are not investing in training the skilled workers (X. Zhou, 2015). In fact, there are a significant amount of illegal activities in school-enterprise cooperation. Enterprises do not provide students with professionally appropriate jobs, making students undertake simple, repetitive, and intensive labour and implement arbitrary and rude management (Pun & Koo, 2019; X. Yan, 2013). It is difficult for students to gain skills, and working conditions threaten student workers' physical and mental health. Researchers on labour studies and employment rights have expressed concerns about the poor conditions for SVS students (C. Smith & Chan, 2015; Yi et al., 2018).

#### 2.3.2.2 The Hierarchical Educational System

Based on the principle of meritocracy, the contemporary Chinese education system is stratified vertically. Key schools are in the top position, regular schools are in the middle, and vocational schools are at the bottom (Hyland, 2014). This stratification directly shapes the differential opportunities in social mobility (Y. Liu, 2016).

Currently, jobs of an adequate status and a pleasant working environment generally require a high level of education (Y. Jiang & Teng, 2015). Power elite positions in the political system and technical elite positions in the cultural system demand competitive

academic credentials, making postgraduate credentials an important condition (Le Zhang & Zhang, 2012). Therefore, the key to entering the elite class is access to higher education. Key and regular schools can provide substantially more opportunities for higher education and the improvement of academic credentials than vocational schools. However, disadvantaged young people are less likely to enrol in regular schools and key schools than advantaged groups (Y. Liu, 2016; D. Yang, 2006a). As a result, the moment SVS students enter a vocational school, there is a high probability that they can only find jobs in the secondary labour market after graduation. The limited returns tend to make the dominant class keep their children away from vocational education (D. Yang & Wang, 2009). Vocational education is increasingly regarded as inferior education (A. Wang, 2017), becoming a frustrating choice for disadvantaged young people to advance their academic credentials.

In addition, the expansion of higher education over the past two decades has worsened the conditions of graduates of vocational schools, particularly secondary vocational schools. The higher education expansion provides opportunities for different social classes. The probability of children with high-educated parents receiving higher education has increased by 17%-22% after the expansion, whereas the probability of children of low-educated parents receiving higher education has only increased by 11%-13% (X. Wei, 2017). The higher education expansion has resulted in the devaluation of the academic credentials of disadvantaged young people (A. Fan & Ding, 2013). Since the rapid educational expansion in late 1990s and early 2000s, millions of graduates with higher education have entered the job market every year, taking job opportunities from groups with lower academic credentials (A. Fan, 2013; Wan, 2006).

#### 2.3.2.3 Family Disadvantages

In promoting the reproduction of inequality, family disadvantage is an important factor as it locates students in a disadvantaged position before entering vocational education and makes it difficult to achieve mobility after graduation. Research has found that the disadvantages of rural parents in terms of marital situation, educational level, income, employment opportunities, and health insurance were likely to be inherited by their children (M. Lin & Zhang, 2012). Children from disadvantaged and low-income families are more

likely to go to lower-quality schools, and their employment and earnings are also low (An & Wu, 2009; H. Cheng, 2008; Hannum, An, & Cherng, 2011; Weidong Li, 2010; C. Wu & Song, 2009).

The transmission of these disadvantages may depend on the following mechanisms. First, in terms of economical capital, parents from these families are less likely to directly provide financial supports for their children. For example, young people need support from their parents to purchase houses in the city, while the help provided by disadvantaged families is significantly less than that by advantaged families, making it difficult for them to integrate into city life and continue living in the city (C. Cui, Huang, & Wang, 2019; Y. Fan, 2020). Second, disadvantaged parents are less capable of investing in human capital for their children, and their willingness to invest in higher education is also lower (X. Yang & Deng, 2016; Wei Zou & Zheng, 2014), making the children's educational performance more likely to be inferior to that of children from families with more advantages. Third, it is difficult for disadvantaged parents to help their children with choices about schools, majors, and occupations. Parents of advantaged families are more engaged in the children's school selection process, collect important information about schools, majors, and occupations for their children, and help children reap the most benefits from his or her education (Xiaoxin Wu, 2011).

Finally, the lack of family social capital may also contribute to the social reproduction of subordinate groups. It is common for job seekers to find work through *guanxi* (關係, interpersonal relationships) to receive higher positions and income (Bian, Zhang, & Cheng, 2012; Yunsong Chen, Beate, & Henk, 2013; S. Zhang & Hao, 2013). Studies have found that the social capital of migrant workers is significantly lower than that of urban workers (C. Cheng & Bian, 2014). Most migrant workers' hometowns are in rural areas, and it is difficult for their social networks to extend to the urban labour market (C. Cheng & Bian, 2014). These migrants lack the organizational resources and personal connections and offer limited help to their children when finding jobs (Wenzhong Sun, 2016). Disadvantaged young people finally take on low-end jobs, which further reduce their social and cultural capital and lead to the reproduction of inequality (Ruan & Chen, 2019).

#### 2.3.2.4 The Chinese Party-State

Researchers have pointed out that the state also bears responsibility for the poor conditions of SVS students on the labour market (Ling, 2015; Y. Xiong, 2010). First, China's discriminatory *hukou* system has long been criticized. Since the late 1950s, China's population has been classified into two groups, namely rural and urban. This rural-urban division has intensified inequality (K. W. Chan & Zhang, 1999; Kuang & Liu, 2012; Xiaogang Wu & Treiman, 2007). After the reform and opening up, in order to meet the needs of the country's rapidly developing industrialization, the *hukou* system was adjusted to allow rural people to work in cities, creating a large pool of inexpensive, mobile labour. The steady supply of rural migrant workers produced low-cost manufactured goods, enabling China's economy to develop rapidly over the past four decades (K. W. Chan, 2009; K. H. Zhang, 2006). However, the *hukou* system still largely prevents the rural population from accessing urban education and social services (Z. Liu, 2005; M. Wang, 2017). Migrant children were, for a long time, not allowed to take high school entrance examinations in the city after completing nine-year compulsory education (Goodburn, 2020; Shao, 2010). In recent years, some cities have begun to allow young migrants to receive secondary vocational education; however, this breakthrough has not been significant (Y. Xiong, 2010). Ling (2015) points out that this expansion is pushed forth only because manufacturing and service industries need a new generation of more highly educated migrant labour.

Second, local governments lack the financial resources and motivation to provide high-quality education for young migrants while protecting the privileges of urban *hukou* holders in education (Goodburn, 2020). To promote local economic development and solve employment issues, local governments often require vocational education to serve enterprises to undertake low-end labour and turn a blind eye toward violations of vocational students' rights in school-enterprise cooperation. Vocational education puts greater emphasis on the discipline of students and less on technical training (X. Zhou, 2015).

In summary, with the complicity of schools, enterprises, and the local government, as well as under the restrictions and obstacles imposed by the rigid *hukou* system, these SVS students, who are predominantly made up of rural or migrant young people, hardly escape

their parents' social positions because they come from families that lack sufficient social, cultural, and economic capital, receive poor-quality secondary vocational education, are devalued on the labour market, and are focused on managing and disciplining students without teaching them adequate skills.

However, solely examining the structural factors in social reproduction cannot give a clear idea. Researchers have pointed out that students should not be regarded as passive victims under the constraints and oppression of structural factors (Ling, 2015; X. Zhou, 2015). Vocational students may use their initiative and creativity to reduce the influence of these factors. Some students may even aim to break the restraints of class solidification and achieve upward mobility. The following section reviews the literature on agency in social reproduction in Chinese SVS students.

### *2.3.3 Students' Agency in Social Reproduction*

#### 2.3.3.1 Resistance of Chinese Vocational School Students and Interning Students

Inspired by Willis' (1977) seminal research that discussed working-class students' resistance in school and its role in social reproduction, researchers in China have taken resistance as the primary manifestation of agency. Ethnographic studies have found that, in the process of reproducing social inequality in school education, disadvantaged young people exhibited various aspects of resistance. First, disadvantaged young people despise and disrespect teachers (A. Kipnis, 2001a; C. Shi, 2015); they see teachers as low-paid and low-status people who are marginalized from society and think that the knowledge taught by teachers is useless because they only teach knowledge from books and do not understand how to survive in society (T. Li, 2016). Second, many students do not invest in learning but do things unrelated to exams and learning, such as reading novels, playing on their phones, gambling, and smoking in class (T. Li, 2016; Q. Shi, 2015; X. Zhou, 2011). In addition, students "make fun" by teasing their teacher and disrupting teaching and social order in classroom (T. Li, 2016; X. Zhou, 2011). Researchers have concluded that the typical lifestyle of disadvantaged young people is "passing time"; they do not abide by school regulations and fail to complete the tasks required by the school (T. Li, 2016; Ling, 2015; W. Ma & Yuan, 2016).

As disadvantaged young people, SVS students also exhibit widespread resistance in schools. Yinghui Zhang and Zhou (2020) found that the most common resistance of SVS students was laziness in not completing their homework and repeatedly failing to correct mistakes in assignments. Most students did not openly challenge the authority of the school, nor did they completely obey the school's arrangements. Instead, these students sought freedom in the middle ground of open resistance and complete obedience. Students also used "silence" to express dissatisfaction and resistance to school discipline and teachers' authority. In the classroom, the students tended to use silence in the presence of a harsh teacher. When the teachers forbade sleep in class, the students actively daydreamed.

The culture of passing time is also common among SVS students (Ling, 2015), which is referred as "doing time" by Woronov (2012). Time was the only real source for the SVS students, who spend their time at school creatively in various ways. Some girls, for example, styled their hair in a particular way to cover up the headphones that they wear in the classroom. On the other hand, some students have developed elaborate networks to circulate comic books, which were prohibited by the school. Student resistance is also apparent in internships. Students generally receive poor treatment during the internships, such as unpaid overtime and low wages (J. Chan, 2017; J. Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2015a). Some students would challenge the management of schools and enterprises, even collectively protesting and going on strike (Pun & Koo, 2019; X. Zhou, 2015).

While Chinese disadvantaged young people, including SVS students, have shown various types of resistance, researchers have argued that the resistance was significantly different from that of the boys in Willis. First, students' resistance did not follow the logic of counter-school culture, which is called "resistance without counterculture" by A. Kipnis (2001a). Ling (2015) argues that SVS students recognized rather than rejected examination-oriented school values and believed in the importance of educational credentials in social mobility. Students' dissatisfaction is targeted at the poor quality of vocational education and not the role of education itself (Ling, 2015). This view has received support from studies that have argued that the Chinese young migrant did not oppose the value of knowledge and diplomas, although they formally or informally resisted the school and

knowledge transfer system (J. Chen, 2019; C. Xiong & Liu, 2014; X. Zhou, 2011). In other words, these students have no insight into the role of schools in the reproduction of inequality. Therefore, the resistance of disadvantaged young people is more accurately understood as self-abandonment under the influence of social structures.

Second, students' resistance is not driven or supported by the working-class culture. X. Zhou (2011) observed that migrant young people not only had no pride in being the descendants of working class, instead wanting to flee from their parents' occupations, values, and lifestyles. Pun and Koo (2019) suggest that the agency of SVS students does not originate from their identification with working-class identity and culture, but instead from their conflicting lived experiences in material production and social and cultural reproduction.

By defying the authority of schools and teachers and reducing self-investment in knowledge and skills acquisition, students can only work in manufacturing and service industries with lower skill requirements after graduation, eventually having similar social conditions and opportunities as those of their parents (T. Li, 2016; Mi & Su, 2016; Y. Xiong, 2010; X. Zhou, 2011). These studies have consistently shown that the structural forces exerted on disadvantaged groups were powerful, whereas class solidification and inequality remain. However, it has been observed that the disadvantaged young people do not passively accept the influence of structural forces, instead choosing to resist the various restraints that they face and try to live a relatively comfortable life; in some circumstances, diligent students manage to get a degree (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2012).

#### 2.3.3.2 Chinese Vocational School Students' Aspirations

Resistance behaviours do not necessarily reflect disadvantaged young people's subjective experiences and feelings. Aspiration is a useful concept that could compensate for this gap. However, no research has systematically explored the role of aspiration in social reproduction among the SVS students in China.

Studies have provided preliminary descriptions of various aspirations in SVS students. It has been found that SVS students chose vocational schools because they wanted to obtain a diploma through vocational education, further attaining a higher income that will offer them a stable, relatively comfortable career in the future. These students ultimately want to achieve

upward mobility and enhance their social status (Koo, 2016; Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2012). From their parents and the media, the participants felt that *dagong* (*打工, selling labour)* was laborious and failed to promise a decent life. Therefore, they did not want to engage in manual labour, such as assembly line workers. Instead, these students aspired to find an office job or be their own boss (Koo, 2016; Pun & Koo, 2019). Moreover, SVS students are eager to stay in the city and do not want to return to the countryside. A survey of students from three secondary vocational schools in cities across western China found that only one of 820 respondents was willing to return to the countryside after graduation. For most SVS students, cities were full of opportunities, whereas farming is too arduous and unprofitable (Koo, 2016).

Studies have observed that the aspirations of SVS students were shaped and influenced by various factors. SVS students often hold the aspiration of learning skills when entering the school because the state and the school promise that vocational education can help students learn skills to become "to be white-collar staff or skilled technicians" (Pun & Koo, 2019, p. 8). However, students gradually realize that they could not learn any useful skills at school. What is learned is tolerance to mundane work and obedience of authorities (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; Woronov, 2012). Students attend vocational education with aspirations of learning skills, but tend to be engaged in a state of passing time, which makes them disappointed.

The experiences of internships have had an even greater impact. Internships are mandatorily imposed by the state and schools, aiming to allow students to learn skills and more effectively prepare for future work. However, during internships, the positions that students are engaged in usually did not match the major that they study. In addition, students are required to engage in low-end labour, with very poor working conditions and low salaries, often being required to work overtime to meet production needs. Enterprises essentially treated these students as a source of inexpensive labour (J. Chan, 2017; J. Chan et al., 2015a; Hansen & Woronov, 2013). The experiences of internships make it apparent that a school's project of self-enterprising is ineffective, and that the students would have little chance of

undertaking middle-class jobs in the future, causing frustration and pessimism (Pun & Koo, 2019).

The inconsistencies between the aspirations and realities encountered by the students in the process of schooling and internships are summarized as *double contradictions* by Pun and Koo (2019). Encountering contradictions in reality and the shattering of the original aspirations would provide rich soil for the emergence of agency and the realization of new working-class solidarity among working-class children (Pun & Koo, 2019).

### *2.3.4 Limitations of Studies on Social Reproduction among SVS Students*

Based on this review, existing literature on social reproduction among Chinese SVS students has the following three limitations.

First, few studies have explained the mechanisms of social reproduction among SVS students. Many studies have explored social reproduction among disadvantaged young people (e.g., rural and migrant youth) in China. However, this paper argues that the mechanism of social reproduction among SVS student may differ from that of other disadvantaged groups.

Second, there has been a lack of attention paid to the agency of SVS students in the process of social reproduction in the existing literature. Most studies have focused on the influence of structural factors such as the state, education system, schooling, and family, whereas few studies have paid attention to youth resistance in school, reflecting their subjectivity and agency. Overall, the existing research lacks a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of the thoughts, motivation, and emotions behind students' actions.

Finally, as an important dimension of agency, aspiration, as well as its role in social reproduction, has rarely been explored among Chinese SVS students. A number of studies have suggested that students held a number of aspirations upon entering vocational school, which were shaped by families and dominant ideologies in society. After entering school, the discourses that the school tried to educate and the students' lived experience in learning and internship continued to shape their aspirations. However, existing literature has not systematically depicted and analysed the aspirations of students, meaning that there is not yet

a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics, changes, and influencing factors of their aspirations, as well as the role of aspirations in social reproduction.

### 2.4 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to make sense of the fears, worries, and rationales behind the daily practices of Chinese SVS students and explore the mechanisms of social reproduction and the role of aspirations. Specifically, this study asks the following three questions:

1. What aspirations about education, future careers, and ways out do SVS students from rural areas have at the beginning of their vocational education? How do these aspirations form, and how are these aspirations related to students' identity as rural youth, students' situation of being channelled into vocational education, and students' personal choice to enter vocational schools?

2. In vocational school and the internship, what new experiences and feelings do students have? What changes in aspirations do students experience? What factors from family, schools, enterprises, and society influence the students' aspirations? How do the students negotiate between the original aspirations and the influences exerted by the structural factors? How do students' autonomy and creativity manifest?

3. Do students' aspirations change after receiving vocational education? If so, what are the new aspirations and what actions have students taken to serve those new aspirations? Will the students' original aspirations or new aspirations help them to transcend their parents' life situation and achieve upward social mobility, and if so, how?

### 2.5 Analytical Framework

This research adopts MacLeod's theory to analyse the role of aspirations and changes in social reproduction. My aim is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the mechanism of social reproduction in SVS students. When MacLeod (2009) analysed the social reproduction among disadvantaged young people, he admitted that structural factors were still

the principal factors contributing to social reproduction, emphasizing the role of aspirations. Changes in aspirations have been the mechanism by which structural factors contribute to social reproduction: "the regulation of aspirations is perhaps the most significant of all the mechanisms contributing to social reproduction; however, aspirations themselves are largely a function of structural mechanisms that should be considered when possible" (p. 113). Therefore, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their subjectivity, initiative, creativity, and the mechanism of social reproduction, it is necessary to delve into the contents and changes of aspirations.

Based on Bourdieu's ideas, Zipin et al. (2015) proposes a conceptual framework of aspirations, which is shaped by three aspects, namely habitus, doxa, and agency. Therefore, aspirations include three dimensions, namely *habituated, doxic*, and *emergent* aspirations.

*Habituated aspirations* are shaped by the habitus of the family and sociocultural group. These aspirations are grounded in biographic–historical conditions and "based in the dispositional structures of habitus, and embody the possibilities-within-limits of given social–structural positions" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 234). Taking the participants as Willis' (1977) study as an example, working-class children rejected the value of education, identifying working-class culture and hands-on manual labour, meaning that they did not aspire to middle-class jobs. Instead, these individuals' aspirations were shaped by interactions with their family habitus and wider socioeconomic dynamics, making them habituated aspirations.

*Doxic aspirations* have been developed from Bourdieu's concept of doxa, which refers to "a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 16). Doxic aspirations are "dominant norms about worthy futures" (Zipin et al., 2015, p. 236), which are shaped by discourses widely circulated in the state, media, schools, and various social contexts. Zipin et al. (2015) suggest that doxic aspirations have the power of symbolic violence because these norms and beliefs are codified and chosen by individuals in relatively powerful positions. For example, MacLeod (2009) found that, under the influence of the achievement ideology in neoliberal

America, black young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have aspired to pursue higher education, make more money, and achieve a middle-class work and life.

Zipin et al. (2015) introduce a third aspect, namely *emergent aspirations*, which are influenced and shaped by new experiences, practices, knowledge, and meanings. Emergent aspirations are "not primarily grounded in the past-made-present but are emerging among young people as their lives apprehend the present-becoming-future" (p. 236). Instead, emergent aspirations are future-orientated aspirations that offer the "possibility for imagining and pursuing alternative futures" (p. 237). In order to provide guidance and imperatives for future researchers, resourcing and capacitating are required to develop emergent aspirations. Appadurai's (2004) study with Indian slum dwellers provides rich information used in understanding the development of emergent aspirations. Appadurai (2004) describes a local organization dedicated to enhancing the living conditions of slum dwellers. Together with the activists, the local poor people creatively use rhetoric and rituals to fight for resources, rights, and dignity. In the process of expression and performances, these individuals continuously practice the arts of aspiration, thereby becoming more capable of reconciling immediate, urgent needs and long-term, overall action goals.

Zipin et al.'s (2015) theory provides insightful guidance for analysing the contents and influencing factors of aspirations of Chinese SVS students. According to this theory, aspirations are dynamic, changeable, and shaped by different forces. When students enter a vocational school, the aspirations that they hold are mainly from two sources. Specifically, habituated aspirations are shaped in family and previous school contexts, and doxic aspirations are shaped by the dominant discourses and ideologies in the society. During schooling, new experiences, such as learning experience, interactions with teachers and classmates, and internships may alter their habituated aspirations, and dominant ideologies that circulate in vocational schools may continuously mould their doxic aspirations. If students can actively strive for resources and increase their capacity to aspire, it may be possible for them to develop emergent aspirations.

The following chapters present the aspirations held by the students when they enter vocational school, the changes in aspirations under the influences of various factors, and the emergence of new aspirations.

It may be challenging to clearly identify a certain aspiration as either habituated, doxic, or emergent. An aspiration may be "a mixture of doxic, habituated, and emergent aspirations" (Macpherson, 2020, p. 64). Koo (2016) found that Chinese SVS students were eager to stay and work in big cities and unwilling to return to the countryside. This particular aspiration may be influenced by the habituated aspirations of families who hoped to leave the countryside and stay in big cities or also influenced by the dominant discourse, which promotes modern urban life and devalues rural life. Therefore, the value of Zipin et al.'s theory is not only to recommend differentiating various aspects of individual aspirations, but also to inform that aspirations are situated in social and cultural contexts and subject to the influence of many factors. Informed by Zipin et al.'s framework, this study focuses on the habitus and doxa in the family, school, and society, as well as their impact on students' aspirations. The paper also explores whether students develop future-oriented emergent aspirations that could provide an alternative future. By detailing the contents of aspirations and its changes, it is possible to understand a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between structural forces and individual agency.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, I first introduce the methodology used in this research and the rationale for the choices. Second, the field site and research participants are introduced in detail. Next, the role of the researcher is elaborated. I introduce data collection and data analysis respectively in two sections and explain how to ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Finally, I reflect on my fieldwork and discuss how my background and position may have influenced the research.

## 3.1 Ethnography

This study employed ethnography as the main method, using participant observation and interviews to probe participants' thoughts and feelings, obtain their life stories, and examine the dynamics of their behaviours. The ethnographic fieldwork lasted for one semester from March to June in 2018. Three considerations led to the use of ethnographies in this research.

First, ethnography helped me to understand the students in the social and cultural environment in which they were immersed. This research focuses on their aspirations, the formation processes behind those aspirations, and students' resistance behaviours. The SVS students had a series of learning and internship experiences that were different from those of regular senior secondary school students. Their perceptions and meaning making were deeply rooted in their schooling and internship experiences. Meanwhile, their perceptions of reality were mediated by the cultural resources in their environment. Therefore, in order to understand the influence of the educational experience on these students, it was important to gain access to the full range of experiences of vocational school students in school, in their internships, and in their sociocultural environment; I needed to understand their interpretations and meaning making of these experiences. Ethnography aims to "describe and interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 2018, p. 143). It is dedicated to exploring these values, behaviours, and beliefs in a broad sociocultural context (Lutz, 1981; Peoples & Bailey, 1988). Students' experiences and aspirations in the vocational schools were influenced by multiple levels of their sociocultural contexts. Research on schooling should not be limited to the

educational process and school environment; it needs to be located in a larger process (Connell, 1989). The ethnographic work of this research looked at classroom climate and peer relationships, family, and community environments as well as policy factors at the national and regional levels. Therefore, the ethnography here adopted a "multilevel approach" (John U Ogbu, 1981) in response to the complexity of the context and in an effort to explore the impact of various factors on individuals.

Second, well-trained ethnographic researchers can "capture the dynamic of change in ways that snapshot surveys using preestablished dimensions and response categories cannot" (Trickett & Oliveri, 1997, p. 149). This research treated students as active social agents who could construct their perceptions; in other words, the students were assumed to be doing much more than just passively accepting various ideologies and discourses from their school or society (Corsaro, 2017). The research further assumed that, in their school and internship experiences, the students might have complex and changing perceptions and feelings. The students' aspirations, values, and beliefs now that they had been in school for three to four years might be different from when they first entered school. As the researcher, I also committed to rethinking presumptions about the people or the social world in the field (such as the stigma attached to "bad students").

Finally, the ethnographic method used in this study is a social constructivism paradigm. Social constructivism holds the ontological belief that multiple realities exist and are "constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others" (Creswell, 2018, p. 75). In this paradigm, understanding research participants entails a double process of interpretation, or double hermeneutic (J. Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). Namely, the vocational school students tried to understand and interpret their own life experiences, and the researcher then tried to understand the students' understanding of their life experiences. In terms of epistemological beliefs, constructivists believe that reality can be best understood through the researcher's involvement in the relevant activities. Thus, "researchers must participate in the life of research participants in order to observe social dialogue and interaction, or the process of creating constructs, ideas, and meanings as they occur" (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 64). Admittedly, the knowing of a world or social reality

can be inhibited by the duration and depth of ethnographic research, as well as the theoretical lens of the ethnographer. The difference between ethnography and other methods of data collection is that ethnographic researchers immerse themselves in the researched contexts and stay close to the experience of the research participants. This immersion helps ethnographic researchers to achieve a deep understanding of the meaning making of the participants:

> *The ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so. In this way immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others' lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process.* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 2)

An ethnographer's position in the social structure affects the ethnographer's perspective on the studied phenomenon. It is difficult to break free from the confines of our original position when trying to see the world from another's perspective (Charon, 2012). Ethnography is an immersive experience. In the fieldwork, I lived and worked in the vocational school and experienced the students' studying and everyday life. This immersion allowed me to better understand students' hobbies, students' expectations about the future, and the reasons for students' choices as well as anxieties, worries, and other feelings.

### 3.2 Research Site: T Branch

This study selected a secondary vocational high school located in T County, Y Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province as the field site. I entered the field in March 2018 under the introduction of a teacher from the school's Office of Admissions and Employment. The school is a typical county vocational high school, and its development trajectory is the epitome of the development of vocational education in rural China since the reform and opening up.[1] In June 1983, with the implementation of the national secondary education structure reform policy, T County established an agricultural high school at a base of fine seed farms nine kilometres away from the downtown county. At that time, it was called T

[1] This section's information is drawn from school history materials, the county gazetteer, and the author's interviews with teachers and leaders.

County Agricultural High School, and it offered only had two majors, both related to agriculture. In 1986, the school moved to the eastern suburbs of the county, adjacent to the Institute of Agricultural Science of T County; at its new location, the school covered an area of 33 acres and was equipped with a production base for students' practice. In 1987, the school was renamed T County Vocational and Technical Middle School, and over the next few years, it gradually added chemical engineering, accounting, and other majors in addition to agriculture. During this period, the school's students scored relatively well on the high school entrance examination; there was not much difference between their scores and the scores of students at T County No.1 Middle School. In addition, the county government implemented preferential policies supporting vocational secondary school graduates, giving them priority in appointments of technicians for rural areas, in recruiting of workers and cadres, and in the army. Therefore, the employment prospects of the school's students were good. Officials from the State Education Commission, the Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee, the Vice-Governor, and other leaders from the central, provincial, prefecture, and county governments visited the school to inspect and guide its work and affirm the school's achievements.

Figure 3-1. The original campus of T County Agricultural High School

*Note*. This school was established nine kilometres away from the county's downtown in June 1983. The school had only one building at this time.

Figure 3-2. The second campus of T County Agricultural High School

*Note*. In 1986, the school moved to the eastern suburbs of the county and was equipped with a production base for students' practice. Currently, the Department of Agriculture and Forestry of T branch still conducts teaching activities here.

By the mid-1990s, with the decline of township enterprises and outmigration of young people, government employment policies favouring vocational education gradually disappeared. The school was left in a difficult position. Majors other than agriculture lacked sufficient teachers and equipment, and the school no longer had the reputation that it had when it was founded. In 2000, the vocational school also recruited regular secondary school students to attract students who wanted to enter a university. The entrance rate of the National College Entrance Examination was the main focus of the school's work. In 2003, the school began to cooperate with companies in the southeast coastal area, developing a form of school–enterprise cooperation to attract students by offering not only studies but also the chance to find employment in big cities. The school diversified and expanded its subjects. In

addition to agronomy majors such as breeding and veterinary medicine, the school added employment-oriented majors such as exhibition planning and organization, clothing, logistics, and computer studies. In 2005, the school reported that two-thirds of the students in the regular senior secondary school had been admitted to the university, and more than 95% of the students in the vocational education classes were employed in coastal areas. Despite some success, enrolling students was becoming more and more difficult. By 2006, the school had to set up specialized enrolment teams to visit every junior secondary school in other counties in Y Prefecture to promote enrolment.

In order to strengthen vocational education and break the bottleneck of school development, the county government appointed a provincial public technician college to take over the school and take charge of enrolment of full-time students in August 2010. The school moved to another new campus with an area of more than 300 acres and modern facilities five kilometres away from the downtown county. Since then, the original vocational senior secondary school has become one of the three branch schools of the technician college. For convenience, the new vocational school is referred to as T branch. As a branch school of a provincial school, T branch's teachers and equipment have been improved, the teaching quality and social reputation have enhanced, and the enrolment problem has been alleviated to a certain extent. From 2015 to 2017, the school hosted the Y Prefecture SVS Skills Competition for three consecutive years, and its schooling capability has been recognized in the prefecture.

Figure 3-3. The new campus of T branch

*Note*. In August 2010, the school moved to a new campus with an area of more than 300 acres and modern facilities. In addition to the office building, each department has its own teaching building, and some departments have special practical training rooms.

More than 98% of students' household registrations in T branch are in rural areas. T branch was my main site for observing the experiences of rural students in vocational education. In 2018, T county was a national poverty-stricken county, and students generally had low family incomes, and a significant number of students had parents who have passed away or were ill. The students' parents were mostly engaged in farming, running small businesses or working in factories outside their hometown.

In the spring semester of 2018, the school had about 4,000 students and 132 faculty members[2]. The school had five departments: Bioengineering, Mechanical and Electrical

[2] T county is located in a minority autonomous prefecture. Among the students of T branch, about 5% are ethnic

Engineering, Automotive Engineering, Computer and Economic Management, and Agriculture and Forestry. The Department of Agriculture and Forestry is still in the old campus near the Institute of Agricultural Sciences and provides agricultural vocational skills training for the public. The other four departments are located on the new campus and mainly recruit junior secondary school graduates. Therefore, my research was mainly conducted on the new campus. There are nine majors under the four departments, with the majors including electronic technology application, automobile maintenance, computer application and maintenance, early childhood education, and nursing. Some majors are completed in three years, and students can take exams to earn a certificate qualifying them as an intermediate skilled worker; other majors demand four-year full-time learning and allow students to take exams for a certificate qualifying them as an advanced skilled worker. All students can take the entrance examination for distance education credentials of vocational college, receive vocational college training, and obtain academic credentials in T branch. T branch has a stable cooperative relationship with many enterprises in the coastal area, and students are sent to these enterprises for internships and employment. The school adopts "closed management" of its students, which means that students can go home on Friday afternoon as long as they return to the school by Sunday afternoon. Students spend the rest of their days at school. Therefore, the school is a major venue for rural students to study and live.

### 3.3 Research Participants

This research focuses on how vocational education impacts and shapes rural students, so students were the main interviewees. Fifty-four students were interviewed, covering all majors of the school. Some of them were introduced to me by teachers and others students, some were students in my own class, and some were students who I reached out to on campus. Due to the large number of students in mechanical and automobile repair majors in the school, a substantial number of students from these two majors were interviewed. Most of the interviewees were with second- and third-year students. Compared with freshmen, these

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minority students, such as the Yi and the Zhuang. Ethnic minorities have unique dialects and ethnic cultures that may have an impact on students' experience in school, in internships in cities, and job choices after graduation. The unique experiences of minority students are not described in this study, but it is a quite good research direction for further studies.

students were more fluent in Mandarin, had participated in more school activities, and were able to express themselves more confidently. In order to understand students' studying and living conditions from different perspectives, I also interviewed 32 teachers. The teachers were also from different majors and played different roles in teaching and management. Information from the teachers played a very important role in understanding the development of various majors in the school, the difficulties in skills training, the economic and cultural conditions, the educational philosophy of the local community, the origins and background of the students, and the future plans of the graduates. Interviewing the teachers also generally helped me to understand the students' broader social and cultural context. During home visits and work in the school, I also interviewed eight parents. Their narratives helped me understand their expectations of their children and their attitudes on their children's academic and personal development. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the school development, I interviewed eight principals or party secretaries who had been successive school leaders since the establishment of the school on different occasions. They provided oral histories that helped me understand the rise and fall of local vocational education to complement the school's historical resources and the county gazetteer. In addition, I also communicated with five officials in charge of poverty alleviation and education to understand the local economic situation and the related economic and educational policies. A total of 107 research participants were included in my study, some of whom were interviewed multiple times.

### 3.4 The Role of the Researcher

Participant-as-observer is the role I adopted in this study. I tried to be involved in daily activities of the school, engage in abundant interactions with teachers and students, and build good relationships with them. This research strategy stems not only from my research interest in exploring how students' aspirations are affected by the educational process, but also from my position of social constructionism. Specifically, I worked as an intern teacher at the Admissions and Employment Office. I participated in the school's admission and employment for a whole semester and assisted several teachers in teaching tasks. During these tasks, I was able to establish close ties with students and teachers. I obtained rich data at

work such as the students' household registration information, family background, high school entrance examination results, income details through my quasi-employment internship, and the status of most students' first job. I observed the performance of students in my own and my colleagues' classrooms. I was also invited by teachers and students to their homes in the villages, where I learned about the local culture and observed interactions within families. All these observations and experiences are recorded in detail as field notes.

I also chose to expose, rather than hide, my role as a researcher in the field. I wanted to be transparent in order to build trust with my research participants to obtain a deeper understanding of them. In addition, my identity as a visiting researcher led to many conveniences. Being a newcomer, for example, I was free to ask many questions to become more familiar with the place. I interacted with different factions among the teachers, having meals with them as well as delivering lectures in classes, and I also spent leisure time with the students. Teachers and students felt comfortable communicating with me about their thoughts and confusions regarding educational ideals, teaching methods, career choices, etc.

## 3.5 Data Collection

In terms of data collection, constructivism emphasizes an inductive, bottom-up approach, rather than proposing a theory and performing hypothesis testing. The constructivist researcher interacts with informants to understand their meanings, which are subjective, "negotiated socially and historically" (Creswell, 2018, p. 60). Accordingly, my constructivist research used participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary data to collect the data (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee (HSESC) of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Written informed consent was obtained from the interviewees in the formal interview. For the informal interview, the students' oral consent was obtained.

### *3.5.1 Participant Observation*

Participant observation is the primary method by which anthropologists conduct their fieldwork (de Munck & Sobo, 1998). It is defined as "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting" (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 91). In a good participant

observation, the researcher maintains a good rapport with the informants, holds an open and non-judgmental attitude, expresses interest and curiosity about people and phenomena, and keeps a certain degree of objectivity (H. R. Bernard, 1994; DeWalt & DeWalt, 1998). In the field, first of all, I participated in the school's daily work as an intern teacher in the Office of Admissions and Employment. In this position, I assisted colleagues with completing reports, making an admissions brochure and promotional web pages, and designing management methods for internships. I also attended school meetings with colleagues, hosted visitors from companies and parents in the school office, and fully engaged in the enrolment in another county with the school admission team. Through this experience, I gained a deep understanding of the current situation of school enrolment and employment and the plight of school development, and at the same time I established a close relationship with school leaders and teachers.

Second, I was intensively involved in the classroom. At the request of some teachers, I helped them prepare for courses, teach competitions, and replaced them when they were on leave. I also sat in on other teachers' courses, including theory and practice, professional, and elective courses. Participating in classrooms allowed me to better observe the learning process, learning attitude, and skills and ideology that the educators tried to deliver to their students. Third, I was involved in my students' daily lives as much as possible. Outside of work, I joined the students in many activities such as having meals in the canteen, walking on the playground, and chatting in the dormitory. I spent several weekends with students as well, as some students invited me to their homes in the countryside, and some students invited me to hang out in the downtown area. With an age difference of about ten years, I tried to be friendly towards the students as much as possible, listening to their worries and sharing their joys like an agony aunt. Through accessing the real life of the informants, observing and understanding their performance in study and life during the participant observation, I was able to discover the characteristics and uniqueness of their behaviours, beliefs, and aspirations. I was able to build a deep understanding of the students at an individual level. Meanwhile, I also paid attention to how students' relationship with their families and the local social and cultural conditions impacted the students.

### *3.5.2 In-depth Interview*

In-depth interview was another main method of collecting data in my research. Interview "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). In my fieldwork, the most important interviewees were students. Interviews with the students provided their direct statements about the problem, which was suitable for understanding their perceptions and attitudes. As recommended by Walford (2018), most of the interviews with the students took place in a later stage of the fieldwork, after I had established a good relationship with them (and they had gained more knowledge of my research). At the time of the interviews, most students had completed at least one internship.

Formal interviews were generally conducted individually, lasting from half an hour to one and a half hours. Interviews were semi-structured, using questioning and follow-up probing to explore the impact of several events (e.g., internships, courses, school society activities) on students and students' perspectives on certain school and work experiences. The interview guide contained three sets of questions. The first set of questions was related to the events themselves. The students were asked what they had experienced during their vocational education. The second set of questions was concerned with their feelings, perceptions, and behaviours before and after experiencing certain events. The third set of questions consisted of their attitudes and evaluations about themselves, their current life situation, education choices, employment, and perceptions on the meaning of life. Interviews were conducted in places where students could feel relaxed and comfortable, such as offices, classrooms, dormitories, and outdoor open spaces. With the permission of the students, the interviews were audio-recorded. Of the 54 students interviewed, 9 were close to me. I conducted follow-up interviews via phone or WeChat to obtain additional information about their last internships and working and life conditions after graduation.

I also conducted a number of informal interviews. Informal interview is a common method of data collection in ethnographic research (Fetterman, 2019). In the informal interviews, an unstructured and non-directive approach was mainly used to understand the students' attitudes and feelings on topics that they wanted to discuss, so as to gain a more

comprehensive understanding of the vocational school students. These informal interviews usually took place when eating, walking, or shopping with students. The key points were recorded by taking field notes.

### *3.5.3 Documentary Data*

In addition to the participant observations and interviews, I also collected and analysed textual documents, including two volumes of the county gazetteer, one volume of the county education gazetteer, and more than forty pieces of school history materials. Document analysis provided a wealth of contextual information, which was helpful to better understand the social meanings, relationships, and activities of the informants (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008). These historical materials on the county economy and education gave social context for the environment in which T Branch developed. School history materials illustrated the development of the school and helped explain the impact of the development of the local economy and education system on vocational education, thus laying the foundation for an understanding of the fields in which students chose to conduct their study, internship, and employment.

## 3.6 Data Analysis

This research followed the three steps on ethnographic data management suggested by educational anthropologist Harry Wolcott (1994): *description, analysis,* and *interpretation*. The main purpose of the *description* step is to present the experience and attitudes of informants in order to answer the question "what is going on here". Researchers should stay close to the narratives of informants. A good practice is to "draw long excerpts from one's field notes, or repeat informants' words so that informants themselves seem to tell their stories" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). The second step, *analysis*, goes beyond the descriptive accounts to identify the "essential features and the systematic description of interrelationships among them" (p. 12). This step is similar to the process of forming themes in thematic analysis, in which the researcher codes the raw interview materials and then develops themes based on the initial codes. A theme "represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In the third step, *interpretation*, researchers try to make sense of data based on the description and analysis. The process of

interpretation “transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 36). The key difference between analysis and interpretation is that the former is constrained and conservative and bound by the border of the data, while the latter goes beyond these borders and forms a more general understanding. This process requires constant dialogues with existing theories to deepen the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon in the field.

These three steps are in line with the “thick description” proposed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1973, p. 16). Thick description emphasizes an in-depth and dense description of the life experience and social and cultural contexts of informants observed in the field. Interpretation is therefore central to thick description. Essentially, “anthropological writings are themselves interpretations” (p. 15). Geertz (1973) further explained the three characteristics of ethnographic description as follows:

> it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms. (p. 20)

## 3.7 Trustworthiness

Like quantitative research, qualitative research also employs certain criteria to assess the research quality; these criteria are often referred to as *rigor, goodness* or *trustworthiness* (S. L. Morrow, 2005). It is recommended to use a different language when evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Agar, 1986). Among the various criteria on trustworthiness, four criteria were proposed by Guba (1981). The four criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### *3.7.1 Credibility*

Credibility is similar to internal reliability in quantitative research, “in which they seek to ensure that their study measures or tests what is actually intended” (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Lincoln and Guba believed that ensuring credibility was one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Scholars have highlighted the importance of triangulation to credibility, as triangulation can ensure honesty in informants, allow iterative

questioning, and enable peer scrutiny of the research project (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991; Shenton, 2004)

*Triangulation*. Triangulation refers to "the use of multiple and different methods, investigators, sources, and theories to obtain corroborating evidence" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 239). In my research, I mainly used triangulation of methods and triangulation of data sources. Specifically, via in-depth interview, the students talked about their experiences and their views on a range of topics, but their verbal expressions and behaviours were not necessarily consistent. Therefore, participant observation was also used to validate some important information about the students. Through participant observation, I found inconsistencies and contradictions between the students' behaviours and their expressions. In addition to interviewing students, I also interviewed many teachers to enrich my understanding. The teacher's statements were invaluable in verifying important student statements, and I further checked with teachers if there were any discrepancies elsewhere.

*Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants*. First, I established a good relationship with the informants. Both teachers and students trusted me. In particular, I tried my best to get along with students equally, emphasizing that I was a researcher from the mainland and also a student from the countryside to avoid the barriers caused by an elite status. Second, I encouraged informants to freely express their feelings and assured them that their personal information would be handled anonymously, their data would be kept secure, and they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Moreover, I emphasized to them my role as an independent researcher: I was not collecting information on behalf of the school, and I had no conflicts of interest with them.

*Iterative questioning*. Informants might not reveal their true attitudes and feelings for a variety of reasons. Potentially deliberate lies can be revealed through rephrased questions (Shenton, 2004). For example, during the interviews, I asked the interviewees some important questions repeatedly or asked the same questions again in different words. If any inconsistencies arose, I had an in-depth discussion on this issue with the interviewee.

*Peer scrutiny of the research project*. For researchers, peer debriefing can provide "the opportunity to test their growing insights and to expose themselves to searching

questions" (Guba, 1981, p. 85). In the field, I often discussed my findings with my peers who were also earning or who held a doctorate in a field related to sociology. They provided a number of helpful suggestions to my research. For example, they suggested that I should also pay attention to parents' expectations even though I was focused on students' aspirations so that I could gain a deeper understanding of the content and characteristics of students' aspirations. After the fieldwork, I also shared my research experiences and findings with teachers and classmates in a post-fieldwork seminar at the department.

### *3.7.2 Transferability*

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the extent to which the findings of the research can be applied and generalized to other contexts (Payton, 1994). However, for qualitative research, generalization is challenging because qualitative findings are the result of interactions between specific researchers and specific individuals under specific social and cultural contexts (Sandelowski, 1986). Therefore, Guba (1981) introduced the concept of transferability, which refers to whether the degree of similarity between the researched contexts and other contexts could enable the transfer of research findings to other situations. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Firestone (1993) argued that readers should take responsibility when generalizing findings to other contexts because the reader has a better knowledge of the similarity between the new context and the research context as well as the credibility of the inference. The researcher needs to focus on providing a thick description, depicting "a full description of all the contextual factors impinging on the inquiry" (Guba, 1981, p. 86). In my research, I made a detailed analysis of the content and process of the discourses which the students shared. In addition, I tried to present complete and detailed expressions of the informants to provide more information about the contexts and reduce potential misunderstandings among readers. More importantly, I provided rich information about contexts, including the national education policy, the local education environment, the economic status of the county, and the history and information of T branch. These contexts provided sufficient information for the readers to decide the extent to which the research findings could be transferred to other contexts.

### *3.7.3 Dependability and Confirmability*

Dependability is related to the consistency of the data, that is, to whether the findings would be consistent if the research were to be repeated with the same or similar research participants and contexts. From a quantitative perspective, the ontological assumption behind this consistency (called reliability) is a single reality. Social constructivism, in contrast, generally holds the assumption of multiple realities. Guba coined the term *dependability* to apply when the concept of consistency "implies not invariance but trackable variance that can be ascribed to sources" (Guba, 1981, p. 81). For example, some sources of variability "might include increasing insight on the part of the researcher, informant fatigue, or changes in the informant's life situation" (Krefting, 1991, p. 216).

Confirmability deals with the issue of neutrality, which refers to the extent to which the research findings stem from accurate information about research participants, rather than from the researcher's bias or motivation. In ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher spends a long time with the research participants and becomes an insider. It is quite challenging to rule out the influences of the researcher's bias and motivation in the findings. Therefore, Guba (1981) suggested that more emphasis should be placed on the neutrality of the data, rather than on the neutrality of the investigator, when addressing the issue of confirmability.

Audit trail and external audit are recommended to ensure dependability and confirmability (Anney, 2014; Guba, 1981; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). An audit trail contains "a thorough collection of documentation regarding all aspects of the research" (Rodgers, 2008, p. 43). All of the decisions and activities, materials and procedures of the research project should be clearly presented. A transparent research path can provide proof of the neutrality of the data. Halpern (1983) suggested that the audit trail should contain the following contents: raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, notes about the processes of the study and the intents and dispositions of the researcher, and information about any instruments used in the study. In my research, I strictly followed this suggestion by keeping the audio recordings, documentary materials, field notes, materials generated during the analysis process, personal and reflective notes, and each version of the written manuscripts in a safe place.

An external audit refers to inviting an independent and competent researcher "to examine the audit trail and to comment on the degree to which procedures used fall within generally accepted practice" (Guba, 1981, p. 87). An external auditor can judge whether the sources of variability of the data throughout the PhD project are transparent and reasonable. The purpose of external audits is "not to produce a single report which claims to represent 'the truth', nor necessarily to reach a consensus", but to examine "how systematically and transparently this particular account has been produced" (J. Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). In this research, I invited a PhD student with rich experience in qualitative research to review the entire audit trail to ensure that the research path was transparent and that my analysis was reasonable.

### 3.8 Reflexivity

In ethnography, which is based on social constructivism, researchers are actively involved in the informants' lives, so a "researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions" (Malterud, 2001, pp. 483-484). Therefore, researchers need to make their position explicit in qualitative research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This involves the concept of *reflexivity*, which pertains to the "analytic attention to the researcher's role in qualitative research" (Gouldner, 1972, p. 427). Creswell (2018) argued that reflexivity should consist of two parts. First, the researcher should describe their background and position related to the phenomenon being studied, including past life, work, study, and family dynamic, as well as their own preconceptions, biases, and values. Second, the researcher should discuss the possible influence of this background and position on their interpretation of the phenomenon. This presentation of any possible influence on the researcher's interpretation and understanding is not intended to eliminate any possible bias, but to ensure readers understand that the results of the research are indeed affected by these aspects of the researcher.

In this study, the differences in educational background, life experience, and age between me and the research participants did make it somewhat difficult for me to fully

understand their perceptions and attitudes. Most notably, my educational background is rather elite relative to the students. Being good at school was something that I took for granted, and I was always able to manage my studies. As early as junior secondary school, I was being instructed by my teachers to study hard; I was told that if I failed to achieve a good academic performance, my only option would be to go to a vocational school. My previous impression of vocational school students was stereotyped: vocational school students had a poor academic performance, weak competency etc. It was not until I started to pay attention to this group that I realized the constraints that a disadvantaged economic and social status imposed on them. Through reviewing the literature in my field, I had gained a broad conception of the multifaceted and complex nature of this group, but my original position still affected my perceptions of them to some extent. For example, in the early days of the fieldwork, it was difficult for me to understand why the students did not like to study, did not listen to teachers in class, and did not complete homework after class. Through participant observations and interviews, however, I gradually realized that "love of studying", or lack thereof, is something that is nurtured and enforced as one grows up. When there is no pressure to enter a higher school, why would you "love to study"? Moreover, the students had some understanding of what their likely jobs would be in the future. Whether they entered a factory or not, they were confident that they would be engaged in jobs that did not require many skills. The skills learned in school would therefore be almost entirely useless in the workplace. In this way, "love of studying" made little sense for them.

A change of perspective is crucial for researchers, but not easy. However, as Wang Hui pointed out, the new migrant workers and the new poor in contemporary China share similar predicaments (Hui Wang, 2014). I am a member of the new poor myself; while I have climbed to the middle class, I have limited spending power. The development logic of neoliberalism has left people like me, who have come from an economically disadvantaged family, to face many difficulties in striving for social class mobility. Although I have acquired a different status through higher education, I shared many of the same anxieties as my student informants. This important connection enabled me to empathize with the students. The students seemed to be versions of myself in a parallel universe, versions who had not been

lucky enough to climb the social ladder. From this perspective, instead of feeling superior because of my elite status, I found myself viewing them as equals and treating them in a caring manner. I made an effort to understand the structural factors shaping their lives. Finally, I have rich experience in ethnographical field work, and as my experience has taught me, I continually strived to reduce the influence of my stereotypes. I established a relatively close relationship with my research participants. I came to know them well, as we were in constant contact in our daily lives. They called me “elder sister”, and I regarded myself as their elder sister in turn. I worked hard to imagine myself coming from a similar family and community, standing in their situation, sharing their sense of confusion and eagerness to identify better prospects. The fieldwork was done in such a process: as the researcher, I faced the challenges brought about by the differences in my background versus that of my participants, but I constantly adjusted my perspective to better understand the participants.

# Chapter 4 Obtaining Credentials, Learning Skills, and Going to Big Cities: The Aspirations to Climb the Social Ladder

MacLeod (2009) argued that aspirations are realistic goals rather than fantasies. Aspirations take social constraints into careful consideration, yet are also different from expectations, which are solely based on realistic conditions; individual aspirations reflect preferences and wishes (MacLeod, 2009). This chapter provides an overview of students' aspirations when choosing to enter vocational school and at the beginning of vocational school. The chapter begins by describing the educational context of the county, specifically the options for rural students provided by the existing educational system after graduation from junior high school. I then shed light on the situation in which the students chose to enter a vocational school at the crossroads of their life, and what aspirations the students valued and felt could be realized through vocational education. Next, I analyse the relationship between the students' choices and family aspirations, describing the attitudes of parents when their children were unable to continue their studies. I further describe the features of students' aspirations. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the holistic aspirations that the students wanted to achieve through their situational aspirations, as well as why their aspirations were reflected in three forms in the current social environment.

## 4.1 The Great Diversion

In analysing the students' choice of vocational education, it is important to determine the choices that were available to them. Under the education system since the reform and opening-up, the test scores on the Senior High School Entrance Examination (SHSEE) are used to stratify and select talent (Hannum et al., 2011; Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). This method is a signification diversion from the traditional education system. After the SHSEE, the students with the higher scores go to the key regular senior secondary schools (RSSS), while the students with low scores go to the ordinary RSSS, and the students with the worst performance in SHSEE go to the vocational high schools (VHS) or leave their studies. Therefore, generally, the main reason for which students enter the vocational education system is poor academic performance. These students' entry into vocational education is often unwanted, occurring only after students have been stratified by the education system.

Currently there are three high schools in T county, namely T Branch vocational high school, T County No.1 Middle School, and TY High School regular senior secondary school. T County No.1 Middle School has a long history, and student quality is high. TY High School was founded in response to the call of the "1650 Education Century Project"[3] in Honghe Prefecture to solve the shortage of T County No.1 Middle School in T County. The school began to enrol students in the autumn of 2004, causing the ratio of students enrolled in RSSS to students who participated in examinations to increase from 18.65% to 33.03% in 2004[4]. Generally, students enter vocational schools (i.e., T branch) only when they fail to meet the requirements of the two RSSS. A small number of students admitted to TY High School joined the T branch because they felt that they could not bear the pressure of RSSS and tended to continue their studies in a more relaxed environment:

> *In fact, the admission score (TY High School) is not high, and I could get. However, I don't want to study there because it's too tiring.*[5]
>
> *I used to be in TY High School. I felt very tired at high school. My dad asked me if I am able to study or not, and I said no*[6].

Many students entered T branch via an alternative pathway; some found that they had had difficulties in studying in junior secondary school, that their grades were not high enough to be admitted to RSSS, or that they had no chance to be admitted to university despite having gone to TY High School. These students had limited hope in academic studies and chose to enrol in the T branch before graduating from junior high school. In 2011, the T branch began enrolling students twice one year: in spring and autumn. The main targets for spring enrolment are the rural youth who has not completed junior secondary school. In the newly admitted students from the T branch, the number of students who had not graduated from

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[3] The "1650 Education Century Project" was launched by Honghe Prefecture government. In this project, Honghe Prefecture vigorously promoted high school education over three years from 2004. Sixteen combined secondary schools and vocational secondary schools have been constructed and enhanced to increase the gross enrolment rate of the senior secondary level to 50%. For more details, see "Continuous 'three-level jump' of basic education in Honghe, Yunnan ", *China Education News*, 27 January 2008, Section 1; "Report on the pilot work of comprehensive education reform in Honghe Prefecture", *Education in Yunnan (Vision)*, May 2005.

[4] Date was from "Statistical Table of T County Senior High School Entrance Examination from 1978 to 2012 (6)", *T County Gazetteer*, p151-152.

[5] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)

[6] Interviewee S44 (2018, June 6)

junior secondary schools was higher than those who had entered the T branch after taking SHSEE[7].

> *I didn't like to study when I was in junior high school; I then dropped out of school. After resting at home for about three months, my parents sent me here to study.*[8]

> *At that time, my academic performance was not good, and I felt that I couldn't go to high school even if I spent more time studying. Therefore, I chose to come to vocational school.*[9]

> *I was in the key class in the first and second year of junior high school. I went to the medium class when I was in my third year. I feel that, even if I perform well in the high school entrance exam, I won't be able to go to university after high school.*[10]

These students chose vocational education because of academic incompetence. Some students chose vocational education because of the poor economic conditions of their family. Tuition fees are required in key and ordinary RSSS. However, public vocational high schools, which are funded by the state, do not charge tuition fees and provide various types of subsidies for students. Honghe Prefecture, which is the main enrolment area for the T branch, is an economically backward region and has the second largest population living in poverty in the province (Government of Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, 2018). Some poor students choose to study at the T branch to reduce family pressure:

> *Because of my family, I chose to study at a vocational school because, after all, I know that, if I go to academic high school, my family may not be able to afford it.11*

> *In fact, I was admitted to the academic high school in our county, but my family cannot not support me. Therefore, I came here; there is no tuition fee here.12*

Many students were unable to enter ordinary RSSS due to their poor academic performance and/or family's economic conditions. However, these students chose to continue

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[7] *Statistics about enrolment size of T branch*, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment
[8] S2 (2018, May 21)
[9] S22 (2018, June 4)
[10] S13 (2018, May 30)
[11] Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)
[12] Interviewee S34 (S34-1; 2018, March 14)

their studies in vocational schools rather than abandoning education. Every year, a considerable number of students choose to quit their education if they are unable to enrol in ordinary academic high schools (T County Education Bureau, 2016), which was referred to as "direct enter society".[13] What aspirations did those students who entered T branch want to achieve? In the following sections, I present students' responses to this question.

## 4.2 Students' Aspirations

### *4.2.1 Obtaining Credentials*

Credentials are one of the elements that students hope to obtain from the school. For many students, obtaining academic credentials was the reason for which they chose to stay in school. A boy (S31) who did nothing at school repeatedly highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of leaving school. He hoped that the head teacher would allow his absence from study while letting him retain his student status (which meant keeping his name in the student log) to "get the best of both worlds" because he had heard that "it seems to work before". However, the head teacher refused his request, which frustrated him. In his opinion, he would definitely leave school early if he did not have to think about the diploma.

It is not difficult to obtain a diploma. As long as the students do not violate school discipline and complete all procedures prescribed by the school, they can earn a diploma, regardless of their academic performance. The students made it clear that they must obtain at least a diploma after vocational education:

> *I feel that no matter how I* hun*, at least I'll be using the four years of my exchange for my diploma, right? I never thought about anything like not studying.*[14]
>
> *I told people at home that I didn't want to study anymore and that I couldn't study well; it's a waste of money. My mother told me that, if you can't study well, at least you can* hun *a diploma, which can you do now if you quit school?*[15]

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[13] Although schools are a part of society, "at school" is opposed to "in society" when used by students, parents, and teachers. When a student leaves school, he is considered to have entered society. This "entry into society" implies a hypothesis that the school is different from the operating mechanisms of society.

[14] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

[15] Interviewee S40 (2018, June 6)

*I have thought about quitting school. My friends are all making money already; they can wear beautiful clothes when they have money. I just thought, let it go, I don't study anymore and want to go out to make some money. Then I thought, what if my salary if a little higher than theirs after graduation? It is impossible for a person to* dagong *for a lifetime? Like I said, I would obtain a college diploma or a secondary school diploma by drifting along if necessary. I insisted and insisted constantly.*[16]

The diplomas earned by these students may demonstrated that they have completed secondary education, but the types of diplomas are different from RSSS. As noted in previous sections, are mainly four types of schools in the secondary vocational education system: regular specialized secondary schools; vocational high schools; skilled workers schools; and adult specialized secondary schools. The credentials received by students in these schools are collectively referred to as specialized secondary education credentials.

Students have had an opportunity to obtain vocational college credentials when studying at the T branch and had high expectations for the credentials. In order to cater to the students' aspirations of obtaining academic credentials, the school emphasizes that "skills and credentials are equally important".[17] The centre cooperated with Kunming College[18] and became a teaching unit of the distance education for vocational college credentials. Specifically, students who reached the age of 16[19] can sign up for the Adult National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) via the T branch. Students who had passed the exam can be admitted to Kunming College and attend distance education courses at T branch. If they pass the test for each course, these students are able to obtain vocational college credentials (distance education) issued by Kunming College within three years. Using the Department of Automotive Engineering as an example, all students (total of 203) who had reached the age of 16 signed up for the Adult NCEE in 2018. The criteria of admission were low. After an examination (the full score is 600, but students who reach 200 could be admitted) and supplementary examination (the total score is 600 and students who reach 190 could be

[16] Interviewee S14, (2018, May 30)
[17] *2018 Admissions Brochure of T Branch*, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment
[18] Kunming College is a public college, established in May 2004, offering both vocational college and a Bachelor's degree. The college has a number of distance education programmes, which cooperates with other partners.
[19] From 2019, students will have to be 18 years old to take the Adult NCEE.

admitted), 201 students were successfully enrolled in Kunming College for the pursuit of vocational college credentials.[20] According to students, the secondary education credentials offered by the vocational school was still at a low level. In contrary, the vocational college credential was much better, although the vocational college credential obtained were only from a distance education programme rather than from a full-time study programme.

> *After being admitted to a vocational college, I guess it was enough. If I work in the factory, this should be enough. If I feel that my diploma is not enough after entering the factory, I will pursue a vocational college diploma.*[21]

> *Because I am studying at a vocational college, I feel that academic credentials should not be a hindrance to my career. If I go to work in an automobile 4S store in the future, I will work harder for a higher professional credentials, such as earning a technician certificate.*[22]

[20] Interviewee T2 (T2-4; 2019, September 4), teacher in charge of distance education vocational college programme at the Department of Automotive Engineering

[21] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

[22] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)

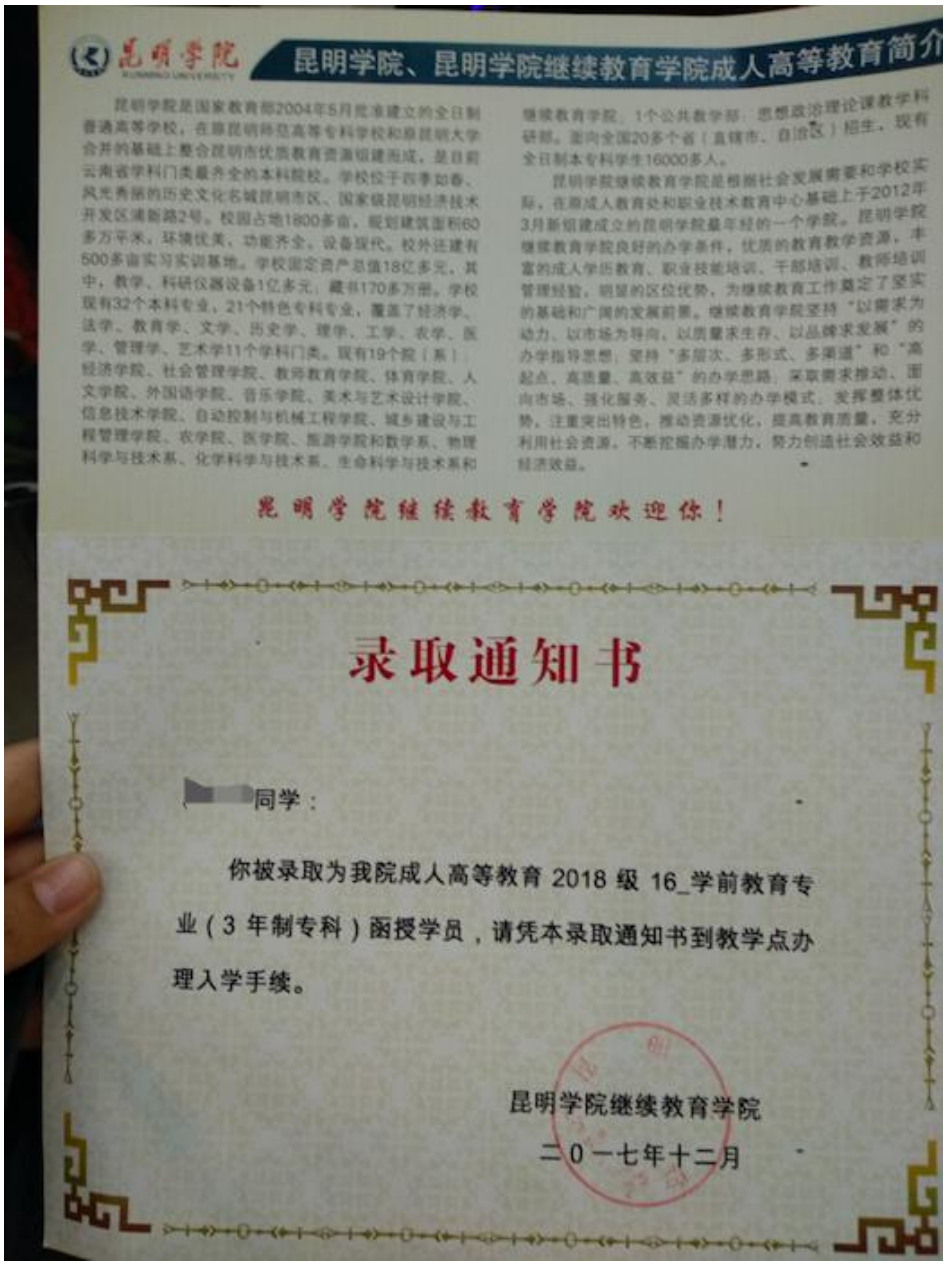


Figure 4-1. Admission letter from Kunming College

*Note*. A student received an admission letter from Kunming College. After completing three years of study, she will receive the vocational college credential (distance education). This type of degree is not particularly competitive on the job market.

It should be noted that students expressed a cautious optimism about their future after obtaining academic credentials, which is reflected in their uncertain, speculative tone when speaking of future: “should be enough” and “should not be a hindrance”. This idea is also reflected in their preparation for the context in which academic credentials are insufficient: In

this case, students continue to find means of achieving more useful credentials.

In addition to academic credentials, such as specialized secondary education or vocational college credentials, there are another two kinds of certificates that students have the opportunity to obtain at school. One of these certificates is the Vocational Qualification Certificate or Vocational Skill Level Certificate, such as the qualification certificate for nursery teachers, the qualification certificate for nurses, or the Intermediate Skilled Workers and Advanced Skilled Workers certificates for auto repair and mechanical majors. Second, if students win a place in the skill competitions, they may also earn award certificates to prove that they have high-level skills. When entering the T branch, some students have the aspiration for two kinds of certificates:

> *When I graduate, I will get a diploma, a vocational college credential, and a vocational skills level certificate, which may offer me more development prospects and advantages than them.*[23]

> *I want to participate in a skill competition before graduating. If I get an award and have a certificate, I may have a competitive advantage when applying for a job in the future. I think so.*[24]

As students described their aspirations and plans, what credentials mean to them became more apparent. Students believe that obtaining credentials will enhance their market competitiveness and make their status higher than junior secondary school graduates in that they would be less hindered, earn higher wages, and obtain more development prospects when looking for jobs. This perceived advantage reflects the belief that human capital investment will pay off when students first enter the vocational school, which is consistent with the findings of previous research (Anagnost, 2013; Koo, 2016). As mentioned by S14, while her friends have chosen to work and already made some money, she has chosen to pursue academic credentials for at least four more years and expressed believing that a higher education may guarantee a higher salary. This practice, which is common in vocational education, is called *The Labour of Waiting* by Woronov (2012), namely investing time in

[23] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)
[24] Interviewee S44 (2018, June 6)

exchange for jobs. In addition, students extensively used the term "*hun* diploma" in conversation. According to the two Chinese researchers (Long Zhang & Meng, 2015), the word "*hun*" *(混, to drift along and waste time)* embodies a passive attitude that values results over processes. The characteristics of students' aspiration, which are reflected in this expression, are further analysed in this chapter.

### *4.2.2 Learning Vocational Skills*

"Universities are not the only way out, and skills are the foundation of survival." Walking into the campus of T branch, this slogan is on the main building. Schools aim to explain to visitors that students who do not get a university diploma can also earn a living as long as they can master a kind of vocational skill. Mastering skills is one of the important aspirations for students when they enter vocational schools:

> *Because I had a poor academic performance in junior secondary school, I chose this school to learn some new skills.*[25]
>
> *I feel that I did not lay a good foundation for my studies at primary school. I was also not good at studying in junior secondary school, making it impossible for me to enter a university. The only choice for me is to enter this kind of a vocational school to learn some skills to earn myself a good life in the future.*[26]
>
> *You go to a high school then enter a university. After graduation, you have to learn a kind of skill in the future when you search for a job.*[27]

After being diverted by the education system, students feel that their possibility of winning the future through their academic performance had been destroyed; they hoped to learn skills through another path and improve their lives. These students believed that "employment depends on competence";[28] surviving in society requires skills. Some students who did not study at regular school, when entering the vocational school, gradually came to realize the importance of learning skills: "*After all, we will enter society as soon as we*

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[25] Interviewee S41 (2018, June 6)
[26] Interviewee S42 (2018, June 6)
[27] Interviewee S28 (2018, March 6)
[28] Interviewee S45 (S45-1; 2018, March 13)

*graduate from this school. Without skills, what can I rely on to make a living?*"[29]

Students expressed believing that that developing proficiency in a particular skill can not only help them get a job, but also offer greater autonomy in choosing a job and gaining respect from others:

> *After we graduate, the school will arrange jobs for us, right? If you don't want to take it, I can do something else since I have proficiency in a particular field. This is what I believe. If I have learned the skills, what am I afraid of?*[30]

> *For me, if I learn the skills, others will appreciate me no regardless of what I decide to do in the future, as long as I have learned the skills.*[31]

In recent years, with the resources deployed in the development of vocational education, the state instils in the minds of the public that receiving vocational education may promote personal development. For example, in 2006, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao held a conference with experts on vocational education and pointed out that vocational education is designed for everyone. Through vocational education, people may find a suitable method for study and development (Wen, 2005). In the National Vocational Education Conference (2014), President Xi Jinping emphasized that vocational education was an important component of the national education system and human resource development, as well as an important way for young people to open the door to success (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Some students shared similar ideas to these claims. S13's brother is a university student, though he did not think that his brother is superior; he believed that there were too many university students and many of them still cannot find a job. What is lacking now is skilled personnel[32]. When first entering the vocational school, some students believed that the promise of learning skills and thought that he just took a different path from RSSS students:

> *There are indeed many university students now. I also know that there are few people in vocational education. I think that people are in need in vocational education. If I*

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[29] Interviewee S21 (2018, June 4)
[30] Interviewee S43 (2018, June 6)
[31] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[32] S13 (2018, May 30)

*study hard, I should be able to become a talent.*[33]

*I was not particularly attracted to high schools and universities. Nowadays, the belief that only going to high school could guarantee a promising future is unfounded, which I have also seen online. Learning skills in vocational schools offers a more promising future.*[34]

However, most students do not carefully consider the major and skills that they need to learn; instead, they often follow the advice of a friend or an acquaintance in the village to choose a certain major or even chose a major at random:

*My cousin is also studying here. She is in this major, so I followed her.*[35]

*I chose it randomly. At the time, I thought that the Computerized Numerical Control was advanced, so I chose it.*[36]

Only a few students seriously consider the employment prospects of their chosen majors. Based on their knowledge of the majors or their family members' suggestions, students choose a major that they believe will offer opportunities in the future. A number of students also consider their personal interests and expertise and form preliminary career aspirations, aiming to develop professional skills to pursue their careers in the future:

*I chose this major by myself because I have fairly frequent contact with it. My parents also supported this decision. Even if I play computer games at home, at least my typing is fast. I have some advantages in this major over others.*[37]

*My family thought that automotive repair would be good for future employment, so I chose this one.*[38]

*My dream is to be a doctor but I didn't keep up with others in junior secondary school and I felt that I was falling behind. So, I decided to study nursing.*[39]

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33 S10 (2018, May 29)
34 S11 (2018, May 29)
35 S41 (2018, June 6)
36 S31 (2018, March 13)
37 Interviewee S20 (2018, June 4)
38 Interviewee S17，S17-1
39 Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

Gender difference was apparent in choice of major. In the 2018 spring enrolment, few girls chose mechanical and electrical engineering, automotive engineering, and computer applications and maintenance. The number of girls in the culinary department was also less than half of that of boys. The early childhood education major was not chosen by any male student, and the nursing and biological agents major is only selected by a few male students[40]. These choices appear to reflect students' awareness of gender segregation on the job market.

### *4.2.3 Going Out to Large Cities*

Since the 1990s, migrating to the city has become a national phenomenon as an increasing numbers of peasants have left their hometown to work in the city in pursuit of a better life (Jingzhong Ye & Wang, 2018; Guangsheng Zhang & Tian, 2018). These students' motivations to work in the cities were diverse, such as obtaining employment opportunities, educational opportunities, welfare and public facilities; some tried to escape from arranged marriages or patriarchal families. The significant urban-rural income inequity remains one of the main driving forces of outmigration (Leng, Fu, & Xu, 2015; J. Li & Deng, 2012). In addition, studies have found that new generations of rural youth tend to seek employment in large cities (Fu, 2006; C. Wang, 2006). In the interviews, students expressed their aspirations to go to big cities:

> *I definitely went outside, even if to just play or explore.*[41]

> *I have problems if I stay in hometown because the development here is too slow. I feel that I can't keep up with the pace in the outside world. I can earn a lot of money when I go to the city and have the opportunity to see the outside world.*[42]

According to the school registration information in 2011-2018,[43] 98% of students are from rural areas. For urban students, families will "try everything possible to let their children go to regular senior secondary schools",[44] as stated by one teacher. This tendency reflects the rural-urban imbalance in educational field. T County has eight towns that are extremely

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[40] Detailed information can be found in the form "*Enrollment Statistics for All Majors in T Branch in Spring 2018*", obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment

[41] Interviewee S48 (2018, March 6)

[42] Interviewee S4 (2018, May 23)

[43] *T Branch Student Registration Information*, obtained from Office of Student Affairs in T Branch

[44] Interviewee T14 (2018, May 16). T14 was one of the teachers in charge of school admissions.

underdeveloped. The four towns close to the downtown are surrounded by farmland, with only a small number of markets as the town centre. The other three towns far from the downtown are located in mountainous areas, with poor agricultural facilities and inconvenient transportation (T County Gazetteer Committee, 2011). There are 12 public junior secondary schools in T County[45]. Three schools are located in towns near the downtown, while the other nine are in remote towns. Before going to secondary school, rural areas and towns are the main living spaces for students. Most of the students had not left T County before quasi-employment internships. For these students, big cities are the "outside world". In these students' narrative, their hometown and large cities constitute a set of opposite concepts —"inside" and "outside". Unlike the gender difference in major choices, boys and girls expressed similar aspirations of going to large cities.

Figure 4-2. A village

[45] "Basic Statistics of General Junior Secondary Schools in T county in 2012 (III)", *T County Gazetteer (1978-2005)*, p. 143.

Figure 4-3. A market

*Note*. On the weekend, some students took me to their homes as a guest. These two photos present the environment of the village and town where their homes are located. Before going to secondary schools, rural areas and towns are the main living spaces for SVS students.

For rural youth, the city is romanticized as a place full of opportunity (Chau, 2006). Students hope to work in the city in the future to achieve further personal development. These students believe that cities are more developed and offer more opportunities and promising jobs, for which they could earn more money. The development in their hometowns is not as good as large cities in many aspects:

> *It feels like it's a bit underdeveloped here! Firstly, in terms of work, if we work here, we only have the possibility of working in a ship. There are no factories here to provide a long-term job for us. Second, technologies and other aspects here are not as good as those in big cities. So, I just wanted to go out and explore because there are more opportunities than here!*[46]

[46] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)

*If you want to earn money, you must go to the city.*[47]

In addition to work and making money, students are curious about the life in cities and want to experience it for themselves; they want to go sightseeing, expand their horizons, and understand things that they have not seen before. In other words, these students want to experience the state of "being in the city", a state of being immersed in modern life. The "big cities" that the students references mainly refer to developed cities in the eastern coastal areas such as Shanghai and Hangzhou. For example, Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, was not on their lists of big cities.

*I want to see the outside world and do not want to be the kind of a frog at the bottom of the well.*[48]

*I feel that the outside world has a lot of attraction to me, and I want to leave my town to explore.*[49]

*I want to go to Shanghai most. When I was little, I always wanted to go to Shanghai. I wanted to experience the life there. My dad used to tell me that life there is hectic. When you're on the road in Shanghai, the people there walk very fast, and I'd like to experience that feeling.*[50]

In a study of the labour force in the Northeast China, Xiang (2014b) refers to people who have not yet migrated but are always ready to migrate as *would-be migrants*. Xiang argues that the *would-be* status significantly changes migrants' present lives. In post-socialist primitive accumulation with different contexts but similar processes, these students also possess characteristics of *would-be migrants*. Before they set foot in the big city, these students had already compared their hometown with their understanding and imagination of the large city and acknowledged the superiority of the large city. These students want to move to a large city for new experiences and opportunities in the future. How the *would-be* status is formed is unknown because few studies have addressed this topic across Chinese youth.

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[47] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23). In the local dialect, "earn money" is "bitter money", which means that the process of making money is bitter and they have to work very hard to earn it.
[48] S34 (S34-1; 2018, May 14)
[49] S20 (2018, June 4)
[50] S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)

Research from other cultures may provide an explanation. It is likely that, through the interaction with their family members, classmates, and friends, students continuously learn about migration, forming a migration habitus and shaping the concept of youth migration and imagined life (Suh, 2018). These concepts are discussed further in the concluding chapter (Chapter 8).

It is worth noting that the students described wanting to go to a large city, seldom expressing their desire to stay in large cities. A number of researchers have observed that the new generation of migrants prefer to remain in cities (S. He & Wang, 2016), which is not supported in this study. Different findings of migrants' willingness to stay in cities may lead to different conclusions when analysing the impact of changes in their aspirations.

### 4.3 Students' Choice and Parents' Aspirations

Students mentioned the role of parents when describing their desire to begin vocational education. Many students received advice from their families when choosing a school and majors. Parents consider job prospects, prospects for further education after graduation, and their children learning skills that will enhance their self-worth. On the whole, parents adopt a pragmatic approach. When students give up their studies after graduation from junior secondary school, parents are more concerned with what their children can do. The current policy prohibits employers from hiring children under the age of 16 (State Council of China, 2002b). Therefore, young people often leave school with nowhere to go. Parents have no choice but to send these children to vocational schools. Admission to a vocational school is, in the parents' view, often a desperate choice.

> *What could such a small child do if you make him leave? Usually, we both work and have no time to take care of him. Let him stay here, if he can learn something, that's fine; even if he obtains nothing, with teachers looking after him, he will at least not misbehave*[51].

> *My dad thought that I was too young to do anything out there, so he wanted me to go to school here first and then think about what I should do when I graduated from here*

[51] Interviewee G4 (2018, March 6), a parent interviewed in the registration site for the 2018 spring semester.

*and was old enough*[52].

Figure 4-4. Registration site for the spring 2018 semester

*Note.* Parents bring their children to T branch to register for school.

Many parents send their children to vocational schools because these young people have nowhere else to go. Obviously, the parents are aware that learning skills is important and that accepting vocational education can be an alternative choice, though they also believe that going to T No.1 Middle School will give their children a better future. In the interviews, students described their parents' perception: "*they think it's good to go to regular senior secondary school and a university*".[53] These respondents knew that their parents were disappointed that they came to vocational school because "*they still have T No.1 Middle School in their minds*".[54] When children go to a vocational school because they do not have an adequate academic performance, parents do not expect much in terms of their educational

[52] Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)
[53] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[54] Interviewee S19 (S19-1; 2018, June 4)

future:

> *I hope he will not mess with me anymore. I can't count on his studying. If he can study, he should go to No.1 Middle School. What can he learn when he is here?*[55]
>
> *I'm sure I wanted her to go to a high school before because her brother did not study well. I want her to study well and live a good life in the future. Vocational high school is okay, she likes it.*[56]
>
> *In fact, I hope that she will go to university, but it's not easy to go to university here. With my health condition, I hope that she will be able to take care of herself in the future.*[57]

The parents were not optimistic about their children's future in vocational school, which was related to the long-term poor development of local vocational education. Locally, vocational school graduates tended to be poorly employed. The students' employment difficulties spread around through interpersonal communication in the rural areas, undermining the reputation of vocational education.

> *There are too many gossips about vocational schools in our area, saying that vocational schools are not good for this and that. There is no way out, and it is better to not study in the vocational schools. In our village, there is a person who went to Kunming to study aviation. He went to sell fishing rods after graduation. Therefore, people in his village said, to go to aviation school was not better than to sell fishing rods directly. How funny it was! The people in his village were laughing at this, and he cannot do anything about it.*[58]

Furthermore, the parents were able to accept their children's poor academic performance and believed that studying depended on the children themselves. If the children were good at studying, they were naturally willing to support their children to continue with

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[55] Interviewee G2 (2018, March 6), a parent interviewed in the registration site for the 2018 spring

[56] Interviewee G6 (2018, March 16), S46's mother, interviewed at home

[57] Interviewee G7 (2018, March 23), S47's mother interviewed at home (G7 has almost lost her vision in both eyes)

[58] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

their education. If they were not good at studying, there was no alternative. When children insisted on giving up their studies or did not choose the school or major that they themselves thought would be more advantageous, the parents did not interfere and adopted a laissez-faire attitude:

> *She's still young, and I just wish she would learn more. She's a very sensible child, but she's not very good at studying. As to studying, we don't understand either. It's up to her*[59].

> *When I came here to study, I heard there was a Jianshui Teacher's School, so my father said it would be better for me to study there than here. I said it would be more convenient here, so I came here*[60].

> *My parents said, we told you to continue your studies, and if you didn't, you might regret it later. When I told them that I was coming here to study, they said we don't care where you study. It's your own business after all, it's your choice anyway.*[61]

When choosing a school, parents did not consider Kunming, the provincial capital, even though Kunming is only a three-hour drive from T county and has many vocational schools with higher teaching quality. Parents preferred to have their children close to home, so the family could look after each other and the children could help the parents work. There were also lower expectations in terms of vocational education in Kunming, with parents believing that there would not be significant differences in their children's prospects:

> *My dad said that Kunming is far from home and there are a lot of things to do at home, so I decided to stay here.*[62]

> *Compared to Kunming, this school is closer to home and I can go home every week. My parents said that Kunming is similar to the school.*[63]

> *My family said that the school in Kunming is good, but I consider that if my family had some problems, I could go back to help during my weekends. I can also study*

[59] Interviewee G6 (2018, March 16), S46's mother interviewed at home
[60] Interviewee S7 (2018, May 24)
[61] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)
[62] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[63] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)

*here.*[64]

In interviews with parents, students, and teachers, parents' educational aspirations were not strong when their children started vocational school. This finding is consistent with those of previous research, revealing that parents' education level and annual family income both affect educational aspirations for their children, with rural families having lower educational aspirations for their children. This finding is a manifestation of the cultural and economic resource constraints faced by rural communities in the urban-rural dichotomy (Y. Li & Wang, 2019; B. Liu, Zhang, & Li, 2014). In addition, the parenting style of not interfering with children's choice of school and allowing children to grow up on their own is common among the rural parents interviewed. Restricted by economic conditions, work status, and education level, it is difficult for rural parents to obtain sufficient information to provide guidance for children's choices, or help their children enhance their academic performance. It is impossible for parents to adopt a middle-class approach, such as using all their savings to send children to elite schools. This finding is in line with the finding of previous studies, which have found that there are significant urban-rural differences in the current parenting style of Chinese families. Specifically, rural or lower-class families are more likely to adopt indulgent and neglectful parenting styles (C. Huang, 2018; Zhu & Cao, 2019).

More importantly, the parents expressed frustration with their children's entry into vocational education. When asked why choosing the specific vocational school, the parents first responded that their children could not go anywhere else. This aspiration is not an active or expressed using "*I want"*, but a passive aspiration expressed through the recognition of various constraints. A number of factors may explain parents' passive aspirations. In the current education system, academic credentials are more highly valued than vocational credentials (Schulte, 2003). Regular secondary education and universities with higher academic credentials can meet the family's need for upward social mobility, whereas vocational education could only meet the need for survival (Y. Li, 2019). Entering vocational education means that there will be almost no academic achievements in the future, and that he future will be much dimmer. Studies have found that family educational aspirations may

[64] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)

decrease with a child's poor academic performance (Kathryn R Wentzel, 1998). When parents realize that their children's academic path is blocked, they may lower their own educational aspirations. In the interviewed parents' eyes, while some schools in Kunming may have higher teaching qualities, they are still vocational schools, just like the T branch. There is probably not much difference in the human capital return that the schools in two different place. It is, therefore, more beneficial to families to choose a vocational school close to home. When difficulties in educational attainment arise due to resource constraints, disadvantaged groups have to gradually adjust their values and look for alternative options (B. Liu et al., 2014). Therefore, parents' aspirations demonstrated pragmatic style when their children chose to enter vocational education.

### 4.4 Holding-back Aspirations and Prudent Efforts

In fact, students' aspirations also had similar characteristics to those of their parents. When asked "Why did you choose vocational education?", almost all students answered immediately "Because I could not go to a regular senior secondary school". The students were somewhat ashamed of their academic performance because they knew that it had led to them being "phased out"[65] of society in the eyes of their teachers in junior secondary schools and vocational school. When asked, "So, what do you want to get here?", the students answered that they wanted to get a diploma and learn skills. The students' (and parents') aspirations for vocational education were only formed after the failure to enter RSSS. This feature is an important characteristics of their aspirations for vocational education because students' frustrating experiences in education influenced them and made them appear passive and restrained in expressing aspiration. Some students who had formed their initial career aspirations before arriving at the vocational school felt inferior after they had stayed in the school for some time and felt that their dreams had been shattered. S8 wanted to be an inventor but felt that "this way is not going to work. As soon as I came into this vocational school, the pathway was broken. I haven't thought about this way".[66] S14 felt that doctors were great because of the experience of going to the hospital when his mother was sick in his

[65] Interviewee T8 (T8-1; 2018, June 6)
[66] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)

early years. However, after entering vocational school, she knew that she had "no capability to be a doctor".[67] In essence, the aspirations that students wanted to achieve through vocational education could be referred to as frustrated aspirations formed under restrictions (Hoskins & Barker, 2017).

Furthermore, the students were influenced by many other factors in their choice of vocational education. Some behaviours and decisions were not consistent with their aspirations. For example, the students' choice to enter the T branch seemed a bit casual. Compared to some schools in Kunming, teaching quality is a normal whereas the professional competence of the faculty is poor at the T branch. All departments, except for the automotive department, lack technical training equipment. The nursing department is not even qualified to provide exams for nursing qualifications. However, these students had no prior knowledge of these situations. The main reason for which they came to this school was the proximity to their homes or because it had been recommended to them. The school's faculty, learning atmosphere, or employment situation were not within students' considerations:

> *Because my brother told me that I wasn't good at study and that I might as well follow him. I didn't think too much of it and came here. What's more, I had a companion if I stayed with him.68*
>
> *I thought about it at that time but just thought about which city I was going to study in. After all, I had to study, so I chose to come to this place, which was closer to home.69*
>
> *I don't know why I came here. I followed my friend.[70]*

A paradoxical state of the students, both in their expressions and in their daily lives, is noteworthy that, while the goal is important and they want to achieve it, they do not work hard towards it. Aspirations seem vague and distant to students and their choices and actions are not entirely guided by the established goals. This paradox may have some explanations. Accordance to Appadurai (2004), the capacity to aspire is an ability to navigate through

[67] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[68] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)
[69] Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)
[70] Interviewee S22 (2018, June 5)

real-life situations. Disadvantaged people lack the opportunity to practice and use this ability, and their horizon of aspiration is more fragile. Many studies have found that the aspiration among disadvantaged people tends to be weak, ephemeral, unstable, easily abandoned, and easily influenced by other factors. When constrained by continuous resources and materials shortages, or the disparity between reality and aspiration, people may actively lower their aspirations and become frustrated. This decreased aspiration would further demotivate these students to take action to get rid of the unsatisfied status quo (Duflo, 2012; Hang & Hu, 2017a; Karandikar, Mookherjee, Ray, & Vega-Redondo, 1998; Selten, 1998, 2001). Moreover, students' aspirations may be weakened by internal constrains, such as low self-esteem, stress, depression, and hopelessness, as well as external constraints, such as diversions in education, lack of guidance from others, and poor economic conditions. All of these factors work together to finally make students take many elements into consideration.

### 4.5 Situational Aspirations and Holistic Aspirations

Aspirations are related to many aspects of life and take many forms, which vary in terms of origin and purpose. While walking, eating, or talking with friends, students expressed various aspirations: "*I want to learn to play the guitar*"; "*I want to live more freely*"; "*I want to live like a normal person*"; "*I want to open my own shop*"; "*I want to give my parents a better life*", etc. These aspirations, along with the aspirations that students aim to achieve during their vocational education, constitute an aspirational repertoire. According to Appadurai (2004), "aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life" (Appadurai, 2004).Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of aspiration from the perspective of human development is recommended (Hart, 2016). As discussed throughout this chapter, in terms of vocational education, rural youth aspire to obtain credentials, learning skills, and going to large cities in the early period of their school lives. Although the aspirations expressed by students are mainly related to the educational attainment and future employment, they cannot not be understood as merely educational or occupational aspiration. Instead, these aspirations may be understood as aspirations to achieve well-being. Like S17 argued, entering vocational school could be

"*another opportunity to change fate*".[71] The series of situational aspirations represented dimensions of the pursuit of a good life (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019). The above three aspirations (i.e., obtaining credentials, learning vocational skills, and going to large cities) are in this stage; they are the means to achieving holistic aspiration. On the whole, students want to invest in human capital development to increase their upward social mobility (Zipin et al., 2015).

These specific aspirations may explain students' local and situated understandings of well-being in their specific context. First, students believe in education. After being diverted by the education system, these students do not opt for direct employment and hope that the vocational education could help them enhance their personal values. Although students are not prudent in their choice of majors and do not have a clear plan about the specific knowledge they would gain in a vocational school, they expressed a desire to obtain academic credentials and skills. In recent decades, vocational education is increasingly seen as the education of choice for less privileged students in the context of the expansion of colleges and universities and an increase in the number of holders of university degrees. In China, the value of vocational education credentials has been lower than that of a regular secondary school credentials on the labour market (W. Chen & Wuriniqiqige, 2016). However, research revealed that the educational returns increase as the level of education increases (Qu, 2013; H. Shen & Zhang, 2015), and the value of vocational education credentials is obviously higher than that of junior secondary school credentials. Students hope to improve their benefits in the labour market with academic and other credentials, and their choice of vocational education reflects their effort for upward mobility.

Second, students have significant expectations of the role of work in enhancing their lives and the role of learning skills in obtaining good jobs. Students escribed aspirations in education, the content of which was related to future careers, or more precisely, employment. In a social environment in which low-end workers have precarious jobs, low incomes, poor working conditions, and a lack of social security (Pun & Lu, 2016; Swider, 2016), as well as interpellated by "Craftsman of the Nation" discourse in the state, mean that students want to

[71] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

master skills through vocational education to obtain a more stable job.

Finally, due to the uneven development of urban and rural areas, as well as the east and west, students choose to go to large cities for better personal development. Compared to cities, rural areas lack opportunities. To stay in the countryside means being unqualified, uneducated, and naive. Just like 10 or 20 years ago, “walking out” is still the dream of the rural youth and their families (Kong, 2015). These students’ situational aspirations are deeply rooted in the social inequality after China’s reform and opening up.

### 4.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter introduced the content and characteristics of rural youth’s aspirations in the early stages of entering vocational school. I argued that, after being diverted by the education system, students hope to obtain various credentials, such as academic credentials through vocational education, skill learning, and moving to big cities in order to achieve the holistic aspiration of upward mobility. These specific aspirations also show that these students are in the midst of the structural inequalities of Chinese society; each of their aspirations is related to changing their disadvantaged situation.

Since adolescents’ aspirations and actions are influenced by their family, this chapter discussed parents’ expectations for their children. On one hand, parents tend to adopt a laissez-faire attitude towards their children with limited intervention and support. On the other hand, when students are unable to obtain higher education credentials through regular senior secondary school, parents’ expectations for their children’s education are reduced. In fact, the influence of the family on students’ aspirations should also be understood in the context of the specific social environment in which they live. Under the influence of the urban-rural dichotomy, parents in rural areas have weaker cultural and economic capital compared to urban areas, which constrains them to choose better educational paths for their children. At the same time, in the long-term practice of regular-vocational secondary school diversion, vocational secondary school is considered as an educational trajectory with no way out. Urban-rural inequality and educational inequality shape families’ educational perceptions and further influence students’ educational choices and aspirations.

Furthermore, this chapter examined the characteristics of students' aspiration as a result of frustrating experiences: their choice of vocational education is largely a helpless move; their expression of aspirations is passive and restrained; and the efforts to achieve their aspirations are prudent. These characteristics are important, and it is described how they affect students in later chapters.

The following chapters describe vocational students' learning experiences, which is rooted in existing social-cultural groundings, and explain how their aspirations have changed and what influences these aspirations and adjusting strategies.

## Chapter 5 More Credentials and More Money: "Everyone Has His Own Success Story"

Chapter 4 described the aspiration of students in the early days of their entry into vocational school. One of the important goals for these students is to invest in human capital and earn credentials (e.g., academic credentials) in order to pave the way for future employment. In this chapter, I describe the changes in students' aspirations in terms of earning these academic credentials. By describing the educational experiences at schools and in quasi-employment internships, I shed light on the didactic instruction that the students have received at school and how the experience of internships conflicted with this instruction. After these situations are introduced, I consider students' own perceptions of reality and their response to said reality. Conversations with students concerning the two experiences reveal perceptions and attitudes of these contradictions: which parts of the didactic instructions were perceived as insightful? Which parts of the didactic instructions remained unquestioned? Why did students develop these perceptions and attitudes? Specifically, what are students' basic perspectives on personal development? These topics have been seldom studied in existing literature. Based on my understanding of students' attitudes, I describe the uniqueness, resistance, and limitations of counter-school culture. Finally, I analyse the new aspirations the students generated in these situations and what the things that they were pursuing mean to them.

### 5.1 Didactic Instructions in Schools: Success Stories and their Logic

One afternoon in March 2018, T18, a young teacher in a biopharmaceutical major, was giving a first chemistry class to students who were enrolled for spring 2018.[72] There were 20 freshmen in this class. The teacher first asked the students to introduce themselves by stating their names, hometowns, and why they had chosen to study biopharmaceuticals. The students' language skills were poor, so they could not fully introduce themselves. Moreover, these students were not comfortable expressing themselves in front of their classmates. One girl's face was flushed, and she did not say a word initially; with the teacher's encouragement, this student only got out her name and address. The teacher encouraged her again and let her classmates finish their introductions; the girl finally managed to say the rest in her own dialect.

[72] Information from field notes (2018, March 30)

One boy also remained silent after giving his name and address, and the teacher had to ask him to sit down. In order to make his speech smooth, another boy wrote a short manuscript while the others were speaking and read it aloud when it was his turn.


Figure 5-1. The first chemistry class of the new semester

*Note*. A male student was struggling with introducing himself.

To comfort and encourage these inarticulate, embarrassed, shy, and overwhelmed students, the teacher asked them the following:

> *Why do you feel inferior to others? The vocational school is not for people who are poor at studying. When you come here, you will learn to study better instead and gain better hands-on skills. You will be better than others in both areas. Don't think of others as clever, they are too clever by half. You can do better with hard work...study hard, keep studying, go higher, and get a higher degree. When you are competent, you can also graduate and start your own business.*

Although most of the students mentioned that they had come to vocational school because they "didn't do well in their previous schooling", the teacher encouraged them to continue to study hard because they may have the opportunity even to outperform others. She also told the students a story of an outstanding student to illustrate that the future of vocational secondary school students would not necessarily be worse than the future of students with a Bachelor's degree:

> *There was a boy in TY High School. When he was in the second year of high school, his score was 560 points. He would have no problem getting into a university. However, he contacted the teacher of our school's electromechanical department, decided to come here to study, and he said he wanted to be a skilled talent. When he got here, he studied hard and mastered professional knowledge. After graduation, he walked out, entered the factory, and was able to get a level three salary. You know, everyone's salary is specified by the state. The lower the level, the higher the salary. We have a very good teacher at our school. He has a level seven salary, which is seven to eight thousand yuan per month. Think about how much money this boy should have for a level three salary. He has supported himself and contributed to society through three years of vocational secondary education, while those undergraduates are still spending their parents' money.*

In the first 40 minutes, the teacher tried to make students more confident, more excited about learning, and more eager for the future. After a 10-minute break, the teacher started the introductory part of the chemistry class. After two years of administrative work at the school, she had forgotten much of the chemistry contents and was reading using textbooks and telling inspirational stories from time to time. In fact, even if she had a solid background in her major, it would not be useful these students. In China, chemistry is taught only in the third year of junior secondary school. Students who enter in the spring semester did not complete junior secondary education, which meant that their knowledge about chemistry is poor. To test students' current levels, the teacher randomly asked the students to write equations on the blackboard about carbon and oxygen reactions that produce carbon dioxide. The students were not able to even write chemical symbols, and much less the formula.

Therefore, the assignment of the first lesson was to copy the symbols and names of the first 20 chemical elements twice, which was equivalent to the assignment of the first chemistry lesson in junior secondary school.

During the fieldwork, I sat in on a number of courses, namely theory courses in mechanics, computer science, and automotive marketing, basic courses such as Chinese language, mental health, career planning, and ethics, law and life, elective courses such as public speaking and eloquence, interpersonal communication, class meetings, and evening tutorials. In these courses, in addition to teaching simple knowledge, the teachers educated their students through storytelling: These stories were told by the teachers, retold by students, becoming widely celebrated success myths in this school. A student who studied hard was admitted being a full-time student in vocational college (unlike most students who could only obtain access to the distance education of vocational college). He studied hard in the college and graduated with excellent skills; the company recruited him and gave him a professional annuity. Another student won the first prize at a prefecture and provincial level. A journalist interviewed him when he got the prize. Mercedes was made aware of this news and invited him to go and work at the company. Later, the company came to our school and hired potential employees. Our school established a cooperative relationship with the company to perform internships because of this student. The third story is about two brothers, who were working in the factory where they do the internships; they had been working at grass-roots positions for a long time and were later promoted to managerial positions.


Figure 5-2. An orientation session

*Note*. During the class, the teacher told the new students success stories of the World Skills competitors and encouraged them to learn from these successful students.

The contents of these stories varied, but they all included the following three common elements. First, who may achieve success? Anyone. Teachers sought to convince students that everyone could succeed through education and consistent effort; all students can "have a bright future",[73] like the protagonists in the stories that were being told. Researchers have coined the term "achievement ideology" (Carter, 2008; Hochschild, 1996; Johnson, 2014) to describe unconditional success. This theory posits that everyone is equal in the land of opportunities, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, profession, or family background. The teachers' stories perfectly fit Ford's definition of achievement ideology: "individuals believe that with education, hard work, and hard effort, anyone […] can become successful in life" (Ford, 1992, p. 198).

[73] Information from my field notes (2018, March 28). Teacher T1 said this in the classroom.

Second, how is success achieved? Through hard work. The teachers emphasized that students could change their destiny through hard work. In the stories that were told, family background, social relationships, access to opportunities, and other information were withheld. There is only one secret to students' success, namely hard work. Moreover, the hard work emphasized here was individual effort, and protagonists' success was always a sole effort. In line with previous analyses (Carter, 2008; Johnson, 2014), mainstream achievement ideology requires individuals to take responsibility for their own successes or failures without considering the structural factors that may prevent students from reaching their full potential. The means of achieving success is "through actions and traits under one's own control" (Hochschild, 1996, p. 18). Moreover, hard work (in studying or working) was described as future-oriented and purpose-driven. The individual's experience and feelings in the process of continuous hard work are trivial as long as personal goals are achieved in the end. It also does not matter what means are used to achieve success. Therefore, this ideology is seen as potentially leading to instrumental rationality (D. Cao, 2014).

Third, what are the indicators of success? Good job and good income. Success could be defined in many ways, but in the T branch, indicators of success are a prestigious job, which means they do not have to work as an assembly line operator forever and have chances of climbing the social ladder, and a substantial salary.

These elements form the most important narrative logic in the stories told by the teachers, reflecting the richness and seductiveness of achievement ideology. This ideology also posits that the belief in it would increase the chance of success in school and life (Ford, 1992). Educators told these success stories repeatedly with the hope that students would buy into the logic and work hard for their future. It is also highlighted that achievement ideology is associated with the meritocratic myth, whose principles lay the foundation for the development of achievement ideology (Lam, 2013). From the 1980s, education in China has been known as explicitly meritocratic. Success in academic subjects becomes the criteria of further education and high-status employment, which has led to a tense competition that mainly focused on intellectual achievement across the entire education system (Ranson, 1988). Furthermore, in the 1980s, the achievement ideology begun to emerge in China, along with

the process of economic transformation and the active pursuit of wealth (D. Cao, 2014). These changes can be understood as products of the economic, political, and social change at the time (Hannum, 1999). Under the influence of the principles of meritocracy, vocational education has been ranked below regular education. The stigma of vocational schools and students has gradually been created (Woronov, 2016). Paradoxically, teachers in vocational schools use the same discourse logic to motivate students and make them believe that their efforts can achieve a future that is as good as or even better than that of students in RSSS. Will students embrace this set of values?

### 5.2 "Credentials are a Just a Door Opener"

After entering T branch for a semester or less, students were sent to factories in the southeast coastal area for quasi-employment internships. Three types of internships are permitted for students in China: observing; participatory; and quasi-employment internship *(顶岗實習, ding gang shi xi, students in the internship doing the same work as real workers)* (Ministry of Education, 2016a). However, in the fieldwork, it was found that the school only organized the quasi-employment internship for students (as it is the main type of internship for vocational school students). This choose is because very few factories are willing to let students observe or learn from experienced workers because it is likely impede production.[74] The meaning of quasi-employment internship is that students in the internship are serving as workers[75]. However, the wages given to students are far lower than their co-workers. The use of student workers is often a method used by factory to meet production needs and save labour costs (J. Chan, 2017; Pun & Chan, 2012). Furthermore, schools and teachers will also receive financial incentives Therefore, although the schools are prohibited by the national policy from arranging first-year students and students under the age of 16 to perform quasi-employment internships (Ministry of Education, 2016a), the T branch arranged internships for students every year. In order to go around the law, the school calls the

[74] Interviewee T12 (T12-1; 2018, May 8). T12 is the Associate Director of Office of Admissions and Employment at T Branch and is responsible for student internships and employment.
[75] In Chinese, formal workers are called *society workers*, because they were recruited from the society, rather than from the schools. In contrast, employees from vocational schools are referred to as *student workers*, or *student labour*.

internship in first two years “social practice” or “work-study alternation”.[76]

Since the national education policy stipulates that internships are a central component of the teaching process, students cannot refuse to attend. For quasi-employment internships, the policy allows students to choose their own placements in consultation with the schools. However, in the “social practice” organized by the T branch, students must follow the school’s instructions. Students, whether from automobile repair, mechanics, preschool education, or nursing, were all sent to factories to complete internships. There were electronics factories such as E1 in Kunshan, E2 in Ningbo, E3 in Jiaxing, E4 in Hangzhou, and automobile factories such as A1, A2 in Hangzhou, A3 in Shanghai, and A4 in Xiamen. Students worked as operators, performing simple and repetitive work on the assembly line. During internships, students were subjected to the dual management of factories and the school. If students fail to participate in internships, they cannot obtain a diploma. Therefore, internships for students at the T branch can be understood as labour transportation completed and profited by schools and enterprises together (J. Chan, 2017; C. Smith & Chan, 2015).

In the factory, as shown by the interview data, students worked on the assembly line alongside workers and interning students from other schools. These students soon realized that their vocational education credentials would prevent them from achieving the prospects that their teachers had depicted for them. Credentials, a new variable not mentioned by the teachers (who had said that success only relied on personal hard work), was introduced into the perception of success. These students began to understand that the credentials were “just a door opener”[77] that would allow them to enter the factory, though their future was still unclear. The insights came from the following sources. First, through work experience, students realized that just doing a good job would not guarantee them to be promoted to managerial positions. These students saw that the factory was full of employees in their forties, many of whom had been working in the factory for more than 10 years but were still trapped on the assembly line. The harsh realities punctured the students’ illusions of entering managerial positions:

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[76] 2018 Admissions Brochure of T Branch, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment.
[77] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)

*I've never been to a factory, and I don't know why I have such a belief that young people work on the front line. After working for a long period, we can become leaders. After I went there, I was surprised to see that there were even workers as old as my parents on the assembly line, and that there was a generation gap between us.*[78]

*My elder sister said that I shouldn't even think about sitting in the office. So many college students have no place to go after graduation. We, the uncultured, will never have good opportunities. In fact, she did not talk about this, but I figured it out. She has been in a factory for many years, and she's doing the same work as I did when I first came.*[79]

Second, as described by S2, the students discovered in their conversations with colleagues that managerial positions generally required a Bachelor's degree. These students' distance education credentials from vocational college meant that they were unable to meet the basic requirements to enter managerial positions.

*An undergraduate next to me from the northeast said that he came here only to fulfil the school's internship requirement and experience life. He told me to enter a university in order to obtain managerial positions.*[80]

*The group leader told me that, if I begin to work at such a young age, this job was all I would be able to do afterwards. It is better to go to a university and find a job sitting in an office after graduation. The leader I met was pretty good.*[81]

A similar situation applies to competition certificates. On one hand, the competition certificates that students receive at school are generally prefecture or provincial awards, whose rank is relatively low, and the chances of getting the first prize are low. The certificates that can be used to promote and hire people in the factory are national or international awards. National- and international-level certificates, which are helpful for employment and promotion in the factory, are too difficult to obtain. On the other hand, employees and managerial staff are hired separately in the factory. Managerial staff are seldom promoted

[78] Interviewee S16 (S16-1; 2018, May 31)
[79] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)
[80] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[81] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

from among employees or workers on the assembly line, who ultimately have few chances of promotion. Their competition certificates, therefore, have limited benefits in terms of employment.

The vocational educational credentials cannot ensure that students are promoted to a line leader, which is a slightly higher rank than workers on the assembly line but does not equal a managerial position. The lack of local social connections in the factory further lowered the opportunity for promotion:

> *Our line leader is not competent at anything, he just scolds others. Everyone hates him, but the manager made him line leader. He is a relative of a certain higher leader.*[82]

> *I wish to be like them, the leaders. They just patrol every day and do nothing. My friends said that they have "guanxi" in the factory. They know someone in a higher position, which is why they're leaders.*[83]

Through internships, students realized that vocational educational credentials only met the basic requirements of the position and could not guarantee positive future development. As Koo observed in her research on rural youth, internship allows students to touch reality and start to feel anxious about whether they can get an ideal job after graduation (Koo, 2016). Regardless of the majors that the students were enrolled in, they were generally able to find a job after graduation because they invested their time studying (Woronov, 2012). However, the most attractive jobs were the ones that could let them "sit in the office". The students gradually understood that success stories were isolated cases, and that the majority of the students could get decent jobs which their teachers promised. For jobs such as operators, "*there is no future at all*"[84]. The students commented on these stories:

> *Maybe it happened in the past when academic credentials were not as important. We missed good times.*[85]

> *There are certainly some outstanding students in the school, but only a few. In fact, it*

[82] Interviewee S31 (S31-1; 2018, March 13)
[83] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)
[84] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)
[85] Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)

*is difficult for most students to earn a promotion; they often go back to their hometowns after working a few years.*[86]

Students have been influenced by the belief that, by investing in education, they will be able to develop human capital and obtain decent, well-paying jobs. After realizing the limitations of credentials, students do not even think that they have an advantage over less educated workers in the factory. In other words, these studies have realized that their investment in human capital did not increase their economic return. In a world that still needs a lot of inexpensive labour (Perry & Selden, 2003; Pun & Lu, 2010), and in an education system with continuous expansion of colleges and higher education, the creation of educational bubbles, and acquiescence to over-education (K. Gao, Wang, & Zheng, 2017; Meng, Shen, & Xue, 2013; N. Wu & Wang, 2018), students in vocational secondary schools have increasingly become the principal source of low-cost and low-skill labour (Vickers & Zeng, 2017; Woronov, 2016). These students' vocational education credentials do not allow them to obtain their desired jobs and future.

### 5.3 Incomplete Insight into Reality

Through the internships, students realize that the success stories told by their teachers contradict the reality that they were experiencing. This section focuses on how students make sense of this contradiction by determining the new insights about personal development that students have drawn from their experiences in school and internships. Has a series of beliefs about success been shaken? Students' accounts reveal their perceptions and understanding of themselves, reality, and the possibilities and pathways to achieve success.

#### *5.3.1 "It's all my Fault"*

Students generally expressed the view that the main barrier that prevented them from succeeding and obtaining good jobs was a lack of adequate credentials. Rather than finding success in the story itself requiring many prerequisites, they felt that it was their own deficits that prevented it from happening. Many students said that they blamed themselves for not studying well in the past. The frustration, chagrin, and self-blame that students experienced when they entered vocational school was reverberated when they encountered setbacks in

[86] Interviewee S31 (S31-1; 2018, March 13)

their lives. All the setbacks, failure, and suffering were rooted in the choice to receive vocational school education, if not tracing all the way back to family education and primary and junior secondary schooling. These students believed that their past mistakes had led to today's disadvantaged situation, which could not be blamed on anybody else.

> *There is no other way; it is all due to my unwillingness to study before. I'm telling my younger brother to study and that he must study hard.*[87]

> *I just feel like I'm not capable enough to learn anything, and I don't want to move on to a university or anything like that. That path is not suitable for me.*[88]

MacLeod (2009) found that the boys with faith in achievement ideology though that it was not the school and job market failed them, citing instead personal failings. In contrast, another group of boys who were sceptical about equal opportunity refused to accept the prescription offered by achievement ideology when they failed. Apparently, students in the T branch were not able to really see through the success stories and mainly felt that their lack of competence was the reason; self-blame was central to students' understanding of failure. Numerous studies have observed in various social contexts and ethnic groups that the achievement ideology's tendency for failure is only due to insufficient personal ability and effort, which makes people who fail to achieve their goals, such as those who cannot find suitable jobs, be laid off, and fail to get into an ideal school, making them blame themselves (Hochschild, 1996; Jaeger, 2019; Johnson, 2014; Prisock, 2015). These views echo neoliberal literature on individualization. The individualization of the society is particularly advocated for and encouraged by neoliberalism (Ferge, 1997). On one hand, neoliberal discourse emphasizes that life is something to be controlled by oneself, and that individuals should take personal responsibility for a better life (Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2004). On the other hand, since everything depends on personal choice, one has to take responsibility for the outcomes, including failures. The prevailing expression among the students accurately conveyed this connotation: "you chose the road, so you have to finish it on your knees if needed". Therefore, if someone fails, it is his/her own choice, and he/she has to bear it. It is difficult for students to

[87] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)
[88] Interviewee S24 (2018, June 5)

realize that the success or failure in education or work are largely shaped by social inequality. Instead, ,amu students believe that their inability to succeed was because they had “chosen” vocational education in the education system because they failed to achieve positive academic performance. Therefore, if they cannot get good academic credentials and their personal development was hindered, it was their own problem.

Figure 5-3. An evening study session

*Note*. The teacher showed a video in class to introduce the students the importance that the country places on skilled people and encouraged them to seize the opportunities and take responsibility for their success.

Furthermore, under the influence of neoliberal discourse, society does not seek to identify the reasons for students’ lack of motivation and ability, instead choosing to place the blame on the student (Lloyd, 2017). As rural youth in vocational schools in western China, students are already typically portrayed by mainstream culture as stupid and ignorant, uneducated, low *suzhi (素質, quality, or an individual’s inherited [nature/genetic] and acquired [nurture/learned] characteristics)*, and morally inferior. The reality of experiencing

difficulties in getting good jobs and a higher income means that they are portrayed as incompetent, unintelligent, and unable to seize opportunities (Anagnost, 2004; A. Kipnis, 2007). These constructs have further worsened these students' social situation, which may further reduce their positive self-evaluation, self-esteem and self-confidence, thereby forming a subaltern identity (Wanning Sun, 2014).

### *5.3.2 More Hard Work*

The emphasis on personal responsibility is always linked to an emphasis on individual struggle. Relying on one's own means that subjects can only continuously develop themselves based on the needs of the neoliberal society and the dilemma that they face (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1991). The students shared their beliefs about personal responsibility and the importance of personal struggle learned from internships. Some students described the indifference that they felt in their social relationships as an important source of discomfort during their internship (Hou, Wang, Bai, & Tang, 2020). These experiences touched these students and made them feel the necessity of personal efforts in a situation where they could not rely on others.

> *The bad thing, that is, a kind of society thing, like a feeling of cruelty. When I was there, many times I was scolded but could answer back. I had no one to count on; I could only rely on myself and work harder.*[89]

> *You can only rely on yourself. If you can't finish, no one will help you. Work from day to night, you can't get off work when others finish. I think that this society is really cold, and you have to work hard to become strong!*[90]

Students also recognized the importance of hard work as a means of surviving in a highly competitive society:

> *When I entered society, I thought it was the kind of special kindness and it was like this school. But after leaving, I really know that reality is cruel, this kind of social competition is really too cruel. If you don't work hard, don't insist, and don't devote*

[89] Interviewee S7 (2018, May 24)
[90] Interviewee S42 (2018, June 6)

*yourself to work, you simply can't survive in this society.*[91]

*I feel that life is very cruel, and capability is the most important thing. Without capability, others will trample on you like a dog. If you don't work hard, what else can you do?*[92]

Many students used the word "cruelty" to describe the society that they saw in the internship. These students were aware of the complexities of society and believed that this lesson was an important lesson learned from the internships. From others' experiences and interactions with others, these students realized there was a high probability that hard work would not bring about change. Educational credentials, *guanxi*, etc., are possible constraints on personal development. However, students failed to reflect on the impact onto themselves or doubt the possibility of realizing their original holistic aspiration. Instead, these students discovered the need for personal struggle in the presence of a number of disadvantages and uncontrollable conditions. When life can only be the responsibility of the individual, personal struggle is the last tool for students at a disadvantage. This finding is in line with the observation of Bauman (2001) in individualized society: being an individual means "having no one to blame for one's own misery, seeking causes of one's own defeats nowhere except in one's own indolence and sloth, and looking for no remedies other than trying harder" (p.106).

In addition, there are a number of common frustrations shared by the students. They hope they are able to cope with the complexities of the world by "having more capability" and "becoming stronger". As stated by S31, the belief that "to change the world, change yourself first" makes the individual become an object that needs to be transformed in order to change the undesired situation (Gershon, 2011). When the idea of striving for self-transformation is internalized, it is possible that the individual may, in turn, become more convinced of the self-management and self-improvement, while also reinforcing the belief that individuals must take responsibility for their own actions(Kelan, 2008; O'Flynn & Petersen, 2007).

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[91] Interviewee S34 (S34-1; 2018, May 14)
[92] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)

### *5.3.3 Alternative Ways*

When their relatively low level of academic credentials were deemed inadequate for self-development, students were hopeful. According to these students, there was more than one path to success, as well as many other opportunities in life:

> *I don't think there is any pity. I was born to be useful. Isn't the rest waste or useless? Impossible.*[93]

> *Everyone has their own success story. They go their way; I go my own way. If I'm not good at studying, I'll try hard in something else*[94].

The students expressed believing that opportunity is for those who are prepared. Thus, the belief that one still has other opportunities is tied to personal effort. As Gershon argue, the neoliberal subject is not present at this moment but is always consciously prepared for the impending possibility (Gershon, 2011). Students believed that they needed to work hard to enhance their abilities and prepare for opportunities:

> *It's nothing, we are still young and there will definitely be many opportunities in the future. The key is whether we have the ability to seize these opportunities.*[95]

> *I can't be discouraged because of a mistake, not in this way. There will always be opportunities. It depends on the kind of people who take them.*[96]

The American Dream is "simple but powerful", as argued by the US President Bill Clinton during his speech to Democratic leadership Council in 1993, "If you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you" (Hochschild, 1996). 10 years later, Cai Mingzhao, the Minister of the State Council Information Office, stated the following:

> The Chinese dream we want to achieve is...to enable everyone to develop themselves and contribute to society, to share the opportunity to excel in life, to enjoy the opportunity of making their dreams come true, and to share equal participation and

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93 Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
94 Interviewee S25 (2018, June 6)
95 Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
96 Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)

equal opportunities for development. (Cai, 2014)

The common features of these neoliberal discourses promoted by these countries are an emphasis on personal effort and on the prerequisite that the state is the land of opportunity, waiting for all individuals to achieve it. The preaching of equal opportunities once convinced Americans that they can get what they want through hard work (Johnson, 2014) and is now being used to persuade young people in China. Students expressed believing that they will have the opportunity to achieve success: if it does not work in this way, there might be another way; if it is not yet realized, it may be realized in the future. Even the aspiration of obtaining a dream job through academic credentials is shattered, and these floating hopes make it less important. The focus has been shifted from the constraints of reality to the possibilities of the future, and difficulties and pessimism have been changed into hope and optimism.

### *5.3.4 Becoming a Moneymaker*

The internship experience has also sparked students' interest in earning money, making it one of their new aspirations. For the students who had just graduated from junior secondary school, the internship was the first time in their lives that they had made money on their own. The first thing that surprised these students was that they were already able to earn so much money. In 2018, T county was still a national-level poverty-stricken county, and the rural residents only had an annual disposable income of 10,356 yuan (P. Luo, 2018). According to student registration information in Spring 2018,[97] students typically have a gross annual household income of 9,000-11,000 yuan. The average monthly household income is only approximately 300 yuan. The local government wants to alleviate poverty through vocational education and has constantly emphasized in its promotions that children will be paid for participating in internships, which will directly bring economic improvement to the family.[98] In their internships, students and parents saw government promotion become a reality. Taking the three-month internship in E4 Company in the fall of 2017 as an example, 218 students (accounting for approximately 86% of 253 students in total) received a net

[97] *T Branch Student Registration Information in 2018 Spring*, obtained from Office of Student Affairs in T Branch

[98] Interviewee T12 (T12-1; 2018, May 8). T12 is the Associate Director of Office of Admissions and Employment at T Branch and is responsible for student internships and employment.

income of more than 3,000 yuan, which was three times the average monthly income per capita. 128 students (accounting for approximately 50% of total students) received more than 4,000 yuan at the end of their three-month internship, which is almost half of the total annual family income.[99] Factory E1 paid higher wages. S7 worked at E1 for half a year and earned more than 9,000 yuan, proudly stating the following: "*I came back and paid my own tuition, and bought myself a mobile phone, and the rest was given to my dad... it was my first time I had earned money and I was so happy. I used to spend my family's money before.*"[100] S17 also worked in E1 for six months and was so impressed with his salary that he remembered every single number; he earned a total of 10,275 yuan. His family had previously relied on his grandma's pension to make a living.[101] With the salaries, students were able to buy the things that they love and had the ability to subsidize the family, which brought pleasure to them and their families.


[99] See *The Public Announcement of the Wages for Students in Work-study Alternation in Fall 2017 at T branch (Group E4)*, obtained from the T branch Office of Admissions and Employment.
[100] Interviewee S7 (2018, May 24)
[101] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

Figure 5-4. A poster for poverty alleviation in a student's home

*Note*. The family economic conditions of the students were generally poor. Earning income through quasi-employment internships is a significant opportunity for these students and their families.

Second, the students deeply felt that it was not easy to earn money; therefore understanding the hardship of their parents would make them more eager to earn money themselves so that they could contribute to the family:

> *Before I had an internship, I didn't understand anything. Now, I am ashamed to recall that my parents are really tired. I feel embarrassed to spend their money. After all, I am old enough; I want to spend my own money later.*[102]

> *The group leader told us the rate for an hour's work. It was piece-rate pay. The money that you got was based on the piece you had finished. I was surprised at that time, oh my, how hard is it to earn money! I felt more and more that it was not easy for my family to make money. I did not date spend money extravagantly when I went back.*[103]

Moreover, students felt that making money was good and necessary when their salary was spent. First, these student wanted to make more money because they needed it. Students' monthly living expenses, travel expenses, luggage fees, and travel expenses must be deducted from their wages. This means of deduction made students directly feel that the expenses accounted for a large proportion of wages. Using the students who took part in the internship at the factory E4 in autumn 2017 as an example, they were deducted over 1,800 yuan, making their final net income 3,000 yuan. The money deducted accounted for approximately 40% of these students' gross income:[104]

> *The teacher took us to visit the Three Kingdoms City in Wuxi, where we went very early in the morning and came back in the evening. I remember spending 200-300*

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[102] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[103] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)
[104] See *The Public Announcement of the Wages for Students in Work-study Alternation in Fall 2017 at T branch (Group E4)*, obtained from the T branch Office of Admissions and Employment.

*yuan that day. I was so sad; I felt like I had worked all week for nothing.*[105]

*Everyone thought that the living expenses were not enough. The teacher said that the living expenses are deducted from your salary. If you spent too much and ended up with no salary, don't ask me for help. We suddenly realized the salary had been spent so fast.*[106]

Second, like the workers, these students went to the restaurant and shopping with their friends in the commercial area near the factory during their breaks. These activities were no longer regulated by their parents or teachers, which made them aware of their need to consume in leisure and social activities:

*On Christmas Eve, I bought a lot of good food and brought 300 yuan, which was not enough to spend, so my sister gave me 100 more. I carried a lot back to the dormitory so that all the girls in the dorm had things to eat and drink.*[107]

*If the living expenses for this week were paid on that day, we would meet up with one another in the dorm to get the living expenses, and then maybe go out to have a meal, eat something good. We went Dutch and had a good meal, then went out to play somewhere, or went to the city for a walk.*[108]

Third, students also experienced the logic of "wealth is status" (H.-f. Zou, 1998, p. 219). Money not only solves realistic problems and provides more opportunities for consumer choice, but also earns the respect of others and allows for greater autonomy in life. Making money is not only legitimate; it has even become "a condition of moral health" (Buchan, 1997, p. 270).

*This experience gives me the feeling that people must earn a lot of money to have the capital to say this is not right, that is not right. Then, others will take you seriously.*[109]

*It's very important to make money. If you don't have money, you'll be bullied, and there's nothing you can do about it... It's like the saying goes, If you are poor, even if*

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105 Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)
106 Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)
107 Interviewee S31 (S31-1; 2018, March 13)
108 Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)
109 Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

*you live in a crowed city, you will be alone. However, if you are rich, even if you live in uninhabited mountains the most distant relatives will flock to you.*[110]

While students complained about the strenuousness and boring nature of their internships, they were still very willing to do it to make money. These students were full of eagerness to make money and did not hide this eagerness when they talked to me. The usefulness of money was confirmed in students' perceptions. A direct link was established between earning money and attaining quality of life and happiness. The students became subjects who would economically; their "habits, perception and subjectivity" were governed by market principles (Read, 2009b). In the following section, I discuss the significance of this phenomenon.

## 5.4 Resistance and Counter-School Culture

Respondents had a complex, conflicting understanding of their way out and personal development in the future. On the one hand, these students were aware of the obstacles of reality; on the other hand, they had a relatively optimistic attitude towards the prospects and the future as a whole. I explore the resistance of the students at school based on the respondents' attitudes and perceptions.

### *5.4.1* Hun *a Diploma*

In the fieldwork, it was found that students' resistance in the classroom was common. As Woronov (2011) observed, the students did not listen to the teacher, instead whispering to one another, sleeping, reading books unrelated to study, and playing on their mobile phones. These students were called "invisible dropouts" because they "physically attended school but have already mentally disengaged" (M. Li, Tan, & Yang, 2019, p. 2). Teachers spent time to maintain discipline in each course, which had little effect because students always had their own countermeasures. For example, students are not allowed to use their mobile phones in class. Teachers collected students' mobile phones before class and put them in front of the classroom. In response to this requirement, students developed many strategies; they handed in the model phone, such as damaged phones, and kept their own mobile phones to use in class. Teachers had to turn on each phone on to see if the screen would light up. The students

[110] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

then found old phones with well-functioning screens in response to the teacher's inspection. As a result, the teachers had to further check whether the mobile phone was installed with a SIM card, and whether there was signal on the phone. Both sides were engaging in a battle of wits, making the collection of mobile phones take ten minutes. Moreover, when the teachers finally succeeded in putting the phones away, the students felt bored; they talked and jostled, and some girls even put on makeup and fixed hair with each other. The classroom, therefore, fell into chaos. In addition to the mischievous behaviours in the classroom, a few students hid in the toilet to smoke, vandalized public facilities, ditched the class, and went to internet bars, and sometimes even engaging in fights.


Figure 5-5. The students in their leisure time

*Note*. After evening study and before going to bed, students went to the mini mart on campus to buy snacks, gathered to chat, and spent time in their cell phones; this time was the free time that they could enjoy.

This kind of disobedience and disregard for school discipline was not solely found at vocational schools. Many students shared with me that they bothered their teachers in junior high school and were urged by their homeroom teachers to enter the vocational school so that the teachers could manage the class more easily. In these students' descriptions, the main reason for which they had been unable to do well in classes for a long time is they "*just cannot listen*."[111] Due to a lack of family education, these learners had not cultivated effective learning habits and abilities (Youlu Shen, 2017). Learning was a painful thing for them, while playing made them happy (some students came to vocational school only because the pressure in regular senior secondary schools was overwhelming). After entering vocational school, some students began to realize that "*often playing like this is not a good thing.*"[112] However, their study habits were poor and their academic foundation was weak, making it difficult for them to keep up with lectures. Therefore, students easily felt bored in the classroom and did all kinds of other things just to kill time.

However, poor learning ability was only one aspect of students' difficulties. Teachers found that students became more difficult to discipline after internships, which teachers described as students "*being infected with unfavourable social habits*."[113] Although students' disciplinary violations occurred at all stages of vocational education, students' interest in learning decreased significantly after the internship. T25 elaborated on this issue as follows:

> *They can only go to the pharmaceutical company to start working as an operator; the senior students went there and gave feedback to the junior students. The junior students felt that they could only do this kind of job after graduation, meaning that there was no need to learn. After the quasi-employment internship, they were reluctant to go to work in the factory and entered various sectors of society, hotel reception, cosmetology, hairdressing, and selling clothes. So, [we] simply quit learning, and I cannot get better anyway. This is a vicious cycle.*[114]

Therefore, students' resistance cannot be simply interpreted as mischievousness,

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[111] Interviews with several students, including S13, S17
[112] Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)
[113] Interviews with several teachers, including T8, T20.
[114] Interviewee T25 (2018, June 4)

instead being a reaction to reality. As observed by researchers, students felt disappointed that they could only work as operators in the assembly line after discovering that the role of academic credentials was limited (Koo, 2016; Pun & Koo, 2019). After the internship, some students chose to drop out in each class, and the number reached half of the total class size for some classes. For the students who chose to stay on campus, the most important reason for staying was that they were worried that life might be more difficult afterwards if they could not obtain the academic credentials of secondary vocational education and vocational college:

> *I still want to get my diploma, three years is not long. When I graduate, maybe the salary will still be higher than those who have not attended high school.*[115]

> *Nowadays, it's a diploma-driven society, and we can't be in managerial positions if we don't have the opportunity to go to a university. What else can we do if we don't even have a vocational secondary education credential?*[116]

These students chose to stay in school to "*hun* a diploma", hoping that their future would be at least not worse than their peers who did not attend vocational school. At the same time, these students believed that there was no need to spend more time and energy studying anymore since education was not enough to change their destiny and they could only do low-end jobs in the future. For students who found that the competition certificate was "*just a decoration*"[117] or found that the school could not provide qualifications for them to obtain the vocational qualification certificate, the significance attached to studying diminished sharply. Although students still hoped to get a diploma, they did not need to study hard, instead passing the time because academic performance was not required. These students also did not have the pressure to go on to higher education, and their interest shifted from studying to other things such as leisure and entertainment with friends and making money. The ensuing resistance behaviour can be seen as a student's response to the disappointment of reality or a coping strategy that arises after finding that the ideal work and life promised by school education cannot be realized. In summary, researchers have suggested that a series of behaviours that students developed as a result of their playfulness and poor learning habits

[115] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[116] Interviewee S48 (2018, March 6)
[117] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

could not be regarded as resistance and could only be referred to as *reactionary behaviour* because it had nothing to do with the youth's insight into and criticism of social reproduction (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Moreover, the behaviours that were contrary to the goals of education and arose due to their awareness of the hopelessness of social mobility could be categorized as self-defeating resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), whether they dropped out of or stayed in school.

These oppositional behaviours have already brought negative effects in schools. Teachers find it difficult to teach because of the chaotic classroom: "*you must maintain discipline in the courses*." T2 stated, "*You know, if you stopped maintaining discipline when you talked about a topic, it was difficult to return to the original thinking, and you did not remember what you were talking about*."[118] T12 also stated, "*Here, the true meaning of education is not to propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge and resolve doubts, but to clear all kinds of obstacles*."[119] The teachers realized that the main goal of vocational school was to govern students so that they could stay safely in school and not create problems. The completion of the teaching task became secondary. Students' attitudes and behaviours toward learning had a negative effect on teachers' teaching, and the poor quality of teaching further impeded students who had the motivation to learn. S6 stated that,

> *When I first came here, I was extremely motivated to do everything but slowly changed. At that time, I made up my mind to study hard, but I felt that the teaching was poor as time went on. I just listened casually in class*.[120]

In addition, this unwillingness to learn spread among peers. When students found that their good friends were not studying in class, they joined them to play together: "*several good friends are chatting (in class), so I don't want to listen either.*"[121] This system is a vicious circle because students drifter farther away from the path of getting ahead by obtaining vocational skills.

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[118] Interviewee T2 (T2-3; 2018, May 20)
[119] Interviewee T12 (T12-2; 2018, May 22)
[120] Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)
[121] Interviewee S15 (2018, May 30)

### *5.4.2 Resistance without Counter-School Culture*

"*I want to be a doctor, but I have no choice. I can't go back to junior high school. I have already graduated from junior high school, and I can't go to university*", S14 said to me. Limitations on this student's academic credential made her realize that her career aspirations were already destined to never become a reality. Just like S14, other students had realized that the practical functions of vocational education were limited after encountering structural exclusion from the education system. The academic credentials from vocational education not only made their pursuit of university education extremely difficult, thus moving them away from the career aspirations they once had, but also made them likely to encounter the glass ceiling in the workplace and confined them in the most difficult operative jobs all year round. Students found that vocational education may not facilitate upward mobility. This insight had a profound influence on their original aspirations for vocational education credentials, which made them exhibit resistance to the daily educational practices of the school.

It is worth noting that students did not take counter-school practice and its underlying values as a goal for action. Students' attitudes toward school education were multi-dimensional, complex, and even contradictory. Although students were dissatisfied with the academic credentials of the vocational school, it was difficult for them to realize the social reproduction functioning of school education. These students did not even fully believe that the school was largely responsible for their predicament. Based on my findings, many students perceived their own problems as a cause of personal development difficulties. Therefore, the resistance of the students in this study is fundamentally different from that of the "lads" in the study of P. E. Willis (1977), although both groups had partial insights. In fact, students who stayed at school were satisfied with the T branch as a whole. Students enjoyed the equal, harmonious relationship between teachers and students at the branch compared to junior high school and regular senior secondary school: "*here, the teachers and the students play basketball together, and we won't have this scenario in junior high school*";[122] and "*he [the homeroom teacher] jokes with us, like brothers*."[123] The school allows students to use their cell phones freely outside of class, and teachers do not pressure students to study as

[122] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)
[123] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)

much as junior secondary school teachers did. The school and teacher intend for students to "self-regulate."[124] This relatively relaxed atmosphere makes students happy. As T18 described, "*they are willing to do anything as long as they are not required to study.*"[125] This finding also explains why reactionary behaviour mainly appeared during class, particularly theory class. Furthermore, the school has severe punishments for fighting and smoking, which are considered serious deviant behaviours. Most students approved of such strict measures: "*other schools are not well-managed, and there are students fighting everywhere*";[126] and "*we have a lot of fights in junior high school, but we haven't seen once in this school*."[127] The students took this system as a sign that the school has "*good school ethos*."

Moreover, the students who stayed at the school cherished the identity of students, an identity that could separate them from "*shehuiren*" *(社會人,people who quit school and go out to work in early adolescence)* who left school early and started working:

> *We are students and at least better and more capable than the punks in the street who wear slippers and ripped pants outside. At least we are on track, unlike those who don't study and just graduated from junior secondary school.*[128]

These students linked academic performance with morality and thought that it was the right thing to continue their study. Students also hoped that their younger brothers and sisters could "*continue to study well*"[129] and "*go to senior regular secondary school*"[130] to change their futures. The recognition of knowledge and diplomas showed that students internalized the hegemonic ideology that more education can bring a better future (Woronov, 2011). Therefore, these students did not lose faith in the possibility of studying to change their destiny (Y. Xiong, 2010; X. Zhou, 2011). In their view, school education was still the most effective means of upward mobility. Therefore, it can be summarized that students' resistant behaviours did not go were against the authority of the school and teachers nor were rooted in the compelling critiques of the schooling system, instead representing the abandonment of the

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[124] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)
[125] Interviewee T18 (T18-2, 2018, May 18)
[126] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[127] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[128] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[129] Interviewee S21 (2018, June 4)
[130] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)

pursuit of academic success after encountering difficulties, or even a pragmatic move after comparing the costs and benefits of human capital investment. Kipnis argued that Chinese teenagers' resistance is atomic and decentralized without the support of counter-school culture. This resistance behaviour as *resistance without counterculture* (A. Kipnis, 2001a). The observation at the T branch supported this argument.

### *5.4.3 Partial Resistance: The Principles are True*

Students who violated school rules and values may understood with reference to their attitudes toward personal development and success. I have described the logics of success that were continually instilled in students by school teachers. These logics are not only present in schooling; they also diffuse and appear frequently in mass media. In mainstream media, the voice of telling successful cases and advocating for hard work are considered to "promote the main melody and spread positive energy" (Xi, 2018, August 22). For example, the *People's Daily*, the official media of the Communist Party, published a commentary stating that most people are not rich, meaning that they need to rely on themselves. The neoliberal logic in the economic system is combined with the idea of governmentalities in post-socialist China (Sigley, 2006). This success discourse is also common on the Tik Tok and Kuaishou applications, which are commercial media that publish short videos and are frequently used by the students. Although some youth subcultures have emerged in online communities, researchers have observed that the production of these subcultures is combined with capital in order to obtain profits, making it difficult for the youth to exert resistance (Qiming Li & Huang, 2017; G. Yang, 2019).

Moreover, these subcultures also share the same logic or core value of success. On the one hand, the anchors, who were predominantly from the working class, produced videos whose contents implied that they had significant existential anxiety caused by dissatisfaction with their real situation (N. Li, 2018). This emotion in the videos targeted students' perception of reality, also creating an illusion of counterattacking from the underclass. S45 and her dorm peers used Kuaishou to watch short videos in their spare time and were participants attracted to an anchor named Paipaiqi, which was also a rural youth who had been to a vocational school. Paipaiqi attracted a large number of fans via a "social shake" in the live broadcast and

accumulated tens of millions of dollars when he was only 19 years old. S45 and her friends felt that Kuaishou allowed them to see the truth of society: "*society is particularly realistic, and life is not easy*." However, realizing the difficulties in reality does not guarantee insights into the logic of how society works. For these students, the way to cope with the hardships of life is to "*work hard to make themselves and their families better, like Paipaiqi did.*"[131] On the other hand, the successful narrative itself is also one of the important outputs from the self-media. These students often told stories of people who endured hardships and finally achieved success. These short videos were concluded with a summary of sentences such as "you chose the road, so you have to finish it on your knees if needed"[132] and "those who are more outstanding than you are working harder than you"[133]. These sentences appeared so frequently in the students' expressions that the sentiments seem to have become part of their language system.

It is easy to understand, therefore, that it is difficult for students to consciously resist success discourse and even more difficult to understand the mechanism of social reproduction that is obscured by success discourse. Students have a relatively simple-minded, optimistic attitude towards their future. "*The teacher was just telling a story*", said S22, "*you can't be too serious. Their purpose was to educate us. The story may be fake, but the principles are true*."[134] Indeed, based on these narratives it can be seen that the teachers were successful in their education: although students saw through the success stories that circulated at the school, the tenets of the achievement ideology were not seen through and even grew stronger in the hearts of students. Instead of feeling hopeless, deceived, or desperate, students felt that they might just need a different path that would ultimately guide them to success. The achievement ideology blurred the structural constraints and encouraged high aspirations (MacLeod, 2009). The students adjusted their original aspirations to explore new ways and write their own "success" stories.

As Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism, as a hegemonic discourse, has been widely accepted as a common sense and has a pervasive and profound influence on the way in which

[131] Information from my field notes (2018, March 28)
[132] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28); Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[133] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23); Interviewee S35 (2018, March 19)
[134] Interviewee S22 (2018, June 4)

people think about things, and constitutes neoliberal subjects. Neoliberal subjects "think, reason, perceive, emote, remember, expect, and hope according to the master narrative of the entrepreneurial individual, despite the fact that it contradicts what happens all around them and even what happens to themselves" (Ratner, 2019, p. 154). Students were convinced of the logic of achievement ideology despite it having failed them miserably and them having had experienced contradictions in their lives. The logic is powerful and overshadows students' lived experience and life knowledge (Ratner, 2019). These students simply wanted to overcome difficulties by working harder, with little insight into the logic of school education to reproduce an unequal society. The attribution of failure to the self, the recognition of the need to change oneself, the belief of chances of succeeding, and the desire for money together constitute a local achievement ideology and materialistic desire at the T Branch. From this perspective and consistent with some past research, the resistant behaviour that lacks the support of counter-school culture is partial resistance and only resists the everyday educational practice at the micro or meso level in the school field rather than macro-level cultural hegemonic practices (M. Li, 2015).

## 5.5 New Aspirations: Finding a Different Path

This lack of revolutionary resistance does not mean that students are completely passive and reactive. Resistance theories focus on the actions of students within schools. If one student attempts to move beyond the resistance/submissiveness dichotomy and looks at broader social life, it can be seen that, after a blocked future, the students try to adjust the aspirations within their own horizons and seek possibilities other than academics based on realistic conditions. Adjustment after frustration is a reflection of the dynamism of this group.

### *5.5.1 Making Money, More and Faster*

When the students realized that human capital investments may not offer significant benefits, their desire to make money was strengthened. During the internship, the students learned that having money means many things and is essential to a good life. Students desperately want to make money, which has becomes a new path to success.

*I was confused when I was in school; then, by making money, I was not confused any*

*more. Now, I can still find a job but am trying to find a way to make money.*[135]

*Academic achievement did not work for me. The only thing that I can do is to make money, the faster the better, and the more the better.*[136]

After the first internship, a number of students in each major chose to drop out of the school and go straight to society to make money. Some students told me the following:

*At the very beginning, our class had a fairly large size of more than 20 students. Things had changed since we came back from the internships. Students felt that their academic credentials were useless here, and it was better for them to earn money outside.*[137]

*After students came back from the internships, they felt that they just "*hun*" at this school. These students could earn money outside anyway, so they wanted to go out and earn money quickly.*[138]

The students who chose to stay on campus did not give up the possibility of making money. These students tried all means to earn money, such as doing part-time jobs on weekends and holidays. Through the introduction of relatives, S6 was a part-time worker on construction sites in the county on weekends from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and could earn 100 yuan a day.[139] S12 was part of a work-study project at school on weekends, helping the gardening department to look after the plants and earning 50 yuan per day.[140] S11 worked with two students from the same department and opened a Sichuan restaurant in a small county close to T County. Each of these students contributed what they had earned in the internship, but one dropped out of school to take charge of the business full time. S11 and another classmate were still studying but taking shares and participating in management. He said, "*It's not really about competence. When I came back last year, I just wanted to make money*".[141] The two of them each could earn 1,000-2,000 yuan a month.

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135 Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
136 Interviewee S21 (2018, June 4)
137 Interviewee S7 (2018, May 24)
138 Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
139 Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)
140 Interviewee S12 (S12-1; 2018, May 30)
141 Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)

Most of the interviewees in this study were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the face of the possible failure of human capital investment in education, the students tended to seize the immediate certainty to increase their wealth and help their families share the financial burden and meet their own consumption needs and expectations of social status.

### *5.5.2 Obtaining Certificates and Ideal Jobs*

Some students are also trying another new path, which involves obtaining some vocational qualification certificates for the purpose of obtaining an ideal job. Since 1994, China has been implementing the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Certificate System, including an NVQ for Vocational Accession and another for Level Evaluation. These qualifications are issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the relevant departments under the State Council. In addition, various local governments and departments have established a large number of vocational qualifications on their own (Donglu, 2016, April 5). In the decade following 1994, the state gradually cancelled vocational qualifications of some occupations in order to lower the barriers to employment and entrepreneurship. In 2017, there were 140 occupational categories requiring vocational qualifications, of which 59 were professional and technical personnel and 81 were skilled personnel (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China, 2017). The ideal jobs for students are largely covered in these occupations, particularly in the category of professional and technical personnel.

Based on students' accounts, it may be concluded that their ideal job has several criteria. First, the ideal job has *bianzhi*, which means that it is stable and they will not easily lose their jobs. Secondly, the income should high. If these two criteria are met, the third criteria, namely "sitting in the office" (i.e., working in the office and no physical labour being required) will generally be satisfied. The fourth criterion is that the job should be decent and have high social status, which can also be guaranteed by the first two criteria.

Specifically, there are three main categories of jobs that meet their criteria. The first category is "*iron rice bowl*", which refers to a job with guaranteed job security and steady income. According to these students, as long as the job has *bianzhi*, it is an iron rice bowl,

such as teachers, civil servants, etc; this kind of jobs is what they most aspire to. However, students usually need one or more examinations and interviews, and competition is fierce. Students know that it is not easy to get good employment. S20 expressed wanting to become a local civil servant; only if he is able to get a Bachelor's degree can he be qualified to take the national civil service examination.[142] S7, from the preschool education major, wanted to have the primary school teacher qualification. At present, there are many private kindergartens in T County, but they do not have *bianzhi*. There are too few public kindergartens, which she would like to enter. She needs a primary school teacher certificate, which could make her qualified to take the national exam for a teacher with *bianzhi*.[143]

The second category includes jobs without *bianzhi* but providing a high salary, such as psychological counsellors, human resource managers, and certified public accountants. These individuals' choice to obtain the certificates is neither based on career goals nor on personal interests, hobbies, expertise, instead taking a practical point of view (i.e., high salary). Once these individuals had obtain certain certificates, they are eligible to undertake certain occupations. Some students had many choices when making a decision. For example, S6, as a student of computerized numerical control, wanted to take both exams for certificates of psychological counsellor and human resource manager.[144]

The third category of their ideal jobs is special. With the government requiring professional qualifications, many companies are unable to recruit employees who meet qualification requirements. In order to cope with inspection by the industrial and commercial administration departments, the companies "rent" the certificate of the person who has passed the professional qualification. In other words, as long as the students earn these certificates, they do not need to actually work in the company. These certificates belong to NVQ for Vocational Accession, including licensed pharmacists, licensed fire engineers, and licensed safety engineers. Students thought that they could earn income on their own and then get another income by renting the certificate. For example, S45, a nursing major, not only wanted to take a primary school teacher certificate, a nursery certificate, or health manager certificate,

[142] Interviewee S20 (2018, June 4)
[143] Interviewee S7 (2018, May 24)
[144] Interviewee S6 (S6-2; 2018, June 29)

but also a licensed pharmacist certificate, which could be rented to a local pharmacy to increase her income.[145]

With the expectation of a desired occupation or income, students were once again investing in human capital. These students invested not only time, but also money. However, most students did not have the ability to obtain effective and valid information online, they were confused about the requirements for a particular certificate and did not even know how to register for the exams. Meanwhile, they were not good at studying and cannot prepare well for the exams through self-study. As a result, they had to seek help from training companies. These companies offered a full range of services from consultation to registration to training. They charge fees ranging from several thousands to 10,000 yuan. Once again, students equated getting a particular certificate with getting a good job. They wanted to give it a try.

After the internship, students were aware that the academic credentials did not guarantee a promising future and were impressed by the importance of making money. A new aspiration gradually emerged, namely making money as soon as possible. Students started doing various part-time jobs and generated another new aspiration of obtaining vocational certificates in pursuit of a better job. The formation of the two new aspirations is grounded in its social context. When China transformed from a planned economy to a market economy, the socialist welfare system tied to permanent employment was considered a burden for enterprises (B. Li, 2018). The state is committed to creating markets in areas such as employment, education, health, and housing, and policies have been created with the intention of making individuals take responsibility for themselves (Wong, 1994). On the other hand, neoliberal economic policies have made precarious employment common (C. K. Lee, 2016, 2019; C. Smith & Pun, 2018). In the absence of social protection and job security, two options had been provided to the students in order to live a happy life: (i) earning money as soon as possible. By accumulating wealth, they are able to provide social security for themselves; (ii) obtaining certificates to obtain occupations with guaranteed job security or high salary. This adjustment reflected students' subjectivity. However, could these two aspirations become reality? In terms of earning money as soon as possible, students lacked cultural and economic

[145] Interviewee S45 (S45-2; 2018, March 28)

capital and could only rely on manual labour or small businesses to support the life they desired. In terms of obtaining certificates, it is not easy to get certificates for students who lacked learning ability. Moreover, earning a certificate is just a way to get a professional qualification but does not guarantee a desired job; it is also difficult to secure a stable job. The students' new aspiration may still be challenged and have to be adjusted in the future.

### 5.6 Concluding Remarks

In modern China, the life trajectory of vocational school students generally does not conform to the logic of achievement ideology (Woronov, 2012). However, the state continuously emphasizes that vocational education is an important means for young people to fulfil the Chinese dream (*Xinhua News Agency*, 2014). In the meritocratic education system after the 1980s, teachers instil the idea that success can be achieved by working hard. During internships, students have come to realize the limitations of their academic credentials, which contradicted the success stories told by teachers. However, although the students could identify various constraints, they were not able to see through the principles of achievement ideology. These students believed that the dilemma was caused by themselves and that, through hard work, there will be opportunities for success in the future; they would be able to solve many problems by making money. This chapter puts students' behaviours at school that conflicted with the purpose of education in this context. Part of the students' resistance can be attributed to reactionary behaviours for entertainment purposes, while the other resistant behaviours were caused by their disappointment with reality. However, the students only saw the dilemma that their academic credentials could not guarantee a good job but did not realize the logic of reproduction in education or observe the root of social inequality through success discourse. Therefore, these students' behaviours were, in my understanding, partial resistance. Although the original aspirations were weakened or shattered, potential success in the future can always provide hope. It may be argued that, while students felt pessimistic about studying, they held an overall optimistic attitude towards the future. As a result, the students embraced the risk that human capital investments may not yield benefits and turned to pursue a desired life by earning money and obtaining certificates.

In the next chapter, I turn to another aspiration (i.e., learning skills) that students have

in the early days of entry into vocational school. I discuss how this aspiration changes as students have new experiences and analyse the reasons and implications of these changes.

## Chapter 6 From Learning Skills to Learning things: "I Have Achieved Much Growth Here"

In 2007, a survey conducted by the China Youth and Children Research Centre on the new generation of migrant workers (post-80s, aged 16-25) found 97% had a strong desire to continue their studies. Among these individuals, 69.7% were most interested in vocational skills, 54.7% in legal knowledge, and 47.8% in intellectual education (Junyan Liu, 2007a). T branch students were also expected to learn vocational skills and knowledge for personal development. In this chapter, I describe students' experiences in school and internships and whether they have learned skills as they hoped. I then explain in detail what students actually learned through vocational education and how the learning experience changed their original aspirations about learning skills and shaped new aspirations. Finally, I analyse the ideology that has influenced this transformation process, and how this ideology, entwined with achievement ideology and contradicted with their actual experience, affects students' perceptions of learning experience, work experience, and personal development.

### 6.1 Operator Level Skills

Unlike some vocational schools that use the name *vocational high schools* and actually offer students subject matter to allow them to take the National College Entrance Examination (X. Ma, 2014), the T branch is a formal school that aims to improve the skill level of its students. The courses at the school mainly focus on vocational education, with specialized courses accounting for 70% of the total courses in the first year and 80% of the courses in the second and third years.[146] Moreover, over 80% of the school's teachers have both theoretical and practical abilities, and teaching quality is at the middle to upper level in Yunnan Province.[147] However, students of different majors generally believed that they had only learned a few basic skills in the two to three years of vocational education, or have not learned skills:

*Learning doesn't seem to make a big difference. Now, I am just faster at counting and*

[146] Calculated from the *2018 Spring Schedule of Classes in T branch*, obtained from the Office of Academic Affairs in T branch.

[147] Interviewee T22 (T22-1, 2018, May 28)
T22, a teacher from department of automotive, regularly takes students to competitions, is an experienced teacher, and has a rich knowledge of the counterpart schools in the province.

*typing.*[148]

*I didn't learn anything about skills. I didn't practice it often and forgot in two months.*[149]

The automobile repair major is the flagship of the school. Due to the financial support of a party-owned enterprise in a local poverty alleviation project, the technical training equipment at the Department of Automotive Engineering is relatively comprehensive. However, students had no confidence in their skill level and did not think that they could independently undertake auto repair work after graduation; they believed that they would still need to continue learning with their teachers:

*My skills are not yet to the level of being able to repair a car, and I'll have to continuing learning when I graduate.150*

*If you want to work in this field after graduation, you'd have to start from scratch. In fact, you can only get a cursory understanding of this profession here and grasp some simple basics.151*

*I've definitely learned some (skills), but nothing practical.*[152]

In terms the skill level of students, T26, a teacher with a high skill level in the mechanical major who won the first prize in a national skill competition, commented the following:

*Generally, our students only learn simple operating skills. The work that they undertake in the future may tend to be low-end, basic positions such as assembly line operators, which they do not need to think much about.*[153]

[148] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[149] Interviewee S53 (2018, March 6)
[150] Interviewee S51 (2018, June 4)
[151] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[152] Interviewee S19 (S19-1; 2018, June 4)
[153] Interviewee T26 (2018, June 6)

Figure 6-1. A technical training class for computer science

*Note*. The students spent the entire class practicing making wires, a technique that was extremely easy to master; the students just needed repetition to improve their speed.

Echoing the teacher's comments, the students also felt that they had no more skills

than less-educated workers who had taken part in internships:

> *There is no difference in our skills; the difference is that they receive a higher wage than we do.*[152]

> *They have better skills and can do the work faster than us. We have to learn for weeks, but we still can't master the skill.*[154]

> *What advantages do we have? The less-educated workers are more skilled than us.*[155]

Students had hoped that they would acquire the ideal occupation through learning skills, thus gaining the appreciation and respect of others. After two to three years of learning, these students' skill level remained low and they were not irreplaceable according to their own perceptions and teachers' evaluations. The most probable jobs for these students were assembly line operators. This situation suggests that these students' aspiration about learning skills had not been realized. So, how do they interpret the discrepancy and its causes?

### 6.2 Obstacle to Learning Skills

When I asked students why did not they acquire may skills, the logic of achievement ideology was applied to their narrative. The students began by blaming themselves, attributing their lack of skills to their lack of ability or effort:

> *S13: I don't think I'm likely (to learn useful skills). (Interviewer: why?) There are many microcontroller programs, but I can't remember. I'm not very smart.*

> *S41: (My skill level is) a bit poor. (Interviewer: why?) I don't work as hard as my classmates.*

The students placed a particular emphasis on personal efforts, asserting that they could learn skills as long as they were willing to learn, dedicated, and hard-working. In particular, when evaluating peers, students were harsh and thought that people who could not master skills should be responsible for their laziness. This finding demonstrates the value of hard work, allowing them to unconsciously use it when analysing problems:

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[154] Interviewee S24 (2018, June 5)
[155] Interviewee S41 (2018, June 6)

*If you are dedicated to learning, you're able to learn skills. Teachers won't lie to us. They are inspiring us how to learn, and all they teach is skills.*[156]

*If you really want to learn, you can. Students who say that they can't learn skills in vocational schools are making excuses. If you don't study hard and just play on your phone, you obviously can't learn skills.*[157]

However, when asked in detail about their experiences in school and at internships, the students shared many of their stories and perceptions. When students no longer used the discourse, they were accustomed to hearing and talking, and real-life experience emerged from their narratives. These students' experiences were closely related to the fact that they have learned very little skills.

### *6.2.1 Barriers at School*

First, these students had weak academic preparation and it was often difficult for them to learn; they were also aware of this weakness as their mathematics, physics, chemistry, and other subject performance did not meet the graduation criteria of junior secondary school. These subjects are prerequisites for studying secondary vocational education courses. As a result, the students felt that they had learned few skills in theory course. In fact, it was difficult for these students to understand their teachers as they had already developed the habitus of not being enthusiastic about studying, which prevents them from being proactive in asking for teachers' help. When these students do not understand something, they do not ask for clarification:

*Generally speaking, we don't understand what the teacher says in class. It is easier to do the practical work. In the technical training class, we played and learned, and it's quite enjoyable.*[158]

*We don't want to learn theory. (Interviewer: why?) Because we don't understand what the teacher says, so how can we learn? We can only understand the simple content and get a general idea of what the teacher is talking about. It's enough to know a*

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156 Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)
157 Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)
158 Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

*little, and you cannot expect much from it. If you can understand these books in detail, you can go to the research and development department.*[159]

Second, the students felt that the school was poorly equipped. Taking the Department of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering as an example, T26 stated that the school's funding was limited, and that the fixed assets of the department were only approximately 2 million yuan. In schools in eastern coastal cities, a piece of more advanced equipment in a training room is worth 2-3 million yuan. The disadvantaged condition hinders teachers' teaching and students' studying.[160] The students felt that the outdated equipment was not enough to help them master the operation skills and was not conducive to their success in skill competitions:

*We can't learn any skills at school at all. At most, we learn a little and lay the foundation. The equipment at the school is old.*[161]

*We went to other schools to compete and found that their equipment was different from ours. The first time that we used the new equipment, we didn't know how to. We were very unskilled and did not win the prize.*[162]

[159] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[160] Interviewee T26 (2018, June 6)
[161] Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)
[162] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

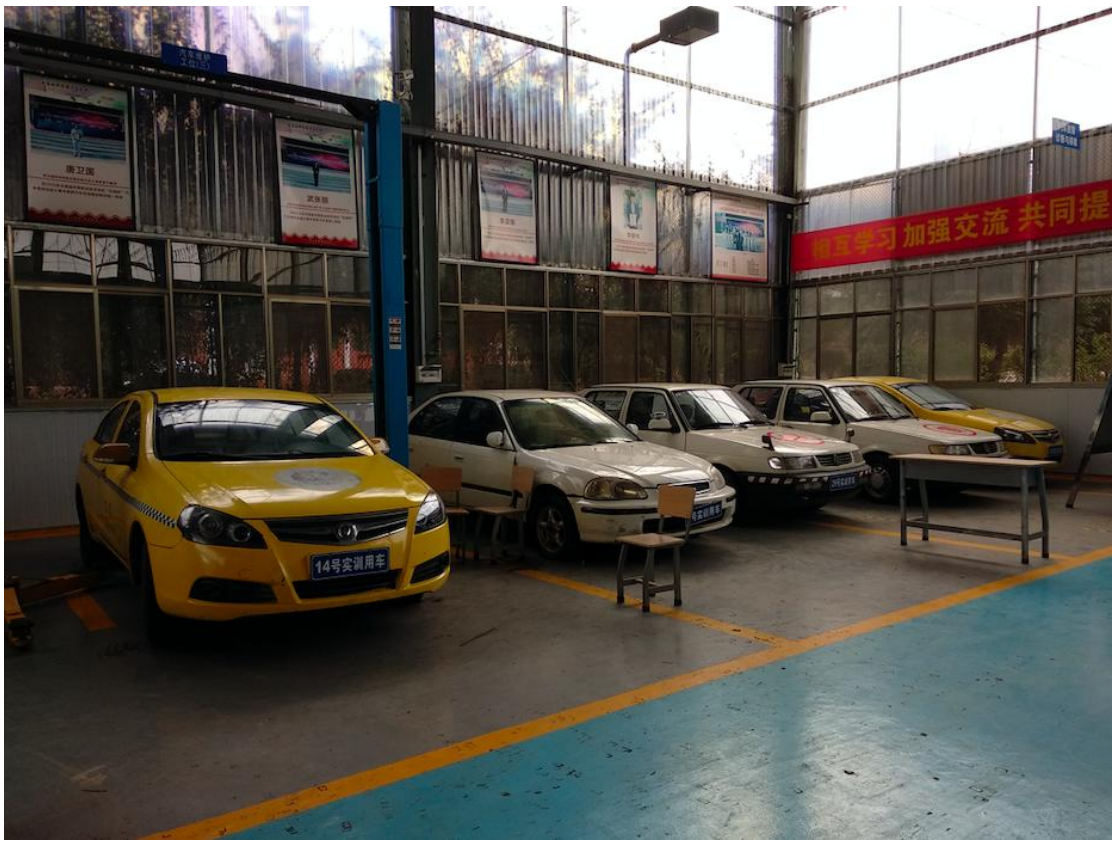


Figure 6-2. Technical training room in the automotive department

*Note*. The cars used by the automotive department for student training were old vehicles that had been retired from the local driving school.

Third, the students were aware that there was a short period of time for classes and a long period for internships. Most students participated in two to three internships before graduation, each lasting approximately five months. During the three-year vocational education, these students spent a third to half of the time as operators on an assembly line in a factory.

> *We study one semester per year at school; it's very short. We haven't mastered the skills yet, and we have to do the social practice in other semester.*[163]

> *Our school requires an extended social practice. Time flies at school, and we don't*

[163] Interviewee S16 (S16-1; 2018, May 31)

*have a solid grasp of the skills.*[164]

### *6.2.2 Barriers in Internships*

The students were aware that they had not learned skills in their internships. The most important reason for the lack of learning was that students realized that the work that they did was not related to their major. Although the state requires schools to arrange internships in line with students' majors (Ministry of Education, 2016a), the school sent students of all majors to the electronics and automobile factories. The students said that work at the electronics factory had nothing to do with the electromechanical major, despite the names being similar. Working in an electronics factory generally involves making and assembling components for electronic products such as cell phones and does not involve mechanical and electronic techniques and principles. Similarly, in the automobile factory, students are generally asked to make small automotive parts or assemble them, which has nothing to do with automobile repair.

> *We studied electrical engineering but assemble cameras in our internships. Seriously, it had nothing to do with our study; it was just to go outside and experience the feeling of work!*[165]

> *The automotive repair skills that we learned had nothing to do with our internships. Although we made car wires, which were parts of the cars, I still feel that it had nothing to do with our major.*[166]

Moreover, the factory has a high degree of mechanization, and the skill-intensive components were mainly performed by machines. The production process is meticulously divided into different steps. The workers in each workstation only need to engage in simple steps to assist the operation of the machine. The trend of deskilling of labour that the automated production systems brings is not conducive to students' learning skills (Braverman, 1998; Previtali & Fagiani, 2015). As T26 stated, "*They don't need to think; they work with the*

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[164] Interviewee S45 (S45-1; 2018, March 13)
[165] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)
[166] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

*machine."* As the lyrics of a worker band wrote, "*dance with the machine, day and night; follow the rhythm and I cannot stop.*"[167]

> *All of the machines are semi-automatic. We just need to put things on it, and it works on its own. We don't need to have skills. They are all simple operations.*[168]

> *We use an all-in-one machine to test the camera. As long as the camera is put on, the four items that need to be tested can be displayed... All we need to do is put the camera on, take it off, put another one on and take it off.*[169]

The conversations with students revealed that they realized that they had not learned many skills; they were also able to analyse the barriers to their skill learning at school and factories. Surprisingly, students still felt they had gained and grown a lot, commenting, "*I have learned a lot*,"[170] "*I didn't learn many skills, but I have learned a lot in other areas.*"[171] As a result, students' original aspiration to learn skills seemed less important. When looking back on the experience with vocational education, the students were even grateful for the school. So, what did the students learn from their experiences in school and internships?

## 6.3 Learning Things and Growing Up

This section continues to describe the students' experiences in school and internships, explain what the specific "things" they had learned, and their perceptions and feelings.

### *6.3.1 Learning to* Zuoren

An important component of learning is learning *zuoren (做人)*, which translates as "make oneself a human being or, simply, doing personhood" (Yan, 2007; p3). In addition to teaching skills, the school aims to guide students to *zuoren*. At the T branch, learning *zuoren* is more important than learning skills. The school follows the principle of "*teaching students* zuoren *first, then teaching students to do things*."[172] This principle runs through almost all of

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[167] Power Bass D Band (重 D 音乐队), a Shenzhen-based migrant worker band, focuses on labour and life, hoping to reinvent the value of labour and the dignity of workers. Their songs are highly reflective. The band has released the album, "*It's Not Easy to Make a Living These Days*", which includes the song, *The Man Who Danced with the Machine.*

[168] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)

[169] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

[170] Interviewee S15 (2018, May 30)

[171] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)

[172] *2018 Admissions Brochure of T Branch*, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment.

the teaching practices at the school. Teachers believe that these teaching practices are "*saving the souls of students.*"[173] Before the start of the school year, the school held a two-week military training for freshmen. In the first week of the school year, the school held a series of lectures on "moral courses" to educate students to be moral people. In a variety of skill-dominant courses each semester, the importance of *zuoren* is emphasized by teachers and perceived by students:

> *When we came to this school, they did not teach us skills at the beginning, instead teaching us* zuoren*.*[174]

> *The school focuses on teaching* zuoren*. When we first arrived, we took moral education classes. For the whole week, we were taught how to* zuoren *at the beginning.*[175]

The *zuoren* content can be divided into the following three aspects based on the descriptions of teachers and students.

#### 6.3.1.1 Obeying Discipline

The first aspect of learning *zuoren* is being a person who obeys discipline. First, students are educated to comply with the requirements of laws. The school has a course named *Ethics Law and Life*, which is compulsory for students in all majors. This course is a component of law and safety education required by the local government. The government believes that "one more vocational school, one less prison" and requires schools to function as a social safety net to protect local order and security.[176]

Second, students should abide by the school's discipline. The school governs students' behaviours through a code of conduct that encompasses all aspects of students' daily actions, from in-class behaviours (e.g., not being late for early morning readings, not leaving early for evening self-study class, not sleeping and playing with cell phones in class) to daily behaviours (e.g., not wearing earrings and strange clothes, not smoking). These norms also include a lot of activities. Students should not leave the school campus from Monday through

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[173] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)
[174] Interviewee S21 (2018, June 4)
[175] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)
[176] O5, an officer of the Vocational Education Division of the Education Bureau of T county.

Friday. They spend every day in the classroom, canteen, and dormitory, and are present in the prescribed place within the prescribed period. In addition, students are required to keep their classrooms, dormitories, and campus clean and hygienic, to sweep the floor, to throw away rubbish daily, and to not litter in the campus. Students who violate these rules and regulations are subjected to punishment; in severe cases, they would be expelled. Teachers stated that these norms are to help students form a sense of self-discipline and not cause problems. According to one teacher,

> *These rules themselves may not be meaningful, but I have to tell them that they should obey the rules of the school when they are in school, obey the rules of the factory when they go to the social practice, and obey the rules of society when they enter society. By doing this, they will not have problems in their lives.*[177]


[177] Interviewee T8 (T8-1; 2018, March 27), a teacher in charge of student administration in the Department of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering

Figure 6-3. A banner by the cafeteria

*Note*. This banner reads: *Students are forbidden from taking food and drinks out of the cafeteria*.

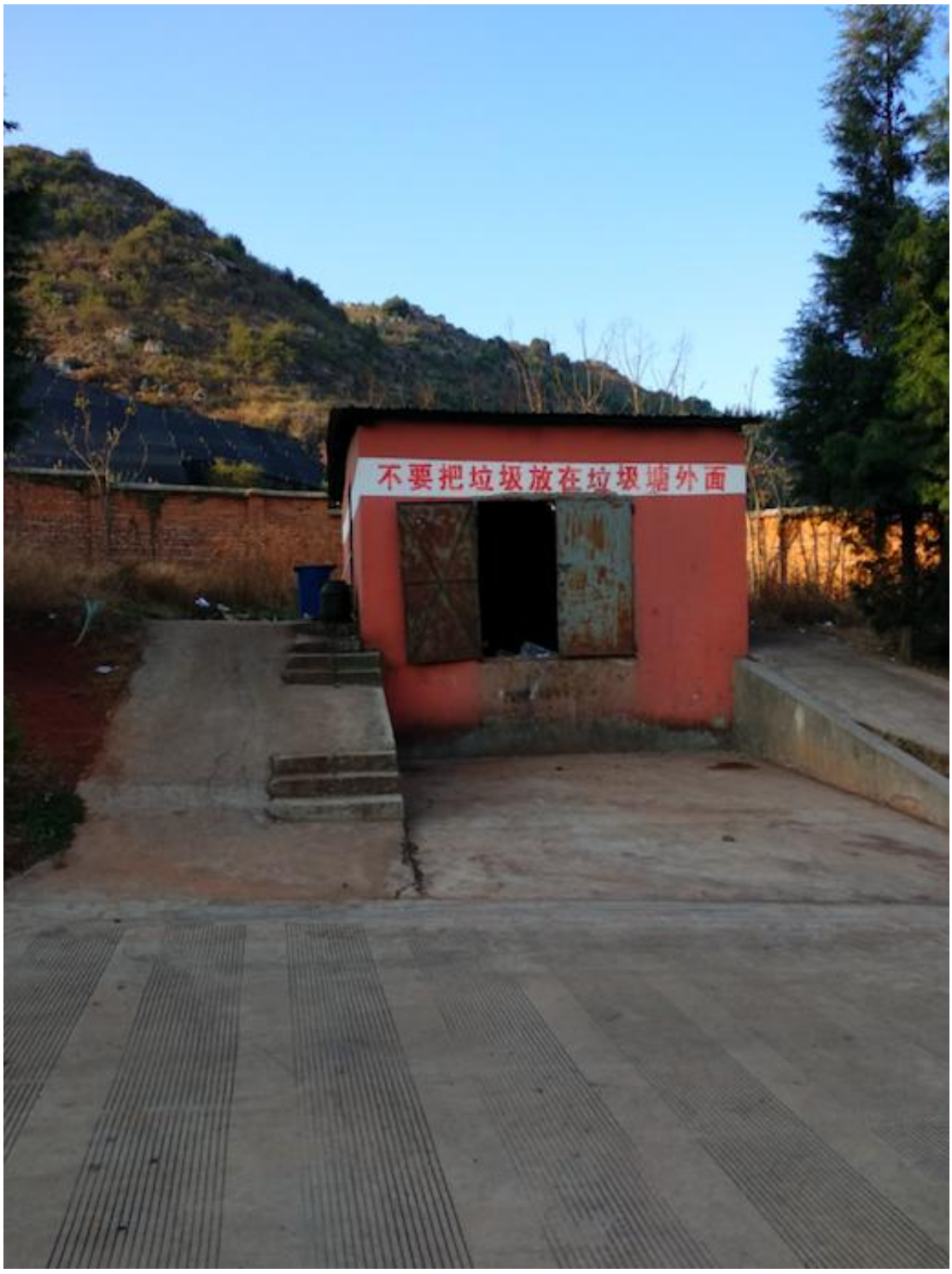


Figure 6-4. A banner next to the garbage room

Note. This banner reads *Do not put your trash outside of the garbage room*.

For students who violate discipline, the teachers patiently talk to and reason with them, hoping that they are able to internalize these norms and be transformed. The school refers to this method as a combination of "*rigid institutional management and flexible cultural management*":[178]

> *The teacher told us that we must think about the consequences of fighting. It could have been solved by saying sorry, so why do you escalate the situation? It affects your career and your future.*[179]

Third, students must obey the management of the factory during their internship. For example, students have to commute to and from work according to the working hours required by the factory, cannot use their mobile phones at work, be absent from work, or fight and make trouble. If a student fails to complete the internship due to a violation of these rules, the school would expel the student.

In their seminal work, Bowles and Gintis (2011) point out that the relationship between educators and students in schools replicates that between domination and obedience in the economic sphere. Moreover, the school shapes the qualities of the students according to the requirements of the profession that corresponds to their social class. It may also be seen in the T branch that there are many similarities between school and factory discipline. For these students about to enter the factory, punctuality and obedience of discipline are of particular importance. By implementing these disciplines, the school not only trains well-performing students, but also assists the factory in shaping easy-to-manage employees.

#### 6.3.1.2 Being Polite

The second aspect of learning *zuoren* is learning to be polite. To be polite means to comply with specific etiquette requirements when working with teachers, classmates and family members. For example, students should greet teachers, not have conflicts with teachers and parents, and not bully classmates. School calls the cultivation of politeness "traditional

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[178] *2018 Admissions Brochure of T Branch*, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment
[179] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

culture education."[180] Students who do not follow the etiquette rules in their daily lives are often reminded and criticized by their teachers:

> *We pay attention to etiquette in vocational school.*[181]

Under ongoing instructions from the teachers, some students are now polite than before. These students described the changes:

> *When I first came here, I had a bad temper and screamed all kinds of things. Now, I greet every teacher I see.*[182]

> *I was very rude before but have almost changed now. When I see a teacher, I will take the initiative to greet him. When I communicate with my classmates, I will not always oppose others, instead listening to determine if what he says is reasonable.*[183]

In internships, students found that people liked them when they behaved politely. S6 got along well with the group leader and formal workers: "*I am polite, they don't bully me. Some of our classmates were a little rushed to communicate and were scolded by the group leader every day*."[184] S11 shared his experience of internship at the factory E5 in Hangzhou:

> *There was a student from the Class of 2017. The Chief of Section asked him to do something, but he didn't want to. The chief blamed him but he talked back. I thought that he was being impolite. When people tell you to do something, you have to listen to them. You can't treat them offensively, like a young master."*

In traditional Chinese culture, *li (禮,propriety)* is important as a philosophical, social, and educational notion (L. Chen, 2001). The Analects of Confucius state the following: "If you do not learn the rules of Propriety, your character cannot be established" (Confucius, 2014). Therefore, *li* is an important part of *zuoren*. According to *li*, people are expected to perceive and behave based on their place in the social order (Yu Wei, 2013). The essence of *li* is to observe the hierarchical relationship between superiors and subordinates, which is reflected in the "Five Relationships," namely, ruler to subject, father to son, ruler and minister,

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[180] *2018 Admissions Brochure of T Branch*, obtained from Office of Admissions and Employment
[181] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)
[182] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)
[183] Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)
[184] Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)

husband to wife, elder to younger, and friend to friend. Individuals, based on classical teachings, should not overstep the boundaries to keep society civilized. It is worth noting that *li* makes demands of both of the superior and the subordinate. When a subordinate respects a superior according to *li*, the superior must also take responsibility for the subordinate and take into account the interests of said subordinate (J. Cao, 2010). However, though the concept of *li* is widely used in schools to educate students, the obligation of the superior to the subordinates has disappeared. Compliance with *li* now only includes obedience of the subordinate to the superiors; this obedience is still emphasized as a moral requirement for human beings. By morally emphasizing the importance of respecting hierarchy and fostering obedience to the superior, students' potential resistance has been restricted (Jinting Wu, 2016).

#### 6.3.1.3 Cultivating Good Habits and Attitudes in Doing Things

Finally, after the students meet the requirements of obeying discipline and being polite, teachers also hoped that they could cultivate good habits and attitudes. Teachers reported that students had "bad habits" when they entered school as they were perfunctory, sloppy, playful, and lazy; these behaviours are viewed as immoral[185] and detrimental to their future development. The teachers expect students to be conscientious, responsible, mature, reliable, patient, and insistent in finishing difficult things. The teachers argued the following:

> *Learn first to* zuoren*. Then, whether one can master a skill depends on one's willingness. When you are willing to learn, you will naturally master a skill. That's why we emphasize the development of good habits and attitudes.*[186]

> *He is a child, it's pretty good that we send him here to get his behaviour cultivated and offer him a chance to become mature.*[187]

During technical training courses, students are asked to be as accurate as possible and to repeat the steps and to observe while others are practicing; after the class, students are required to organize the equipment and clean the training room.[188] These activities aim to cultivate students' meticulousness, patience, and conscientiousness. Students also evaluate

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[185] Interviewee T20 (T20-1, 2018, May 21)
[186] Interviewee T23 (2018, May 29)
[187] Interviewee T8 (T8-1; 2018, March 27)
[188] Information from my field notes (2018, March 21)

themselves and others based on whether they possess these qualities. Students also have to compare the present self with the past self to determine if they feel happy about their changes:

> *When I was in junior secondary school, my teacher told me that I was underdog that could reach new heights. I feel more serious when I do things now and I'm especially uncomfortable with people who don't take things seriously. When people don't take it seriously, I just want to ask them to do it properly.*[189]
>
> *When I do something now, I stick to it for as long as I feel I have the ability to accomplish it.*[190]


Figure 6-5. Technical training class in the automotive maintenance major

*Note*. The students practised the required procedures repeatedly. After the class, they were required to organize the equipment and clean the training room.

[189] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[190] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)

In the selection of candidates for the competition, the teachers also value the "*attitudes of doing things*" and argued that "*the skills in the competition might not be used when they go to the factory, but their attitudes will have a great impact on their future*."[191] Teachers also paid attention to fostering these qualities in their students in school society and extracurricular activities. S4 participated in the school's broadcasting society and had to take charge of the society while other students were on break, which made her feel tired and want to quit. The teachers told her that she had to take the responsibility, and S4 said, *"Nowadays, when I am doing things, I will take it seriously and do my best if I feel it is a right thing to do*." S5 participated in the school's Taekwondo society. The Taekwondo master was reluctant to accept him as an apprentice at first, thinking that he was, "*not of good character, and slouchy and fiddling around*", but eventually decided to give him a chance. S5 thought that his master changed his life because this course taught him a lot about "*how to behave and how to treat others. Skills were actually secondary*."

There is a hidden evaluator in teachers' perceptions of what constitutes good habits and attitudes of doing things, namely the factory. Since the 20th century, the most important objective of vocational education has been to train students to find employment, serve the industry and to enable them to work well in factories (Zhen He & Xie, 2018). Therefore, teachers should consider the qualities that are needed and valued by the factory:

> *When I first got here, I did not have a good attitude towards doing things and wouldn't take them seriously. The teacher told me to take things seriously now and develop good habits. When you enter the company, others will respect and appreciate you.*[192]

> *On duty once, I forgot to take out the trash and was caught by the inspector, giving the class a demerit. The teacher told me that I could do whatever I wanted at school. However, if I misbehaved at work, I wouldn't be trusted with anything important.*[193]

When students undertake internships, teachers place heavy emphasis on the importance of learning to *zuoren*. The fact that students work for the factory is interpreted as a

[191] Interviewee T26 (2018, June 6)
[192] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)
[193] Interviewee S28 (2018, March 6)

learning experience in company, and students are encouraged to perceive hard work in the company as a necessary means of developing positive attitudes towards doing things. The narrative of S11 vividly reflects the influence of teachers' education on him:

> *Teachers say that social practice is a test of our patience and attitudes towards doing things. Although the work that we do may be different from the major that we study at school, the positive habits and attitudes cultivated in school have lifetime benefits. Positive habits and attitudes towards doing things are the same, regardless of the professional work that you will be engaged in the future. From this point of view, learning skills in school is secondary to learning the attitudes of* zuoren *and doing things. We only do professional work after graduation.*[194]

In their internships, students view the fulfilment of factory requirements as a means of training themselves. S15 was only 15 when she worked at E1 and she felt so tired in her daily work that she would doze off sitting next to the machine. She was often not able to fulfil the required production and was forced to work overtime until 11pm or midnight. She still could not accomplish the tasks and, therefore, was punished by the forewoman to copy the words "production requirements not satisfied" 50 times. However, this student expressed the following "*They're not fierce; they're nice to me... I feel like I am more sensible and able to accept punishment, especially compared to before.*"[195] S17 also worked in E1 and was in charge of the camera inspection. His eyes were store from morning to night due to being in front of the machine screen. Despite the stools offered to students, he and his classmates stood to work throughout the day to speed up the process and meet the factory's production requirements. He said the following:

> *When I was working in the factory, if I made poor-quality products, I would be blamed by line leaders. This had an impact on me, and I felt like I should become more and more responsible. I just feel like I should have proper working attitudes, and then I can do it well. When I came back, I thought that I would do well at whatever*

[194] Interviewee S11 (2018, May 29)
[195] Interviewee S15 (2018, May 30)

*plant I was assigned to when I graduated*.[196]

Since persistence and endurance are by teachers as positive attitudes towards doing things, students are proud of themselves when they discover that they have these qualities. After returning to school, these students miss the internship period. S8 made WeChat avatars with photos during the internship and explained the following: "*When I see this picture, I think of working hard. No matter what I do, go through a few more times, and I find it rewarding. Eat this bitterness first before I can have a good life*." S1 also stated the following: "*Looking back on this experience, I still miss it... Thinking that I used to insist on working every day, I feel like I was really good at that time*."

After reform and opening up, Chinese society has been accustomed to associating academic performance with morality. As vocational school students are "bad students" diverted by the highly competitive education system, they are often assumed to be morally lacking (Ling, 2015). Therefore, teaching these students to *zuoren* has become a key task for vocational schools. *Zuoren* is a complex concept with moral implications for Chinese society and is more holistic and social than Western personhood (Hui, 2003). Y. Yan (2017) argues that, in rural cultures, *zuoren* is a lifelong undertaking that can only be realized through the ongoing fulfilment of one's moral responsibility to others. Through ethnography in a village, he found that a person is regarded as good at *zuoren* if his or her behaviour conforms to the traditional cultural norms of the community, such as working for the family by discontinuing studies at school, helping the son get married to an appropriate person, and being generous in gift exchange. At the T branch, on the other hand, the content of *zuoren* is expressed in other ways. *Zuoren* has become a more modern concept, representing a set of behavioural norms more in line with the requirements of industrial society. In addition to social relationships, the concept also involves behaviour and performance in schools and workplaces. Moreover, the development of human subjectivity in traditional *zuoren*, such as the pursuit of truth, discerning right from wrong, and self-reflection has been removed (G. Huang, 2014). Instead, the suppression of self-judgment to follow the rules and accomplish tasks has been strongly advocated for. In schools and internships, students are used to these norms and consider that

[196] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

learning *zuoren* would facilitate their growth. By emphasizing the importance of *zuoren* and prescribing its contents, educators are bringing students with agricultural habits into the classroom to create a person with the merits of adhering to labour discipline and taking responsibility for things, as well as positive work habits and the patience of the industrial man (Thompson, 1967).

### *6.3.2 Improving Interpersonal Skills*

#### 6.3.2.1 Developing Expressive Language Skills

The improvement of interpersonal skills was frequently mentioned when students described their key gains in vocational education. In the chemistry class, students experience difficulties in expressing themselves in the early stages of school, which is partly because they rarely use Mandarin in their daily lives, including in their daily interactions at school, preferring local dialects or minority language. It is not easy for these students to switch from dialects to Mandarin. The school offers a weekly Mandarin course to help students become familiar with Mandarin vocabulary and speech. However, what has been useful in enhancing students' Mandarin is communicating with others during the internships. The students stated the following:

> *When we first went out and people spoke to us, we all nodded or shook our heads. We were afraid to speak for fear that our pronunciation was not correct but slowly became familiar with Mandarin before daring to speak. We did not dare to speak until we were somewhat familiar with Mandarin.*[197]

> *We usually spoke in dialect and rarely Mandarin at school. When we went out, we felt awkward speaking Mandarin. After spending five months outside and coming back, I felt that it was normal to communicate in Mandarin. No matter who I spoke to, there was no communication problems between us, and I could express myself freely.*[198]

In addition, the school offers elective courses such as Chinese language classes, speech and elocution, communication and interactions. In these classes, teachers introduce the importance of language skills for future career development and means of developing

[197] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[198] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

language skills. The teachers also set up specific scenarios to teach students what to say in an interview, what to say when asked to introduce themselves, etc.[199] Students find these courses useful: "*the teacher taught us how to communicate with others and what to say in specific situations*."[200]

Furthermore, during these courses and other class or school activities, students are encouraged to express themselves, share their own stories, and demonstrate their talents in front of teachers and classmates. Through these courses and activities, students not only develop their language skills, but also gradually overcome their shyness. Students become more outgoing, open and willing to talk to people. Many students told me that, if they had met me in the early days in vocational school, they would definitely not be able to say a word, and it would not be possible for them to chat with me as happily as when they were interviewed:

> *I didn't have any friends when I came here. I was very shy, but now I'm much braver when talking to people.*[201]
>
> *When I first came here, I didn't know how to talk to people at all. If someone chatted with me, I would be extremely nervous. Now I am much better, as you can see, I'm very comfortable talking to people.*[202]

#### 6.3.2.2 Improved Emotional Intelligence

Another aspect emphasized as improved is emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (EQ). In the success stories told by the teachers, EQ was an important element. For example, when telling the story of "*the brothers who were promoted to managerial positions*", T1 often said that the brothers, "*were not only hard-working, but also had high EQ*"[203]. Therefore, these students were valued by company leaders. Similar to the purpose of learning to *zuoren*, the purpose of improving EQ is to help students work harder in the factory and gain the appreciation of leaders and others.

One feature of having EQ is having *yanli (眼力, having the ability to recognize what*

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[199] Information from my field notes (2018, March 28)
[200] Interviewee S35 (2018, March 19)
[201] Interviewee S2 (2018, May 21)
[202] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)
[203] Interviewee T1 (T1-1; 2018, March 6)

*needs to be done for others and offering help in advance before it is requested)*, which refers to having ability to recognize what needs to be done for others and offer help in advance before they ask. For example, when the master is working, if a student can hand in tools at an appropriate time to make the work go more smoothly, the student has *yanli*. The apprentice might be appreciated by the master and receive benefits in the future:

> *Like the teacher said, if you get along with the master for a long time, have* yanli*, and maintain a good relationship, he will also teach you more tricks.*[204]

Another feature of having EQ is speaking properly, which means that students need to speak appropriate words in specific occasion; the words chosen would make others feel comfortable. This speaking requires students to be able to discern others' emotions and the emotional climate. For example, if the leader seems to be in a good mood, students can express compliments or even make an appropriate joke to bring the relationship closer; however, if it is not an appropriate occasion for jokes, students must be serious.[205] As experienced by S52, skill levels may be difficult to be discovered by leaders as having EQ and proper speaking might draw the attention of leaders::

> *Personal strength is not only reflected in skills; it contains various aspects, such as* zuoren *and doing things. Skills are usually not easy to discern by leaders because you have limited contact with them. It mainly depends on whether you are able to speak properly.*[206]

In a book that inspired the public's interests in emotions, Goleman (1995) proposes five primary characters of emotional intelligence: knowing one's emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; and handling relationships. At the T branch, only the last two characters are highlighted. Therefore, the purpose of vocational education is to improve students' EQ and promote social relations in the workplace.

According to teachers at the T branch, both expressive language skills and EQ are

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[204] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[205] Interviewee S44 (2018, June 6)
[206] Interviewee S52 (2018, March 6)

important elements of the comprehensive *sushi* and help students to maintain positive interpersonal relationships in factories. The reason for which students need to be trained in their language skills and EQ is that they are likely to work in factories in large cities and entered a brand-new world, where the social interactions might be very different from the rural community in which they live. Positive relationships important because they have to live and work harmoniously and closely with people from different regional cultures or even had conflicts of interest to ensure productivity. Boler (1999) argues that promoting EQ is the new requirement of human resources by capitalism for its own interests, following rule-obedience and capacity for efficiency. Workers' discomfort, dissatisfaction, and inability to cooperate are constructed as poor emotional control, poor interpersonal communication skills, and a poor understanding of others. These were perceived as problems that individual itself needs to deal with, thus preclude the room for resistance (Hughes, 2005).

The expansion of the discourse on emotional intelligence in the field of education serves the needs of the economic system for emotionally malleable workers (Hartley, 2003). However, high EQ is presented by educators as a key factor in individual and group success (Fineman, 2004). The control of emotions is packaged under the discourse of personal growth and progress and accepted by the students. As S44 argued, "*If people from small places like ours are going to big places, then the way we speak and* suzhi *have to improve*." For higher job prospects and the possibility of going to places with more opportunities, students consciously and diligently improve themselves and strive to become part of the economic system.

### *6.3.3 Accumulating Experience*

Teachers' emphasis on the importance of accumulating experience in order to understand society and broaden students' horizons also downplays the importance of learning skills, thereby weakening students' aspiration to learn skills. For example, the internship, which is designed by the state as a core component of teaching and learning, is aimed to improve the quality of skill training and promoting the formation of students' vocational skills (Ministry of Education, 2016a). According to teachers, the aim of the internship is to provide an experience of society:

*The purpose of the work-study alternation is not to exactly improve a particular skill. Frankly speaking, there might not be many companies that match your major. Most of the students who come here to study are from rural areas that are still underdeveloped. The quasi-employment internship is more about giving them experience of society.*[207]

For some teachers, even participating skills competitions are not to improve skills or win prizes, but to gain experience.

*The instructors told me that it didn't matter if I won an award or not; I just had to go and see more of the world.*[208]

Through the instruction, the teachers instil the importance of experience to students, from which students learn to use this criterion to evaluate what they had learned in their vocational education; students felt that they gained valuable experience.

#### 6.3.3.1 Work Experience

When aware of the limitations of their academic credentials in the internships, some students did not even think that they would have an advantage over poorly educated workers in their future career because they no longer had illusions about academic credentials on one hand. On the other hand, students did not feel that they were more highly skilled than poor-educated workers: they confused vocational skills with work experience, believing that their lack of vocational skills were due to their limited work experience:

*Our skills may not be better than theirs, not really. They have had work experience before, we are fresh out of school and a blank slate.*[209]

*I don't think that our skills are better than theirs. They have a lot of life experience and know how to deal with the issues that they confront. We can only turn to teachers when we have problems and can rarely handle them on our own.*[210]

It is clear that students considered problem-solving methods gained through work

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[207] Interviewee T21 (2018, May 22)
[208] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[209] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)
[210] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)

experience as part of their skills. When students first enter the workplace, they feel that they do not have this experiential knowledge and therefore lack skills. The students use the metaphor "a blank slate" to describe their inexperience; "I haven't worked independently outside. I don't know if I can do it."[211] Yan conducted an in-depth analysis of this metaphor, arguing that it was one of the many conceptual somersaults in the post-Mao era (H. Yan, 2008). Students now use this concept to describe themselves far less confidently and longingly than when Mao used it to describe New China. These students expressed believing that a lack of experience was a disadvantage that needed to be compensated through hard work to increase experience. They thought:

> *Formal workers have a higher rank than student workers. They may not be as educated as we are but, when they enter society, they know more than we do. This is their rank.*[212]

In order to increase one's "rank", it is necessary to actively experience new things in an internship. Students want to experience more from different jobs and work contents, which makes them not dissatisfied with the arrangement of the work content given by their leaders. In order to catch up with production, factories sometimes mobilize students to help in other workshops; sometimes, students are required to work 24 hours a day, take a day off, and then work continuously for 24 hours. These arrangements are the flexible use and deployment of labour resources by factories. However, the students felt that they could "*see more and learn more*"[213] in this way:

> *It feels fairly good to do something else. The teacher kept telling us, in fact, to learn to persist. That is to say, no matter what I do and no matter whether it is related to my major or not, it's also good to gain experience.*[214]

> *I learned a lot of things and had working experience. I know what I want to do after graduation and know how to be a good employee.*[215]

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[211] Interviewee S22 (2018, June 4)
[212] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)
[213] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[214] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)
[215] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)

With the expectation of learning something, students are accustomed to thinking of themselves as a learner and somebody who causes trouble for the factory. These students tend to ignore the fact that they are labourers who create value for the factory. S34, a student from the nursing department, contacted a hospital on her own for a quasi-employment internship. She did not receive any salary and was instead asked to pay the internship fee to the hospital, which she found understandable: "*we had not really practiced before. Conducting an internship is to learn from others, so we have to pay money to the hospital*."[216]

A number of studies have found that, due to the emphasis on work experience by the discourse of employability, students attached great importance to accumulating work experience in order to gain an advantage on the labour market. However, these students failed to realize the social inequalities in terms of social class, gender, race, age, etc. behind the discourse (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The same was true for students at the T branch; they are eager to change their status to "a blank slate", to conform to the factory's various arrangements, and believe that they have grown from it. These students are not aware of the labour regime behind work experience.

#### 6.3.3.2 Life Experience

The students felt that they had more life experience than before; this life experience was also a sign of growth from their internship experience. The life experience that students discussed mainly referred to the experience of living in a big city. Over the past forty years of reform and opening up, the country's resources have flowed to large cities in a large-scale government-led urbanization process (Ban, 2018). Substantial discrepancy have emerged between urban and rural areas in terms of development levels (Z. Zhang & Lu, 2018). There are significant differences in living standards and lifestyles between developed cities along the eastern coast and in T county. In the cities, the students acquired some new life skills:

> *The first reaction when I stepped off the train was: wow, this place is huge! It's huge! Every time I left the factory, I couldn't find my way without using my phone to navigate. At that time, I thought I was lucky, fortunately, I can use this navigation.*[217]

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[216] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)
[217] Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)

*When we first went there, we didn't know how to take the bus or subway. We were too timid to go anywhere. Sometimes we would take the taxis together. When we were about to leave the city, everyone said they could take the public transportation after this trip to the big city.*[218]

Furthermore, owing to the persistent and profound inequalities between urban and rural residents in terms of political rights, economic gains, and social welfare (H. Zhou & Zhu, 2019), a comprehensive set of judgments on city and village has occurred: the city is considered to represent a direction of modern development, being full of opportunity and hope (Yochim, 2014). In fact, the factories in which students work are usually located in towns far from the city centre, and rest time is limited. The range of their activities is based around the factory, and the students have limited experience of urban life. However, all kinds of new things that these students confront are considered as increasing their knowledge, such as experiencing a fast pace of life, going to an amusement park, or even seeing the snow.

The students also shared experiences of social realities in urban life; In one of the few leisure activities, they experienced deception. S10 and other students went out to cut their hair. The barber used some hairspray and charged each of them three to four hundred yuan. The students did not want to pay the unreasonable fee, and the barber closed the gate and threatened them. S10 commented on the incident, "*When you go outside, you gain a lot of* jianzhi*. You feel like you've confronted everything. It's not like at home, where you don't know anything about what's going on outside*."[219] S13 and his classmates were once deceived by a retailer selling scratch cards when they saw someone winning a lottery and they also tried. Unexpectedly, the content of the ticket that they drew showed that they had to paid money to the retailer. Later the students realized that those who won the lottery and the retailer were a gang, working together to deceive others. These experiences made them feel that "*life is very cruel, and society is particularly realistic*". These feelings ultimately led to a sense of helplessness, the sense that "*there's nothing we can do*", or triggered a return to the logic of self-improvement: "*it's important to learn how to* zuoren *and do things*"[220].

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[218] Interviewee S31 (S31-1; 2018, March 13)
[219] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)
[220] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)

### *6.3.4 Eating Bitterness is Wealth; Suffering Losses is Fortune*

Previous sections described the study experience of T branch students in vocational education. The formal curriculum of the vocational school is designed to teach skills to the students, and the internship is designed for students to practice these skills. However, the emphasis of the school is on learning *zuoren*, enhancing interpersonal communication, and accumulating experience (M. W. Apple, 1971). In these experiences, students' beliefs and perceptions about learning, such as what needs to be learned, how to learn, and why, were reshaped.

Students believed that the contents of learning were "knowledge". This kind of knowledge is not from books, instead representing generalized knowledge that lays the foundation for entering society. Through vocational education, the students felt that,

> *We have learned a fairly good amount of knowledge. Almost all of this knowledge can be used when entering society. It's not like in junior secondary school, where knowledge was all based on textbooks and not useful.*[221]

The main way to learn is through experience and necessarily through courses at school. Since students could learn "things" through experience, they believed a motivated person should take the initiative to experience, "*let yourself have an experience of eating bitterness and put yourself under some pressure.*"[222] The purpose of learning is to pursue not clear and precise success, but self-growth. The changes that occurred through vocational education could be understood as growth, "*First, the knowledge has definitely increased to some extent […] I am also a little more psychologically mature.*"[223] If this growth has the potential to lead to future success, it would be ideal for students; if not, the growth itself is important.

Specifically, in order to learn "things" by experience, one must be able to "eat bitterness" and suffer losses. Eating bitterness means "to endure hardships, overcome difficulties, and press ahead all in one" (Loyalka, 2012, p. 16), whereas suffering losses refers to undergoing hardships or important losses. During work experience, there must be many

[221] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)
[222] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[223] Interviewee S20 (2018, June 4)

hardships, and students would encounter situations in which interests are compromised but they have to restrain and suppress oneself. The students came to believe that all the bitterness and hardships must be endured, and that all the losses must be suffered. There are several reasons to explain the formation of this belief. First, the students believed that eating bitterness (*chiku*, *吃苦*) was indispensable to get things done,

*I feel like two work-study alternations are incentives to me. Before I start the internship, I heard that it has a lot of hardships. I thought, we cannot complete anything without eating bitterness. For young people, eating bitterness is wealth. After two internships and coming back to school, I felt like I could accept anything.*[224]

Second, students hoped that the growth after eating bitterness could lead to future success, though this success might be vague and uncertain: "*It feels like sacrificing a little but it's a fortune to suffer a loss. You endure more hardships and will have a better future or something like that.*"[225] Third, the students realized that there would be more hardships in life and that they have to get used to them. The acceptance of eating bitterness itself is a kind of growth: "*It will let me persist in society in the future, so that I feel like in the past I've had a harder job than this, and the hardships in my current job count for nothing.*"[226] Finally, the main features of eating bitterness and suffering losses are the ability to endure and persevere. Bitterness and losses are regarded as difficulties that must be overcome. Regardless of what students encounter or experience, they need to persevere to the end: "*Oh, be strong! I think if I do something, I must persevere. No matter how hard it is, I have to endure.*"[227] Eating bitterness itself has become a part of the positive qualities that characterise individuals who are able to experience hardships. Eating bitterness has also become a prerequisite for legitimacy and helps to conceal the existence of social inequality (Griffiths & Zeuthen, 2014).

As a result, the current contents and teaching methods of vocational education have been rationalized. Students were not dissatisfied due to the limited skills they learn at school. Instead, these students believed that, through vocational education, they had a more

[224] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[225] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[226] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)
[227] Interviewee S16 (S16-1; 2018, May 31)

comprehensive understanding of how to *zuoren* and do things, obtain many changes and growth, improve their comprehensive *sushi,* and become more mature. Therefore, these students "*feel that it is very meaningful in this school.*"[228] Moreover, the generalized knowledge was considered to be valuable and effective because it matched the requirements of society: "*I was educated by teachers at school first and later obtained experience at the factory. These experiences had prepared me for entering society.*"[229]

In addition, specific learning habits may influence students' perceptions of future work. The hardships, burnout, and even illegal employment arrangements brought about by the oppressive production regime may tolerated, and students might become more tolerant of overtime, night shifts, and high production requirements because they have full psychological preparation and tolerance for eating bitterness. When ongoing dilemmas are often understood as learning, and the students think they will be rewarded with growth, they may not have much incentive to complain or resist.

### 6.4 Body: Difficult to be Disciplined

As seen in the above description, in the students' educational experience, the education system, which is heavily influenced by neoliberalism, has cooperated intentionally or unintentionally with factories and built a web of impervious discourses around "learning things", which imposes techniques of disciplinary power on students (Foucault, 1979). This system not only stipulates the study content, method and purpose, but also explains the necessity of discipline, emphasizes the importance of having modern *sushi*, and legitimates or downplay hardships. The education system reshapes students' behaviour, everyday language, and the way in which they think about things. Students naturally evaluate themselves and their peers based on their "habits and attitudes of doing things", setting "being polite" as standard for themselves, and regarding "enhancing emotional intelligence" as an important component of their own development. Students also use "accumulating experience" to convince themselves to engage in tedious work, using the logic of "eating bitterness is for growth" to explain various experiences. It is apparent that the concepts of neoliberalism have

[228] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[229] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)

been deeply ingrained in this young population.

However, this web of discourse is not seamless. In quasi-employment internships, students intensively experienced many firsts in their lives: this experience was the first time that they left their hometown, the first time that they left the countryside for the bustling big cities in the coastal area of southeast China, the first time that they entered a factory, and the first time that they undertook a job independently (Hou et al., 2020). These experiences bring about significant "growth". However, the experiences were also the first time that many of these students had felt so much pain and discomfort. Discourses have presented in various forms and constantly attempts to persuade students. Under the call of learning things, students struggled to adapt to new environments with different times and spaces, diets, and interpersonal relationships. Students also try to embrace the heavy workload, changing work arrangements, and unfair salary.[230] The discipline seemed to be easily accepted by the mind, but ultimately, the body becomes be the subject of practice: obedience to the discipline and practising discipline in the process of production. As Foucault argues, the body can become a useful force only when it is both productive and tamed (Foucault, 1979).

The students at E4 worked for long hours every day, wrapping tape on car wires. In order to meet the factory's production requirements, the students could not use any protection. The skin of their hands was worn out; they could even see the flesh, and they would bleed when washing their hands: "*It's too painful, really. It is so painful that I can't sleep at night. I couldn't stand it*".[231] When working a 24-hour shift, students are not given the opportunity to rest and were so tired that they had to sit on the floor and had to do the wrapping slowly, "*I was so tired and there was no other way. My eyes turned red after working overtime and I had pain throughout the whole body*," and "*I was very, very sleepy and physically exhausted.*"[232] At E1, many students are asked to work night shifts as soon as they arrive at the factory; they "*stood the whole time, with feet swollen. The light stung our eyes. Very, very tired. We were so*

[230] Students must perform the same duty as workers in these factories, lasting 10–12 hours a day. The hourly wage of workers is 14.5 Chinese Yuan, while students only receive 8.5 Yuan. Thus, the students nicknamed themselves "eight and a half".
[231] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)
[232] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)

*tired that we couldn't eat and just wanted to sleep*,"[233] and "*we were so tired that many students stood and cried.*"[234] This is not a special experience of this group or generation, but collective experience for generations of migrant workers since the reform and opening up (Fitzgerald, Chen, Qu, & Sheff, 2013; W. Yu et al., 2012; Qiujie Zhang, 2012).

These bodily experiences were the starting point for students putting aside the discourses and facing their own experiences. Their own physical pain and that of their peers made them feel that "*the factory only cares about production*" and caused them to wonder "*why our wages and those of workers are not the same*"; some resistant behaviour did emerge, including a lack of politeness. S9's fingernails were worn down to the nubs, and the flesh on his hand was exposed, which was very painful. He also had a cold. He wanted to take sick leave: "*When the line leader didn't allow me to leave, I felt a particular impulse at that time to argue with him. However, I could not surpass him in speaking. I just had the urge to hit him.*"[235]

Responsible attitudes towards doing things also disappeared:

> *Once, the group leader asked us to work overtime. We were tired already because we worked until eight o'clock. Suddenly, a batch of orders arrived. The leader let us work overtime until 10 o'clock. All the student workers on that assembly line had negotiated privately that we would all leave as soon as we got off work and didn't care about the new orders. The next morning, that foreman came to us and said, why didn't you guys work overtime last night? We said we couldn't do it anymore; we were too tired.*[236]

Observance of discipline disappeared:

> *When the group leader asked us to work overtime with the next shift of workers, all of us were absent from work and asserted wouldn't work overtime! Or we would go home. We also ran out to play. I don't know who gave us the courage, but all of us were united and dared to be absent from work and run away. It was so funny! The*

[233] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)
[234] Interviewee S15 (2018, May 30)
[235] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[236] Interviewee S10 (2018, May 29)

*next day, the teacher asked who took the lead, and we all stood up. The teacher had no choice but to required us to write a statement of self-criticism and then get back to work. That's it – and there's nothing he can do about it. We were just absent from work. What can you do to us?*[237]

This small-scale, occasional, narrowly targeted and game-like resistance, and the short-lived victory that it brought, was only one side of the story. The prolonged physical exhaustion also caused psychological torture and distress to students, who felt repressed, with some even developing depressive symptoms: "*Mentally tired, very stressed, I am not knowing what I'm doing for many times*", said S3, "*I just turned 16 and I'm already so tired.*"[238] Many students frequently suffered from insomnia. After working hard for a day and being desperately in need of rest, they lay in bed and kept turning over, "*I don't know why, but I can't sleep*."[239] S12 thought the following: "*Why am I under so much pressure? Why can't I live like a normal person?*"[240] When unable to sleep, all the "growth talk" became insignificant, and the original meaning system could not explain the confusion. The students asked, "*why do people live? What is the point of being alive?*" (Hou et al., 2020) By the next day, students still had to take their tired bodies into the workshop again and repeat the work on the assembly line.

Students' biological bodies, which had the disadvantages of being hungry, sleepy, tired, aching, are objects that education and capital seek to transform. However, these bodies are the last place of resistance that cannot be completely ruled, even if this resistance is expressed in a passive form. In *Made in China*, Pun (2005) provides a vivid, insightful interpretation of domination and resistance over body. The rich practice of the body poses a powerful challenge to the labour regime and shatters the attempts of disciplinary power to shape it into a materialized and singular body image. Will the honest perceptions and serious reflection on bodily sensations construct a unique, stable recognition of the identity of student workers? This study has not been able to answer this question. It is, however, apparent that the students' bodily sensations are contradicting and contesting with the discourses that is

[237] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[238] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)
[239] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[240] Interviewee S12 (S12-1; 2018, May 30)

presented to them. Although the discourses keep telling them that physical discomfort is just something that needs to be dealt with by the individual, something that can and should be overcome through patience and perseverance, the pain is so strong that students cannot hide or continue to deceive themselves. The domination of the discourses and the resistance of the body coexist in the students' experience, together constituting a part of their unstable, contradictory subjectivity.

### 6.5 New Aspirations: Learning "Things"

Following the change in attitudes towards studying, students' aspirations also changed. In terms of educational conditions, the lack of funds and the low quality of teaching in vocational schools make it difficult for students to learn high-level skills. The school's self-positioning is also a adolescent-disciplined institution, in which students with no academic prospects are taught to *zuoren* before entering society. Under these circumstances, students are no longer focused on skills alone. Their aspiration about learning skills was weakened; learning skills was important, but "*skills alone were not enough.*"[241] To some extent, learning other "things" was even more important and more useful for their future than learning skills. Students looked forward to learning vocational skills and wanted to continue to learn more specialized skills when entering companies; they also looked forward to acquiring a kind of generalized knowledge, such as *zuoren*, attitudes towards doing things, language skills, emotional intelligence, work experience, life knowledge, and social knowledge. As the students argued, "*It's useful to learn anything*;"[242] this knowledge is so broad that it can encompass almost all life and work experiences. In his fieldwork, P. E. Willis (1977) found that self-consciousness within the working class shaped resisting agents. The "lads", therefore, rejected the dominant narrative offered by the school due to their identification with their own identity. In contrast, the neoliberal discourses construct the identity of Western rural youth as an object that needs to be transformed (A. Kipnis, 2007). The discourses require a comprehensive reform from their vocabularies and behaviours to their thoughts and do not provide confidence and autonomy for them to choose a different path of growth. The students hoped that they would learn all aspects of knowledge through

[241] Interviewee S52 (2018, March 6)
[242] Interviewee S31 (S31-1; 2018, March 13)

eating bitterness and suffering losses in new experiences, so as to grow and more effectively cope with the future. These students want to go to large companies after graduation because "*they can learn more things.*"[243]

Similar to students' aspiration for success described in Chapter 5, students' aspiration for growth grew from their conflicting daily experiences. That is to say, the current labor regime in China is intricately intertwined with the vocational education that students received and their specific life experiences in cities and factories, affecting students' aspirations. Being asked to be better selves all the time, students are eager to learn things. Although they are dissatisfied with the heavy labor, they understand the pain in the framework of growth and can achieve self-consistency over a period of time. Therefore, the capital-labor relationship did not lead to very violent defiance.

The students did not expect that the growth would guarantee future success, and the aspiration for growth seemed more realistic than the aspiration for success. However, the aspiration for growth is also fragile and unstable. First, although the aspiration for growth has a certain amount of initiative, it is more about the accommodation to and acceptance of reality. Students believed that the generalized knowledge needed to be acquired from experiences of life and work, though they had limited choice about life and work. Therefore, these students could only learn the knowledge prescribed by certain jobs and not freely choose the content of the knowledge. Furthermore, the students needed to endure the unsatisfactory nature of the job in order to complete the experience. Therefore, the aspiration for growth in knowledge involves using familiar discourses to comfort themselves under the manipulation by life. Second, the aspiration for growth implies a certain aspiration for future success. However, the students' lack of skills was not addressed. In a state with surplus inexpensive labour (Golley & Meng, 2011), a lack of skills makes students highly replaceable. The jobs that they can find offer very limited possibilities upward social mobility. The lack of skills and lack of academic credentials together contribute to a disadvantaged situation for the students on the job market. When the students gradually realize that growth may not necessarily lead to success, the growth discourse is likely to be less persuasive. Finally, students' work experience was often

[243] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31)

accompanied by undeniable pain, which is contradictory to the importance of learning things. Therefore, the students may gain insights into the hypocrisy of learning things.

### 6.6 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, based on students' own observations, experiences, and understandings of everyday activity, I disentangled the content of students' learning in vocational education and the impact of the educational philosophy on the students, illustrating how everyday life at school make students more receptive to dominant ideologies. Facing the disadvantageous conditions of learning skills in schools and internships and constantly being taught the importance of learning other things, students' aspirations to learn skills have been generalized as aspiration for "learning things". This shift may help student to interact more smoothly with others and to integrate into society, but it is not conducive to the development of their core competitiveness in skills. Furthermore, this new aspiration (i.e., learning things) obscures the direction of students' efforts and increases their endorsement of eating bitterness and endurance.

"*Growth, thy name is suffering*", is a popular quotes of the then Foxconn Chairman Terry Gou, who used the phrase to discipline his employees (D. Zhang, 2008). The essence of this quote can be referred to as the *growth ideology*. In the same way as achievement ideology, the growth ideology is constantly instilled in students in vocational education. While the achievement ideology emphasizes the importance of success as the ultimate goal, the growth ideology seeks to show people that the process of hard work is not meaningless because it can bring growth, including good qualities, rich experiences, etc. On one hand, growth itself is a valuable asset. On the other hand, growth has the potential to lead to future success. Thus, the growth ideology may aid in reducing the dissatisfaction of those who have not yet succeeded so that they can take, or even welcome, current pain in order to gain growth.

Again, students internalized the growth ideology without awareness: they believed that eating bitterness is a necessary way to learn and that suffering is an indispensable experience in the process of growing. Therefore, these students accepted the unreasonableness in reality to some extent. Furthermore students were able to perceive the existence of hardships and sufferings that contradicted the growth discourse in their daily practices.

Although students were incapable of providing explanations for suffering that fit their own experiences and ultimately discerning the growth ideology, some consciousness and actions of resistance have been generated. Drawing on insights from Gramsci (1971), hegemony is never complete; it is always contested and always challenged, shaping students' subjectivity.

The following chapter continues to explore the methods and processes of students' self-persuasion and describes students' wavering between the "outside" and hometown.

## Chapter 7 “City Pathfinder” and “Hometown Cherisher”: “Take One Step and Decide on the Next Step; Go with the Flow”

This chapter focuses on the changes in students’ aspiration to go to big cities. In their early days of vocational school, students were very much looking forward to working in big cities, broadening their horizons, experiencing different lifestyles, and gaining better life opportunities. In the third-year internship, however, they had to decide whether to go to a big city or stay in their hometown. Unlike the internships in the previous two years, the purpose of the internship in the third year was no longer “experiencing life”, as the teachers put it. Rather, the purpose was to gain employment. This third-year internship was meant to be closely related to the student’s first job after graduation. Students were allowed to choose which factory or company they wanted for this internship, and they no longer had to obey the school’s arrangements as in the previous two years. Students who did not like the school’s placement could simply choose the position they preferred instead. Students who complied with the school’s arrangement could negotiate with the enterprise to continue to work there after graduation if the enterprise was satisfied with their work; otherwise, they could seek a new job.

The key questions of this chapter are as follows: Was the students’ aspiration to go to big cities achieved, or did this aspiration wither away? What contributed to this change? To answer these questions, this chapter first details the discourses about the city and the countryside in which the students were immersed at school and in their community. These discourses reflect how the western rural communities perceive economic development and the role of people in the unequal development between the eastern and the western, urban and rural areas. Second, I show what factors were intertwined with development inequalities, as these factors shaped students’ complex experiences of being in the city and the countryside. I also show the pros and cons of being in the city versus in a hometown in the eyes of the students. Finally, I analyse how students’ perceptions of urban versus rural areas influenced their aspirations, what the characteristics of these aspirations were, and how the students interpreted their own life trajectories to achieve self-consistency.

## 7.1 Stigma of Hometown Cherisher

When discussing with me the options of leaving home to work or returning to their hometown, teachers and students at T branch often used the phrase "*hometown cherisher*". For example, when I ask them, "*Why don't you want to go to a big city to work?*" I often received the following answer: "*Because we Yunnan people are hometown cherishers!*" In this section, I start with this word as a way to help analyse the local people's understanding of going to the big city versus staying in the countryside and the impact of this understanding on the students.

### *7.1.1 Hometown Cherisher and Pathfinder*

The people of Yunnan are called "hometown cherishers", which means they have great love for their hometown and think that nowhere else is as good as Yunnan. This term can refer to a mindset as well as to people with this mindset. In fact, as a backward province in the southwest, Yunnan Province is the country's main battleground for poverty alleviation. From 2013 to 2018, a total of 7.07 million poor people were lifted out of poverty in the province, but there are still 1.81 million poor people and forty national-level poverty-stricken counties; in short, the task of poverty alleviation is ongoing and arduous (Poverty Alleviation and Development Office of Yunnan, 2019). One of the government's main poverty-elimination methods is to encourage the labour force to go out and seek jobs in economically developed areas. However, locals are not very active in going out to work. Studies have shown that only 23 percent of the rural labour force in central and western China have plans to work outside their hometown in the future (Ren & Shi, 2015). The mindset of hometown cherisher is considered to be a major cause of people's reluctance to work and live outside their hometown. It is also viewed as an important reason for the personal poverty and economic backwardness in Yunnan Province. For example, one state government report explicitly proposes discouraging the mindset of "hometown cherisher":

> *Without enthusiasm and a risk-taking spirit, we cannot find a new way, and we cannot hold a new career. All departments at all levels should resolutely abandon the mentality of following the trend and running after the others, and resolutely dismantle the 'hometown cherisher' mentality of sticking to one side and relying on the status*

*quo. We must liberate ourselves from the mentality of 'waiting for, relying on, and requesting' and maintaining stability and conservatism, and from the traditional mindset and path dependence. With the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of racing against time and taking unshirkable responsibility, and with the innovative passion of daring to try and daring to change, we make great efforts to do, make great strides to surpass, and strive to move ahead. We endeavour to perform in a way that will be recognized by the country, satisfy our people, and withstand the test of practice and history.* (Government of Wenshan Prefecture, 2019)

This passage reflects a judgment towards reality and policy inclination that are typical among governments in the western region. This statement is immersed in the neoliberal view of development in China that has been established since the reform and opening up (So & Chu, 2012). It assumes that the individual's spirit of *chuang (闖,doing something with great perseverance and passion)* is directly related to the degree of economic development; it also demonstrates an eagerness to catch up with developed regions, which is in line with China's eagerness to catch up with developed countries in the process of modernization (Vogel, 2011). In addition, the statement reflects an optimism about and openness to new experiences, an emphasis on risk-taking, and a willingness to pursue better economic conditions at all costs (P. Willis, 2019). It argues that launching an undertaking requires a drive to *chuang* and an emancipation from the old rules. As a result, the reasons for the economic backwardness of the Yunnan region are simplified. Being a hometown cherisher is portrayed as a negative trait that runs opposite to daring to *chuang* and hence as an obstacle to regional development and poverty alleviation.

In media and government reports on poverty alleviation, the image of the hometown cherisher appears frequently and is criticized. In these texts, hometown cherishers are associated with complacency, a lack of courage, a narrow vision, an inability to pursue opportunities, a negative outlook, and even a negative personality, all of which should be overcome and eliminated through personal effort (X. He & Yang, 2014, February 11; Z. Luo, 2017, May 3; United Front Work Department of Kunming Municipal Party Committee, 2020; T. Zeng, 2020, June 18). The report cited above requires cadres at all levels to break through

the hometown cherisher mindset, and the media tend to call on ordinary local people not to be hometown cherishers and to seek out more opportunities instead. In this developmental discourse, people who are willing to leave home to work and hometown cherishers who do not want to do so form a simple dichotomy, and their characters are also simply summarized as *chuang* and *not chuang*. *Chuang* could refer to a kind of behaviour characterized as living independently and seeking development far from home and family; it could also refer to a personality that has the courage to try new things and the ability to obtain new achievements. As a result, hometown cherishers are backward, and city pathfinders characterized as *chuang* are commended.

The dichotomous attitude towards hometown cherishers and city pathfinders is also common in schools. When educating students, teachers often encouraged them to get out to *chuang*. "*How can you develop while staying in your hometown?"* One teacher (T28) told the students in class, *"You are still so young, and the school has offered you great opportunities to get out and see the world!*" T2 also encouraged students similarly: "*Don't feel lost every day. When you stay at school, study hard. When you graduate, go out to work hard. Go and chuang your own world.*"[244] Many teachers admitted that they were also hometown cherishers and chose to come to work at T Branch because they wanted to stay with their families. However, they believed that at least some of the young people, although only a few, really could successfully 'stay outside' and do well for themselves. Staying outside means building a good life and social relationships outside their hometown and not needing to return home. The teachers were proud of these students, who would likely become the next protagonists in the stories they told to their new students.

Teachers believed that being too attached to their hometown was the reason why students failed to achieve good development outside. T8, who had been working as a homeroom teacher at T branch for six years, explained student employment to me in detail:

> *We people have a backward mindset that we don't want to be too far from home. Here in our county, the curtain makers are all from Zhejiang, and the supermarket operators are also from Zhejiang. They are good at doing business in Zhejiang, and*

[244] Information from my field notes (2018, March 12)

*they are also good at it here. But we Yunnan people, including me, never want to be too far from home. The students quit their jobs and returned after three or four years. They may actually settle outside, but eventually very few people could stay there. They come back at a certain time, and they are back every year for the New Year Festival.*"[245]

The practice of students coming back every year for the New Year Festival was considered to directly hinder their development. The holiday for the New Year Festival in many factories is short, lasting only a week. Students spent half of their time on the road traveling back and forth. If the students wanted to stay at home for a longer period, they had to ask for a leave of absence. When there were rush orders, sometimes factories even suddenly notified workers that there would be no holidays for the New Year Festival. The employees who stayed would be more likely to receive promotions, while those who went home would lose their year-end bonuses or even be dismissed. Some students also talked to me about this issue. S5 found out about the disadvantages of going home for the New Year Festival from his elder brother. His brother could have been promoted to be a director, but the position was given to someone else because he went home for the New Year Festival. "*He always wants to come back. He is only a small-picture thinker*", S5 commented, adding that he was different from his brother:

*I had a different personality from him from an early age. I persevere in whatever I do... I hope to and I must go outside. In fact, in Yunnan, people always assume that they will come back during the New Year Festival. It is a lack of self-development motivation. If I really go out, I will stay out for two or three years and won't even think of coming back, so that I can reach the level I want.*"[246]

In this discourse used by both teachers and students, urban and rural regions clearly correspond to a successful and unsuccessful life. After years of division between urban and rural life, it is not strange that many rural residents think that upward mobility is only possible after entering the city (Murphy, 2002). As I have pointed out, the discipline of emotions is an

[245] Interviewee T8 (T8-1; 2018, March 27), a teacher in charge of student administration in the Department of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering.
[246] Interviewee S5 (2018, May 23)

increasingly important way in which capitalism manages its workforce (D'Aoust, 2014); eventually, “the emotional life becomes integral to economic rationality” (Vrasti, 2011, p. 9). In seeking to enter the city, students have to accept that their affection for their family and hometown is unimportant. Instead, personal development is of paramount concern. In order to obtain a better position, traditional customs and habits such as reunions on New Year’s Eve should also be abandoned. The discourse of individual struggle is embedded in the reality of urban-rural inequality and places higher and more dehumanizing demands on young people in rural areas of the western region.

### *7.1.2 New Hometown Cherisher*

Only one kind of hometown cherisher is not considered disgraceful. They are called “new hometown cherishers”. These people stay in their hometowns, but not because they feel attached to their hometowns or because they cannot make a living outside. Rather, they return to their hometowns with capital and technology to start their own businesses. According to a survey conducted by the Development Research Centre of the State Council, migrant workers have been returning to their hometowns to start their own businesses since the 1980s and 1990s. Since 2000, the number of migrant workers who return home to start businesses has gradually increased. According to a survey of 301 villages, more than 37,000 migrant workers returned to their hometowns in 2007, accounting for 23% of total migrant workers. Those who returned to start their own businesses accounted for 16% of the total returning migrant workers (Han & Cui, 2007). Since these individuals are considered as good examples of taking the initiative to help the poor, they are praised in terms of morality and ability. A report run by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China contrasted the old hometown cherisher with the new one in its coverage of poverty alleviation in Yunnan. The report first criticized the old image of the hometown cherisher, who is a poor person who has energy and opportunity but “*just don’t want to leave their poor nest*”. Then the image of the new hometown cherisher was shaped: this individual returns to their hometown to start a business and uses the advantages of being in their hometown to develop the business. These people not only achieved personal success but also used that success to help poor villagers. The article advocates that governments in poor areas should “guide

skilled workers and wealth leaders to return to their hometowns and start businesses so that poor people can increase their income and become rich in their hometown" (Jing Yang, 2018, June 19).

As early as 2008, the state encouraged capable migrant workers to return to their hometowns to start their own businesses. At that time, faced with the impact of the international financial crisis, a considerable number of rural migrant workers did begin to return to their hometowns. The General Office of the State Council issued policy documents to strongly support migrant workers returning to their hometowns to establish businesses, as these workers seemed likely to devote themselves to new countryside construction in order to boost local employment (State Council of China, 2008). In 2015, the state began to vigorously promote mass entrepreneurship and mass innovation, hoping to foster prosperous development of small and large enterprises through structural reforms. The return of migrant workers to their hometowns to establish enterprises has been further advocated in parallel with entrepreneurship among university graduates, scientific and technological personnel, and overseas talents (State Council of China, 2015a, 2015b). The media described the migrant workers as "geese flying south" and the people returning home to start businesses as "phoenixes flying back to their nests" (K. Xiao & Liu, 2018, Septerben 27), with only the latter group receiving high praise. The discourse of the new hometown cherisher is a distinct manifestation of the mass entrepreneurship campaign in rural areas, and it is part of the country's discourse aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. In 2020, the National Development and Reform Commission offered advice on returning home and starting businesses, with an emphasis on the role of vocational education as a way to cultivate high-quality workers who could return home and start businesses that went on to become training bases in the same vocational schools that had educated the workers in the first place (National Development and Reform Commission, 2020). The discourse of innovation and entrepreneurship has directly penetrated into vocational schools through national forces.

At T branch, entrepreneurial ideas and actions were very popular. In their spare time, almost every teacher was busy running their large or small business. The teachers were engaged in the service industry, running restaurants and tea shops, or participating elsewhere

in the education industry such as running dance classes or parent-child activity centres. Some well-funded teachers had started their own enterprises and even had small factories. Many teachers closely followed the national policy guidelines for their own entrepreneurial practice. In recent years, the state has advocated the development of new types of agriculture, so several teachers had actively contracted a piece of land to grow fruits or flowers. After the rise of self-media, they also started doing business on WeChat, such as selling cosmetics and daily necessities. On WeChat, they asked students to hit the like button and forward their businesses to expand their influence. In this atmosphere, students often mentioned entrepreneurial plans. The plan they talked about the most was to open a small business, with potential businesses including restaurants, milk tea shops, beauty salons, and car repair and maintenance shops. Some students had not though about what they wanted to do, but they did know they wanted to have their own small business.

Figure 7-1. A flower plantation in T County

*Note*. The local government advocates the development of new types of agriculture,

emphasizing the use of land for the cultivation of more profitable agricultural products such as flowers and fruits.

Figure 7-2. A greenhouse in T branch

*Note*. This greenhouse was one of T branch's technical training bases and was contracted by a T branch teacher to start her own business in gardening. The atmosphere of entrepreneurship has influenced the teachers and students of T branch.

Starting a business provided a reasonable and even glorious reason for students to return home. The reasons why students were unable to stay in the city, which will be described below, were obscure. In this discourse, the students returned to the countryside not because they could not afford to live in the city, but because they wanted to start their own business in their hometown. The city was not responsible for them leaving, and the city was not expected to make any changes to alleviate the hardships and barriers they had encountered during the mobility process. Thus, the entrepreneurial discourse has the potential to facilitate

the emergence of rural entrepreneurs whose business skills and assets are comparable to those of their urban counterparts, but it cannot eliminate the urban-rural divide. In the following section, I illustrate this division as experienced by the students and their consequent perceptions.

## 7.2 Working in Cities

The above section illustrated how students are influenced by the hometown cherisher and new hometown cherisher discourses both at school and in their local communities. These discourses reflect the different status of city and country and continue to shape new inequalities. Through their internships in the first two years, the students experienced life and work in factories in big cities and gained a better understanding of the difference between big cities and their hometowns.

### *7.2.1 High Income and High Living Cost*

Conversations with the students revealed that the city was not very attractive to them, even though the students had long envisioned going to work in the city. The one important attraction was the high-salary job that the city could offer. Since the reform and opening up, the gaps in economic development between regions have gradually widened with the rapid development of China's economy (Qinghua Zhang & Zou, 2012). The urban-rural income gap is also very large according to international standards. Moreover, the contribution of the urban-rural income gap to overall inequality is significant, and it is still increasing (J.-X. Wu & He, 2018). According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the per capita disposable income of urban residents in the eastern part of the country was 46,432.6 yuan in 2018. For rural residents, it was 18,285.7 yuan. The per capita disposable income of urban residents in the western regions is only 33,388.6 yuan, while that of rural residents is only 11,831.4 yuan (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). The per capita disposable income of urban residents in the east is already four times that of rural residents in the west.

The rural west and urban east happen to be the main living spaces where T branch students spend their vocational education and internships. In Chapter 6, I demonstrated that students experienced the high wages in the eastern cities during their internships. Their income from their internships was very impressive relative to the per capita disposable

income of their hometown. Statistics show that migrant workers employed in the east earned an average monthly income of RMB 4,222, while those employed in the west earn an average monthly income of RMB 3,723 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020c). However, the students perceived an income difference even larger than that. Even as interns, they were already able to earn about RMB 3,000 per month. The students knew that formal employees were paid more, with an average of RMB 5,000 per month, though that would fluctuate depending on the profit of the factory. The salary was highly attractive to them. By contrast, manual labourers in T county generally earn RMB 1,500 to 2,000 per month, which was difficult for the students to accept.[247]

At the same time, students perceived a high cost of living in the city, even though they lived and had meals in the factory most of the time. This factor sparked concern when they were considering whether to work in cities. Statistics show that the urban consumer price index (CPI) in 2018 was 702.4, while the CPI for rural residents was only 489 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The students felt their wages depleted quickly, both in terms of daily food and consumption. Many students said: "*Out there ... Cities are very big out there. Housing and everything else are very expensive, and the cost of living is very high.*"[248] Most students wanted to save money to support their families, pay tuition, or spend as they liked when they returned to their hometown. During breaks, they tried to find cheap places to stay in order to reduce their expenses.

> *We don't really like to go shopping because it's very expensive there, too expensive, and the malls don't really suit us. We just go shopping outside the malls. We usually bike to Red Star City, where the food is cheap. We get three or four people on a tricycle, and it only costs us four or five yuan each.*[249]

### *7.2.2 Not Truly in the City*

As described in Chapter 6, students spent one-third or even half of their time in cities in the southeastern coastal area during their three years of vocational education. As youth who grew up in the countryside, they believed that their horizons had been broadened and that they

[247] Based on my summary of interviews with several students and teachers.
[248] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)
[249] Interviewee S4 (2018, May 23)

had acquired certain skills for urban life. When they first arrived in the city, they were excited and had many ambitions: "*I have finally come to the big city. When I grow up, I will also go to Beijing and travel around the world!*"[250] However, after completing one to two internships, the students were less sure that they really had the ability to live in the city, which made them worried when making decisions. S1 said that he would still feel timid if he went to a big city again, even though he had already been to the city three times:

> *Yes, I have been there before, but I didn't go to the most central, most central place of the city, didn't go to the most prosperous places, to see those, those ... how to say, those things that I haven't seen.*[251]

He felt that his leisure time experiences had not been sufficient to develop the ability to live in the city, so he did not believe that he would perform well. Many students expressed similar concerns and low confidence. The factories they were in were generally located in suburban areas, which were specifically zoned for industrial areas and had a catchy name: economic and technological development zones. In fact, these places used to belong to rural areas, but the areas had been developed by the government as industrial areas during the rapid urbanization process (McGee, Lin, Wang, Marton, & Wu, 2007). These places had a well-developed infrastructure and a commercial area with factory employees as the main target consumer group. However, their functions and appearances were very different from those of urban areas. This urban yet not urban area was the main living space for students. The students were well aware of the differences between the two, referring to them as the "town" and "city" respectively.

Meanwhile, the working hours set by the factory also restricted the students. The most common working hours for students who worked the day shift were from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. If they worked overtime, they got off work even later. After work, they had to do laundry and shower. As one student put it, "[we] *don't have the energy to play and to wash and rest right after we get off work.*"[252] There were not many leisure activities when they were off duty. Many students never had the opportunity to visit downtown during their

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[250] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[251] Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)
[252] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)

internship. The only time they visited a tourist attraction was to participate in a school-organized group activity that lasted only one day.

As Castells (2009) pointed out, the operation of social domination is achieved by selectively absorbing and excluding certain populations and certain functions in different temporal and spatial structures. The spatial development of cities is not natural; rather, it is manufactured according to the logic of capital (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Soja, 1996). Spatial segregation is an important factor in the formation of social exclusion (Massey & Denton, 1993). The demand for working hours was also a clear sign of social control, as it kept workers isolated from people and events outside of work (O'Reilly, 1989). The students were like the third spacers depicted in the metaphorical science fiction *Folding Beijing* (Hao, 2015). They performed hard labour that was vital to the city, yet they were not allowed to appear in the same spaces at the same time as people who resided in other spaces. The segregation of time and space has become one of the powerful social barriers, and it successfully made students feel that they were "not truly in the city"[253] even though they were physically in the city. As a result, the students did not develop the confidence to live in the city.

### *7.2.3 Lack of Social Relations*

In the factory, students and workers did not establish a deep connection, in part due to the temporary nature of the students' internships. To facilitate management, the factory did not arrange for students and workers to live in the same dormitory. Students lived, had meals, and spent free time with their own classmates as they did at school. They did not often interact with workers due to disparity in age and experience. In contrast, students interacted more with student workers from other schools. Many students mentioned that they got along well with other SVS students and college students and did develop a close relationship with them. However, these student workers, like them, returned to their schools after the internships, and their future employment was also uncertain. This did not help the students to establish local social relationships in the city.

Students also mentioned that the city made them feel "*indifferent*" and "*cruel*". S13

[253] Interviewee S6 (S6-1; 2018, May 24)

recalled an incident when he and his classmates were cheated while shopping. A lot of people had been watching, but no one warned them or told them what was happening. It made him feel hurt: "*Someone should have stood up and helped us at that time... Many people in that society would not help each other. People only care about themselves.*"[254] Beyond school teachers and classmates, students had no chance to establish other social relationships in the city, which made them feel helpless when they encountered difficulties. This situation was related to the aforementioned segregation of time and space, which was not conducive to the students' integration into the local community (T. Liu, Wei, & Tong, 2020).

Even the relationships the students had with their classmates and teachers were unstable. In the last internship before graduation, the teachers did not accompany the students to companies, and the students had to fully accept the company's management; in other words, the students lost the protection of the teachers when encountering problems. Besides, students had to attend interviews in order to be employed by the company, so students who were familiar with each other might not necessarily enter the same company. Students were afraid of the loneliness of being "*out there by themselves*". T12, a teacher in T branch who was responsible for managing students' internships, had worked in the school's Hangzhou office for five years and also realized this. He argued that the students needed to build a social network of Yunnan people in order to work better in big cities, so that students outside could feel as if they were in the hometown: "*Just like Zhejiang people, unite and form a close group no matter where they do business.*"[255] Some studies have shown that the migrant population mainly relied on consanguinity and geographical proximity to enter the cities (P. Li, 1996), and the ties of lineage and fellow villagers had a significantly positive impact on the integration of migrant workers into urban society (Y. Wang & Zhao, 2020). The climatic conditions and regional culture of Yunnan Province are relatively unique, and the dietary habits of the local people are also very different from those of the southeast coastal areas. Even teachers with a bachelor's degree expressed that they had a hard time adjusting to other places.[256] Under such circumstances, having fellow villagers nearby would have a great

[254] Interviewee S13 (2018, May 30)
[255] Interviewee T12 (T12-3; 2018, May 24)
[256] Based on a summary of interviews with several students and teachers.

influence on choosing to work in big cities.

In general, the urban-rural disparities faced by students are particularly pronounced due to the state of uneven development between the east and the west. The students generally felt that the city was "hard to survive." This response contrasts with the experience of migrant students who received their secondary vocational education in the cities and whose parents were already living and working in the eastern cities steadily (Ling, 2015). For young people in the rural west, poor integration at the economic, social, institutional, cultural, and psychological levels was a hindrance to their staying in cities (Zhuang & Huang, 2015).

### 7.3 People Cannot *Dagong* Forever

The previous section described the attractiveness of cities and the obstacles to integration for students. This section focuses on the impact of students' experience in the factory on their choices of city or countryside. First, the students fully experienced the pain of working in a factory with just one to two internships. The pain had three main aspects. The first aspect was the physical fatigue. Student workers undertook the same tasks as adult workers and worked overtime and night shifts, even though they were only 16 years old or less. In order to catch up with production, they stood from morning till night, sometimes even working for 24 hours straight. Nearly every student told me that they were "*so tired that [we] couldn't stand it any longer and wanted to go home*",[257] describing "*lying down and being unable to move due to exhaustion.*"[258] The second aspect was the mental burnout caused by the repetitive work. Many students described a state of numbness after long hours of repetitive work. "*There are times when I feel like I don't know what I'm doing.*"[259] As a result of "*doing the same action, the same thing over and over again*", they felt "*extremely bored, with no colour at all. It is also a kind of tiredness.*"[260] Some students even felt that physical tiredness was tolerable, but the "tediousness" of the work was difficult to stand: "*I repeat one thing every day, do it repeatedly, back and forth. Nothing else.*"[261] The third aspect of pain was their lack of autonomy. Students expressed that there was "*too little freedom*" in the

[257] Interviewee S34 (S34-2; 2018, May 18)
[258] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)
[259] Interviewee S3 (2018, May 22)
[260] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)
[261] Interviewee S35 (2018, March 19)

factory. By contrast, they felt that although *dagong* in some small shops earned less, at least they were free. Working in a factory, on the other hand, was highly disciplined. The time, space, and content of activities were all strictly regulated. When making their choice, students had to consider whether they wanted a job with relatively more freedom or one with higher wages. All the painful aspects of working in a factory made students feel that "*dagong is not a long-term solution*", and they still needed to find their way out.

Secondly, the students did not develop a stable identity towards *dagong*. They showed some attributes of *workers*, such as caring about working conditions and the work environment, and they were sensitive to their wages (Junyan Liu, 2007b). Some students could recall their wages to the single digits; they understood the complex methods of calculating wages and felt dissatisfied with the situation that student workers were paid differently from formal workers for the same work. A few students were even aware of the oppressive aspects of the labour relations. For example, they found that "*the leader earns more money than us for doing nothing*"; "*I worked for 12 hours, but it only accounted for eight hours. It's not fair.*" However, students also felt that they were *dagong* only for a short period and were rarely aware of their status as a worker. "*It's not possible to dagong all the time. People cannot dagong forever*", the students sighed, thinking that *dagong* was temporary, something they would do "*when they were young*". As C. K. Lee (1998) explained, *dagong* is characterized as harsh exploitation, loss of control of personal time and space, and impaired sense of security and dignity. Although the All-China Federation of Trade Unions defines migrant workers as new members of the working class (H. Lin, 2004), the actual situation of *dagong* has long dispelled the political aura shrouded in the status of working class. In fact, migrant workers are a subaltern identity in contemporary China (Wanning Sun, 2014). The jobs in the city offer nothing to the students except for high wages, but the students felt that, because of the wages, "*they have no choice but to go out to dagong*."[262]

Finally, students were also attracted to the entrepreneurial discourse. Some students saw entrepreneurship as a brighter path compared to *dagong*. For example, S14 said, "*We*

[262] Interviewee S1 (S1-1; 2018, May 20)

*can't dagong for a lifetime. We have to step outside to do something on our own.*"[263] They believed that *dagong* was to work for someone else, while entrepreneurship was to create their own business. They thought the two types of labour were completely different in nature. As pointed out earlier, in the entrepreneurial discourse, workers' demand for autonomy at work transforms into a personal spirit of entrepreneurship, which meets the needs of capital growth (Alliez & Feher, 1987). In students' words, *dagong* and entrepreneurship ran along a continuous timeline, with *dagong* being the foundation for future entrepreneurship: "*First go out and dagong for five or six years, then come back and open a small shop*."[264] By working in a factory, the students believed they could accumulate experience and also obtain the capital they would need to start their own business. In other words, they rationalized *dagong* by assuming they had to endure the hard work they were currently doing in order to create their own business one day: "*The class in the frontline had just to experience hardships. The greater the hardship, the more experience we will gain later*."[265] Other students regarded returning to their hometown to start a business as a retreat, because room for promotion in the factories was limited: "*Work hard first, stay there if we have success. If we don't have achievements, come back and start a business.*"[266] The problems encountered during *dagong* were suspended; why gaining promotion in the factory was difficult was not questioned, and entrepreneurship was a preserved hope that could be saved for the future. By promising that everyone has the opportunity to share in the benefits of the economic system, the entrepreneurial discourse blurs the line between *dagong* and entrepreneurship: it undermines the political consciousness of labourers, in particular their ability to see themselves as workers who have the potential to gain strength through solidarity and collective institutions. Rather, the discourse encourages individuals to think of themselves as a company (Read, 2009a). By guiding labourers' actions towards transforming themselves in order to better pursue their individual interests, mass entrepreneurship shapes a new value hierarchy and a new politics of production (June Wang & Tan, 2020).

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[263] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)
[264] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)
[265] Interviewee S16 (S16-1; 2018, May 31)
[266] Interviewee S8 (2018, May 28)

### 7.4 Family Relationship

Family is also an important factor that students considered when choosing between city and countryside. Just like many teachers who chose to teach at T Branch in order to stay closer to their homes, many students realized that staying in cities meant it would be difficult for them to be with their families, even though cities mean higher income and more opportunities. The students experienced the hardships of their family through their internship experiences and came to realize that "*parents do not easily make money.*"[267] S6 said, "*My parents have much hardship at home. I always thought of their extreme hardship when I was outside, so I did not even feel [my own] hardship anymore*." The students used to just have fun and not think much about the situation of their family. The internships made them feel apologetic towards their families, as the experiences helped them to understand their parents and made them feel that they were sharing burdens with their families. The students' stories exemplified their changes in family responsibilities:

> *When I came back from outside, I wanted to do something to help my family. Before I went out, I didn't know anything. One day I came back from school, I didn't squeeze into the bus, so I was walking home. It was two or three kilometres from school to my home, and it wore me out. When I got home, I was sitting there watching TV, and my mom was busy cooking and asked me to go get something for her. I said I wouldn't go. I feel ashamed and quite sorry for my parents when I recall this. My parents were also busy working outside every day, they were also tired, and they had to cook and do housework when they came back.*[268]

> *I've become more mature, less childish, communicating with my parents. Previously, my parents often told me what I could be doing and if I could help them with something. Now, I usually take the initiative to tell them to take more breaks, and I'll do it for them.*[269]

The literature shows that Chinese rural youth, including the new generation of migrant workers, have a strong sense of family responsibility (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004;

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[267] Interviewee S21 (2018, June 4); Interviewee S33 (2018, May 14)
[268] Interviewee S9 (2018, May 29)
[269] Interviewee S18 (S18-1; 2018, May 31)

Hansen & Pang, 2008; Junyan Liu, 2007b). I found evidence for this observation in the present study. When choosing a vocational school, many students mentioned that they wanted to stay close to home so that they could "help out at home."[270] They took on a lot of work for the family, helping with farming or small businesses. Many students gave part or all of the wages they earned from their internships to their parents to pay tuition for their younger siblings or to build a house for the family. When choosing internships and jobs upon graduation, taking care of their families was once again an important consideration. On the one hand, family was the main reason they wanted to stay in their hometown. S4 did not want to leave. Her parents were divorced, and her elder sister was *dagong* outside: "*My dad is home all alone, and I don't want to go outside because of my family*." S49 also didn't want to leave because his parents wanted him to stay and help the family. On the other hand, family was also the reason why the students wanted to go out to work. S25, who wanted to go, was one of the few students who also wanted to settle outside; his reason was so that he could "take his parents and let them enjoy happiness." S33 wanted to go to the city in order to earn money. Her parents grew bananas at home, which was very strenuous work. She said, "I just want to be docile and follow my teachers' arrangement. I will do whatever job they tell me to do, so my mom and dad won't have to work so hard." Labour migration is also driven by family needs, such as increased income and parents' care. Therefore, migration does not imply disembeddedness in relationships (Barbalet, 2016; Xiang, 2007). Migrant workers have taken on a wide range of work in different places, exhibiting a tendency towards individualization driven by the rapid socio-economic change; however, traditional family values remain in place, and family needs are still important considerations for rural youth when making decisions (F. Cao, 2018).

Many students felt homesick during their internships and wanted to return home to take care of or spend time with their families. Many of the students' families needed their care, too. Some students had lost one of their parents; some students had parents or family members with serious physical or mental illnesses. Still others had divorced parents and had been raised by other family members, usually grandparents, who were now senile and could

[270] Interviewee S23 (2018, June 5)

no longer work. In his study of rural China, Y. Yan (2011) found that rural areas lacked "institutionalized mechanisms for re-embedment of the individual beyond the family, such as medical care, pensions, and other social welfare programs" (p. 229). Other researchers have also found that private sector workers, self-employed workers and farmers are not covered by social security (Hebel, 2003; M. Zhang, 2011). The lack of social security in rural areas of China has resulted in welfare production being largely based on family (Eyferth, Ho, & Vermeer, 2004). This reality forced students to take caring for their families into consideration.

In turn, family members provided emotional and financial support for students. Some students expressed the sense of meaning that family members brought to their lives. S11 said that his sense of meaning came primarily from the evaluation of his parents and girlfriend. S15 also said that her mom and dad were very kind to her, and she therefore felt that her life was meaningful. Hou et al.'s (2020) case study of SVS students showed that in situations where students were confused due to overly boring and depressing circumstances in a factory, they sought for an explanation that would give their life meaning. The love and happiness among family members was one of the most important answers that gave students a sense of meaning in the midst of a tough life situation.

On the financial front, some students wanted to return home because they could get support from their families, even though the family members were not financially well-off either. This wish was more common among male students. In order to get married, the young men needed to buy a car and an apartment and prepare to pay a bride price to their spouse's parents. To meet these expenses, the young men often had to rely on two generations (Q. Jiang, Zhang, & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2015). S31 completed his internship in T county and then worked in a local communications company. He was the only son in the family; his parents had already paid the down payment for his car, and he was paying off the car loan himself. Moreover, his parents and sister had done their best to help him buy an apartment in the county so that he could marry his wife. S1 and S18 had initially wanted to leave their hometown to work, but after completing the internship in the factory, they both chose to return to their hometown and opened a small shop. S1's shop was a snack shop, while S18's

was a bar. Both parents invested money for them. S1's mother even helped out in the shop. S19 stayed in the car company A4 after his internship, but he wanted to go home and buy a car for another year. His father had offered some money to him so he would not have to take out a car loan. He said to me half-jokingly, "I am professional at gnawing on the old." Faced with risk and uncertainty in market society and a desire to improve their lives, Chinese family members still practise relatively close cooperation and mutual help to deal with the large-scale social and economic transformations (Qi, 2016). Students' freedom of choice in the type and location of their work "remains entangled with their perceptions of the family as a collective of indisputable economic, social and emotional importance" (Hansen & Pang, 2008, p. 98).

### 7.5 Limitation of Majors

Another important factor that influenced students' choice about whether to stay closer to home was their majors. T branch offered nine majors for 2017–2018, including early childhood education and nursing, which fall under the categories of educational and medical majors, respectively. These two types of majors are state-controlled. The Ministry of Education has high requirements for the basic conditions for running schools and strict approval procedures. In 2010, the Ministry of Education stipulated that the establishment of such majors in SVSs needs to be reported to the provincial education administrative department for record-keeping purposes. Subsequently, the state also stipulated that vocational colleges must apply to the provincial education administrative department before establishing relevant majors, and the provincial department shall report to the Ministry of Education, which will in turn organize experts to discuss and make final decisions (Ministry of Education, 2015c). In 2020, the Ministry of Education further upgraded the qualifications of kindergarten teachers to match those of junior college level. In addition, SVSs were required to gradually stop enrolling students in the early child education major; the medical majors at the vocational level were no longer added, and the enrolment scale was gradually reduced (Ministry of Education, 2015b). Since T branch does not have the qualifications to offer these two majors, nursing students were not eligible to take exams for nursing certificates after graduation. For students in the preschool education major, in order to obtain

the certificate for nursery teachers, the students had to earn a distance-education vocational college diploma and then take the certification exams. The T branch did not guarantee that students could obtain this certificate.

The lack of vocational qualifications did not affect the employment of graduates in local areas. T county and nearby counties had many private kindergartens which did not require the teachers to have the certificate for nursery teachers. The learning experience of early childhood education in SVSs was already considered competitive. As a result, students from the early child education major in T branch were very well positioned and even sought after in the job market.[271] However, these students could only find employment in backward areas where there was a lack of regulation for the employment of kindergarten teachers. If they wanted to find employment in large cities in the eastern coastal area, getting a job as a kindergarten teacher would prove difficult; they would only really be able to find work in other industries. Therefore, students who wanted to find employment in their study field could only work in counties in the western region. The situation was similar for students in the nursing major. Since they were not eligible to take the nursing certificate examination, students were left with the option of trying to achieve certificates for elder care. Some students entered county hospitals for internships, but it was difficult to find decent work. Instead, many students entered nursing homes to work. They were also unable to continue their own profession if they wanted to seek urban employment.[272]

[271] Interviews with teachers in early child education, including T4, T6 etc.
[272] Interviews with teachers in early child education, including T19, T31, etc.


Figure 7-3. A popular private kindergarten in T County

*Note*. Many graduates of the department of preschool education in T branch obtained jobs at this kindergarten and similar ones. But if they wanted to work in big cities, they would be unlikely to obtain jobs as kindergarten teachers.

For students majoring in electromechanics and automobile repair, the situation was just the opposite. T county's industries are mainly traditional industries such as coal, electricity, and chemical industries. In terms of agriculture, the modern flower industry has been vigorously developed recently.[273] However, there is no electronics or automobile factory. This practical reason was often cited when students expressed their desire to start their own businesses rather than continue their original professions. Although the state encourages SVSs to set up majors in line with the development of regional pillar industries and characteristic industries (Ministry of Education, 2015c), electromechanical and automobile repair were the majors that recruited the most students in the county. When the school arranged internships and jobs for students, it sent all of them to factories in the eastern coastal cities. Although the

[273] Information from *T County Gazetteer (1978-2005)*, pp. 280-308.

students knew that what they had learned at school was not related to their internships or jobs, they regarded their education as marginally well-matched. If they wanted to return home, they could not work in factories because there were no electronics or automobile factories. As a result, the limited knowledge and skills they had previously acquired in the factory were hardly useful for their future employment.

Uneven regional economic development brings limitations to employment. Considerations about professional development were entangled with the strengths and weaknesses of urban and rural areas, complicating students' choices and bringing more changes to their life trajectory. Affected by various factors, students gave up their professional focus many times. In other words, switching between urban and rural areas could render the skills they had accumulated in the past no longer helpful, forcing students to rely purely on their knowledge, experience, and emotional intelligence to do the next job. Therefore, the idea that learning skills was not very useful compared to learning things was further strengthened in the employment process.

### 7.6 New Aspirations: Alternation between Urban and Rural Areas

In the above, I have illustrated students' experiences and perceptions in cities and in the countryside and how these factors influenced and guided the students' choices about mobility. Analysis of population mobility often entails consideration of the economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors of both the new location and the hometown (Parkins, 2010). These factors could be divided into pull factors and push factors (E. S. Lee, 1966). In the context of a new location, pull factors attract people to migrate to the new location, and push factors hinder people from migrating. In the context of a hometown, pull factors entice people into staying, and push factors drive people to leave (Kang, 2020). The push/pull framework is also frequently used when analysing the Chinese migrant workers' urban and rural choices (Qiang Li, 2003). Despite the diversity in the students' choices, the interviews indicated that the factors that influenced their choices were essentially the same. Due to individual differences, the students assigned different weights to different factors, making their life trajectories differ. If the push/pull framework is adopted, it can be generalized that the pull factors of cities are mainly the high-wage jobs in eastern cities while

the push factors are the high cost of living, lack of experience with living in cities, and lack of social relations. At the same time, perceptions of not being able to stay in a factory for long, attitudes towards family relationships, and considerations about professional development are entangled, contributing further to the push and pull factors of the city and the countryside. In addition, the discourse of hometown cherisher and new hometown cherisher that are popular in T branch and the wider social context also pulled students in different directions, complicating even further the factors that students considered and rendering the students' aspirations even more unstable. The prevailing discourse on city and countryside implies that the job decision depends on individual temperament and is a personal choice independent of social context. In fact, we can see that students are confronted with a set of complicated and confusing factors. Although the students tried to go to the city to *chuang*, the fact that few of them actually stayed in cities cannot be fully explained by whether they had the temperament of *chuang* or not. As Xiang (2007) discovered in his research on the left-behind population in rural China, it was perceived to be an individual decision on whether to migrate or stay back; in fact, there were many "fundamental institutional constraints on such decisions" (Xiang, 2007).

Under the combined influence of these factors, the students made a temporary decision to go to the city/hometown. Before their last internship in their third year, the students could make a choice; after the internship, they had an opportunity to make another choice. Their life trajectories began to diverge with these choices. Some students chose to conduct their internship in large companies in coastal cities through the school's introduction. For example, S17 wanted to save more money by working in a factory, then start his own business; S12 was asked by her parents to earn more money for the tuitions of her younger brothers and sisters. Some students chose an internship in their hometown. For example, S31 wanted to receive more support from his parents; S4 wanted to take better care of her family; S34 was very passionate about the nursing profession and wanted to realize her dream of being a nurse in a hospital. After this internship, some students chose to stay in coastal cities to continue to their jobs. For instance, S6's family economic condition was not good, which necessitated working in a factory for a long time; S19 wanted to earn some money to buy a

car before leaving. Still some students chose to return to their hometowns to start their first jobs. For example, S18 had enough funds to open a small bar in his hometown with the support of his parents.

The state of moving between cities and countryside like this may not be coming to an end anytime soon for these students. After starting their first job, the students' aspirations for the future were still not entirely based on the contents and location of their current work but on looking for a better life elsewhere. Some students staying in the city aspired to return to their hometown. S17 was raised by his grandmother alone. He needed to go home to take care of his grandmother, and he wanted to start his own business at the same time. S19 felt more comfortable in his hometown, where he had many acquaintances. In contrast, some students who worked in their hometowns were eager to go to the city again. For example, S31 was not willing to give up his comfortable job in his hometown, but he always thought that he "*should go out more when still young.*"[274] S34 suffered many setbacks to her dream of becoming a nurse. She was working as a clerk in a relative's company while also thinking "*I should go out and learn something, since I haven't become a nurse*."[275]

Lv (2013) described the state of migrant workers hovering between urban and rural areas as "*not accepted in the city, unable to go back to the countryside, and lost between them*". Nowadays, the students of vocational schools are also in the same state. Returning to the countryside does not necessarily mean farming as it once did; now there are many other options such as engaging in service industries, among which the most attractive is entrepreneurship. However, as can be seen from the changing state and aspirations of the students as they moved between the city and countryside, there were many unsatisfactory aspects in their work and life in both the city and the countryside. The students aligned with Xiang's (2014) description of the would-be migrant; they pinned their hopes on the future, aspiring for a happier life in the next place, but did not plan or and act continually towards achieving these aspirations. These aspirations were not so much created for real realization as they were for hope or even fantasy purposes. The students needed an "anchor of hope" so that their present life had a goal to aspire to (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018).

[274] Interviewee S31 (S31-3; 2018, March 19)
[275] Interviewee S34 (S34-4; 2018, March 19)

## 7.7 Self-Consistency: The Alternation of Success and Growth

The changing life situations of the students are the epitome of this era. Uncertainty, risk, and the resulting sense of powerlessness are common in the contemporary world. Young people, who once felt clear about their position in the labour market, now face more uncertain outcomes (Furedi, 2018; Lightfoot, 1997). The underprivileged population face more uncertainties, and their decisions have greater impacts than ever on their lives (Douglas & Isherwood, 2002). Contemporary China has also transitioned into a risk society due to dramatic changes in recent decades. The problems of urban accommodation, uneven development, class differentiation, and urban-rural confrontation have all contributed to high frequency of risk (W. A. Zhang & Zhao, 2011). Rural workforce members, in particular, are highly mobile and uncertain, and their lack of insurance coverage in the cities makes them especially vulnerable to risk (Houjian Li, 2014). They also have high uncertainty about the future, so they make a variety of uncertain choices and preparations to prevent risks, thereby increasing their cost of living and greatly reducing the efficiency of the allocation of their resources and of public and private goods (Y. Lu, 2015). Similarly, the students' choices were also affected by many complex factors. Each choice brought changes, and the consequences of each choice were uncertain. So, how did the students themselves interpret their ever-changing state?

I found that the students internalized the discourses of success and growth that they were constantly indoctrinated with in school and applied these discourses flexibly in their daily lives. When the students wanted to try something, whether they worked directly in their hometown, went to work in a big city, or went back home to start a business, they tended to interpret that effort as part of their pursuit of success. They aspired to succeed and to improve their life situations through career success. Although their goals were often obscure, the aspiration to succeed meant that they always had aspirations for the future. When they pondered the possible positivity of a goal, they encouraged themselves with the belief that they were "*going out to chuang and taking a shot in order to succeed.*"[276] Simultaneously, the pursuit of success was coupled with the acceptance of growth. When considering the possible

[276] Interviews with several students, including S2, S18 etc.

negativity of a goal, they offered themselves a fallback by saying "*I am still young. It is just to accumulate experience.*"[277] When they encountered setbacks in the process of pursuing success, found it difficult to achieve what they wanted, or had to change to an alternative goal, they comforted themselves by saying "*at least I have grown.*"[278] Growth itself became a secondary goal. Meanwhile, due to how broad their forms of growth were, students generally believed that their growth would lay the groundwork for future success. Therefore, it did not so important that their original goal was never achieved, because it was now surely possible to achieve future goals. The students adopted a forward-looking perspective in terms of time and an optimistic mindset so that they could embrace failure, the past, and also themselves (Türken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016).

S17, for example, used to expect to work in factories in big cities to make money, which he believed would contribute to his pursuit of success. When he discovered that he could not stay in the factory for a long time, his original aspiration weakened. He interpreted these working experiences as accumulating growth: his horizon was broaden, experience was accumulated, and a better understanding of society was grasped. In his spare time, he used short video platforms and found that others can make a lot of money by making videos. Moreover, this way of making money does not require him to be in a big city. Therefore, his new aspiration became to make money by running self-media in his hometown, which he believed to be his new way to achieve success. Although this goal was different from his last one, in his view, his working experience in the factory paved the way for the new aspiration due to his overall abilities had been improved.

Another example is S1, who was hesitant to go to a big city. Because he didn't want to work for others in the factory, but wanted to be his own boss. After graduation, he worked in a factory for several months, then chose to return to his hometown and run a snack shop under the help of his mother. This job was quite demanding, and the monthly income for the two of them was only 3000 to 5000 yuan. However, he believed that this was "*increasing his experience*"; "*although I didn't make any money, at least I accumulated experience*."[279] He

[277] Interviews with several students, including S1, S11 etc.
[278] Interviews with several students, including S14, S34 etc.
[279] Interviewee S1 (S1-4; 2020, March 18)

was not clear about the specific purposes of this experience, but he thought that it would be helpful for the future, for his *suzhi* was improved through this experience.

To conclude, success is the true aspiration, and it is directly related to upward mobility. Growth is an alternative aspiration that arises from the failed pursuit of success. The boundaries between growth and success are blurred, and growth can provide comfort to students at the right time. Both pursuing success and embracing growth encourage students to swallow bitter truths without complaint. All they have to do is "*continue to work hard and not be afraid of hardships and tiredness.*"[280] The belief that tolerating bitterness will lead to gains, in turn, made the students optimistic about future success and led them to attach great importance to the process of growth.

As for when to pursue success, when to accept growth, or even when to pursue growth, it depends on the specific situation – the students tended to "*take one step and [then] decide on the next step.*" Most students had aspirations for the future, but the contents of those aspirations were not specific, such as going to *chuang* in coastal mega-cities or opening a small shop, and these aspirations were also changeable. When it came to plans about the future, the students often said that they did not think about it clearly and had no specific plans, and even that it was meaningless to think about. "*Plans can't ever keep up with the changes*," they said, "*thinking about them [plans] only adds trouble*."[281] In her research on the second-wife phenomenon, S. Xiao (2018) found that because her subjects "*don't know what will happen tomorrow*", active planning only brought more pain and increased the sense of powerlessness; procrastination or even avoidance therefore became an active strategy to cope with the pain (S. Xiao, 2018). Vocational school students had the same tendency. "*Now everything is done in a natural way. Go with the flow. Anyway, any talent given by heaven must be useful.*"[282] In complex situations, the students could only take one step at a time, not deciding on the next step until it was time to take it. The students adjusted their actions in response to reality and employed different discourse resources to persuade themselves to remain optimistic and move on with their lives. In this process, changes and uncertainties

[280] Interviews with several students, including S6, S16 etc.
[281] Interviewee S17 (S17-1; 2018, May 31); Interviewee S20 (2018, June 4)
[282] Interviewee S14 (2018, May 30)

were accepted, the experience of continuous frustration was also accepted, and therefore resistance was suppressed.

### 7.8 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has shown how the students navigated the urban-rural divide. The changes in development pathways since the reform and opening up have reshaped China's symbolic order. City/country oppositions, or urban-rural dichotomies, are regarded by P. Willis (2019) as one of the important three arrows of change. Cities represent the modernity that China has pursued for centuries and are revered as an economic and cultural paradigm, while the countryside is a place that people try to escape (P. Willis, 2019). As a result, a series of discourses with obvious value judgments have formed around staying in one's hometown, going out to work, and returning home to start a business. These discourses constituted the wider cultural milieu in which the students were immersed and affected all aspects of the students' daily life. However, "city belief" and "urbanization [as a] great leap forward" have brought crisis to both rural and urban governance (Yulin Zhang, 2013). The students found that working in the city presented many difficulties, but going home to start a business was not necessarily a smooth pathway either. Therefore, their aspirations were not long-lasting and had changed constantly. The students' choices and life trajectories were embedded in multiple entangled contexts. These contexts included a production system full of sweat factories and the urban-rural dichotomy of the household registration system. They included the symbolic order. There was also the uneven socio-economic development between the east and west and an education system decoupled from local social needs. A complex network of families and rural communities which retained traditional culture and beliefs was also at work. Under the influence of the success and growth discourse, the seemingly contradictory aspirations of "going to the big city" and "returning to the hometown" were integrated, and the two roles of the hometown cherisher and the city pathfinder coexisted in the vocational school students. More fundamentally, the boundary between success and failure was blurred, and the aspiration to pursue a better life was obscured by a reality of bitterness and suffering. The students felt that they were always in the process of growing up and always on the road to forming their next aspiration. This constant state of change hindered any deep understanding

of the structural forces that oppressed their group, diluted the suffering and frustration they were feeling, and enabled them more easily to accept the uncertainties in their lives.

# Chapter 8 Conclusion

In contemporary China, the development and predicament of vocational education, especially secondary vocational education at the county level, is a complex social phenomenon worth exploring. Vocational education is an integral part of the education system and is influenced by the state's policies on education equity and expansion (Shao, 2010; X. Zhou, 2015). It is also closely related to the state's economic situation. The purposes and practices of talent training are affected by the development of the manufacturing and service industries. Ideally, vocational education should be an incubation base for Craftsmen of the Nation, helping young people to cultivate their skills and providing the country with hundreds of millions of high-quality labourers who can drive the transformation and upgrading of China's manufacturing industry and the development of modern service industries (Y. Lin, 2016; X. Lu, 2014, March 24). However, vocational education has instead become embedded in the urban-rural and regional inequality that has gradually deepened since China's market reforms (Ling, 2015; Y. Xiong, 2010). The inequality directly hampers the mobility, employment, and potential dream fulfilment of the millions of young people in vocational education. In addition, vocational education has been shaped by a series of poverty reduction measures targeting disadvantaged groups implemented by the state and by the state's century-long expectation that youth will take on the historical responsibility of national rejuvenation (B. Chen, 2017, March 13; Hu, 2014, June 30; Xi, 2019, April 30). Therefore, the study of vocational education provides a window into a new understanding of the profound changes in China's social structure since the reform and opening up.

Existing studies have explored how the above-mentioned structural factors cause rural youths in vocational education to replicate the fate of their parents. The roles that schooling, the education system, the family, and the state play in reproducing inequality have been analysed (X. Zhou, 2015). However, the students' own experiences have not yet been fully revealed, and the voices of students about their wishes for development have not been fully heard. Moreover, from the perspective of determinism, many scholars still hold an optimistic view which is consistent with the official media; namely, many scholars have suggested that removing constraining structural factors, such as by increasing policy and

financial support for vocational education and poverty alleviation, will give students more channels for upward mobility and allow them to subvert social reproduction (Ni, 2014, June 24; Weng, 2017; G. Xu, 2019).

Inspired by previous discussions about aspiration (Appadurai, 2004; MacLeod, 2009; Zipin et al., 2015), this study adopted a bottom-up perspective in an attempt to reconceptualize the process and mechanism of social reproduction for rural SVS students. The study emphasized the role of students' agency in this process, as understanding agency only through the observation of resistance may not be sufficient; students' subjective experiences need to be given more attention. Therefore, the students' experiences and perceptions during their vocational schooling and internships have been described in detail. The contents of their aspirations, how their aspirations changed, as well as their strategies for regulating aspirations have also been described and placed in the specific context. In this study, aspiration was adopted as a concept that could bridge the gap between structure and agency (MacLeod, 2009). The students' aspirations were deeply shaped by the students' past experiences. The students' aspirations also reflected their subjective understanding of their current situation and their agency in seeking possibilities in the future (MacLeod, 2009; Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). From this perspective, this study revealed that some characteristics of the aspirations that the students developed in the face of long-term frustration, combined with structural constraints, contribute to the outcome of social reproduction among this group. This perspective also explains the social phenomenon of the social mobility of rural students not being significantly improved, despite the state's efforts to revitalize vocational education in various ways in recent years.

In this concluding chapter, the research questions are answered and further discussed. Guided by Zipin's theory on aspiration, the first section explains that the vocational education at the county level is not only education for the disadvantaged, but also a disadvantaged education. This vocational education, as it currently exists, does not have the capacity to help students realize their original aspirations upon entering the school, much less to help them develop emancipatory emergent aspirations in conjunction with the development goals of their local communities. At the same time, the school's educational practices, which faithfully

represent the dominant ideology of the state, heavily emphasize success and growth via what can be summarized as achievement ideology and growth ideology. The former is born out of the market economy's praise of struggle, competition, and personal achievements. The latter is closely related to the country's practice of *suzhi* discourse in economic and educational reforms. The two ideologies complement each other, providing an explanation for the destruction of the students' original aspirations, students' acceptance of reality, and the formation of a new package of aspirations which provide students with different hopes and goals.

In the second section, I further analyse the characteristics of the students' aspirations and resistance. I explain the reasons for the formation of these characteristics as well, in order to better understand the students' agency and subjectivity. My ethnographic work explored the ways in which the students adjusted their aspirations, coped with difficult situations, and explored all kinds of possibilities. Their new aspirations were still high after encountering setbacks. These high newly formed aspirations reflected, on the one hand, that the students were still influenced by mainstream ideologies. On the other hand, the new aspirations also reflected the students' continued efforts to find a way out of their parent's social class despite facing a social structure with extremely limited opportunities. However, the SVS students ultimately had a weak capacity to aspire. They consistently lacked insight into the origins of individual dilemmas, which made it more difficult for them to imagine any paths different from the existing routes to upward social mobility. They also adopted a cautious and pragmatic attitude in their actions and adjusted the direction of their actions as needed all while holding high aspirations. Correspondingly, the students did not develop a counter-school consciousness, but rather endorsed the logic of success and growth. Therefore, their resistance to and dissatisfaction with the social structure were suppressed. Although they showed resistance to management in schools and factories, they were not fully aware of the mechanism of social reproduction.

The third section describes the significance and contribution of this qualitative study. Empirically, this study provides a wealth of information about students' aspirations and perceptions, their plights and frustrations, and their strategies and creativity. Theoretically,

this research provides a new perspective for understanding rural youth's agency and the mechanism of social reproduction within this group. It also provides a new explanation for the problems of vocational education development. First, this study has highlighted the role of aspirations in social reproduction. Aspirations have been shown to be important in the Western context but have received little attention in research on Chinese disadvantaged youths. Second, this study has conducted an in-depth exploration of the characteristics of rural SVS youths' aspirations. By enriching the understanding of the concept of aspiration, the study reached a different conclusion from previous studies: even high and stable aspirations do not necessarily change the outcome of social reproduction. Third, this study demonstrated the importance of the capacity to aspire. Accordingly, it analysed the influencing factors of capacity to aspire and provided a theoretical basis for empowering disadvantaged youth.

The last two sections of this chapter address the practical implications and offer recommendations for future studies. It is recommended that the state, schools, and rural community work together to improve the development of vocational education and local communities. Better environments also need to be created for youth to cultivate creative aspirations and agency. In addition, this research calls for more in-depth longitudinal studies, comparative research, and action research. It advises empowering the participants and making efforts to change their education situations and life difficulties.

## 8.1 Secondary Vocational Education and the Changes of Students' Aspirations

In this study, the black box of vocational schooling was opened up through careful observation of the educational process within the school and rich interviews aimed at exploring students' subjective experiences and perceptions. In this section, I discuss how the students' experiences of vocational education weakened and reshaped the students' initial aspirations. The values inculcated in students by vocational education and the social roots of those values are also discussed.

### *8.1.1 Education of the Disadvantaged with Disadvantaged Education: The Shattering of Original Aspirations*

Consistent with the findings of previous literature (Koo, 2016; Pun & Koo, 2019), this study found that most students aspired to obtain a higher academic credential, learn skills,

and work in big cities. Students wanted to obtain a decent job and achieve upward mobility at the beginning of their entry into vocational school. These aspirations were the reasons why students chose vocational education instead of directly entering the labour market. However, the students soon realized that academic credentials would be of very limited use; these credentials were a necessary condition to obtain a good job, but far from all of what would be needed. As for learning skills, the students believed that they had only learned some basic and simple skills throughout their vocational education thus far. The teachers concurred that the students had only reached the level of an average operator in a factory in terms of skill level. Their limited skills would make it difficult for the students to get a decent job if they attempted to stay in a big city, where they would also be subjected to the pressure of high cost of living. These original and specific aspirations were thus fundamentally shattered after the students' first internship.

The shattering of these aspirations is largely related to the overall poor quality of secondary vocational education in China. This study observed that in T branch, the teaching quality was poor, the training equipment was insufficient, and the internships failed to help students improve their skills. Since the reform and opening up, the Chinese government has continuously advocated the development of vocational education to meet the needs of skilled workers for economic and industrial development (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 1985; State Council of China, 1980). Especially since the 1990s, the Chinese government has improved the quality of secondary vocational education; standardized the development, management, and teaching of secondary vocational and technical schools; and established a group of key and model vocational schools (Fang, Liu, & Fu, 2009; State Council of China, 1991). However, secondary vocational education is still a very weak sector compared with regular secondary education, especially in the central and western regions (Ministry of Education, 2017b).

Secondary vocational education has three main disadvantages. First, the secondary vocational teaching force is in poor shape. There is an insufficient number of teachers, and the existing teachers have a low professional level and lack practical experience. In particular, the shortage of "Double Teacher Type" teachers, or teachers who have both theoretical and

practical experience and abilities, has constrained the development of vocational education (Ministry of Education, 2019b; Z. Zhao & Liu, 2019). Second, the national financial investment in secondary vocational education is insufficient, accounting for only 33.9% of the funding for all of secondary education. In turn, secondary vocational education relies excessively on the funding from the government (Ministry of Education, 2014, 2020c). Third, school–enterprise cooperation and internships are in a state of chaos. The students in the present study were assigned to jobs that had nothing to do with their majors, and they lacked guidance from teachers and skilled workers. Their skills failed to improve, and worse, their safety and rights were violated in various ways (J. Chan, 2017; Hansen & Woronov, 2013; J. He, Yi, Li, & Zhang, 2017). In short, secondary vocational education, which is meant to provide a way out for disadvantaged youth such as rural and migrant youths, is itself a type of disadvantaged education.

More importantly, the government, education system, and society have placed vocational education in an inferior position since the reform and opening up. In the process of transitioning towards a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, the overriding focus of the country has been on achieving efficiency in development, rather than the egalitarian socialist utopia of the Mao era (Vickers, 2009). In Mao's era, the purpose of education was to promote social equality, and the children of the working class were meant to have equal access to education (D. Yang, 2006b). The educational policy in the early days of the People's Republic of China tended to preserve the difference between mental and manual labour, between urban and rural areas, and between workers and farmers. Mao believed that these differences needed to be eliminated through an educational revolution (Andreas, 2009). During the Cultural Revolution, in order to reduce social differentiation and elitism, secondary education was not divided into vocational education and regular education (Tsang, 2000). In the late 1970s (i.e., the beginning of reform and opening up), the role of education shifted to meet the needs of modernization and promote economic development (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Meritocracy, a powerful ideology, replaced egalitarianism under the Communist Party (Y. Liu, 2013). The stratifying function of education, which could assign individuals to different levels of workplaces, was accepted (Tsang, 2000). Examinations,

mainly the National College Entrance Examination and the high school entrance examination, have become the most important mechanism for the selection of talent (Woronov, 2016). Students are divided into different groups according to their exam scores; the scores ensure certain students enter different school tracks, learn different levels of skills, and obtain different jobs and socioeconomic statuses (Y. Wu, 2013). The school tracks and students are thus stratified. This stratification of education is essentially a mechanism of social stratification that the state can manipulate for its own purposes (Jingming Liu, 2004).

In the current education system, there is both vertical and horizontal stratification. From a vertical perspective, schools are divided into key or model schools, that is, into regular schools or vocational schools. There is a huge disparity between the employment prospects and social status of graduates of vocational schools and those of key or regular senior secondary schools (Y. Wu, 2013). More strikingly, when the state tried to improve the teaching quality of secondary vocational education in the 1990s, it adopted a similar pattern by establishing a number of key vocational schools. The result was further division of SVSs into national key vocational schools, provincial key vocational schools, and regular vocational schools (Fang et al., 2009). Stratifying schools and providing more support to schools with higher hierarchy has become a logical way to facilitate educational development. From a horizontal perspective, schools are divided into rural schools and urban schools, or schools in the eastern coastal region and the mid-western inland region (Y. Liu, 2016). From these two perspectives, vocational schools such as T branch in the central and western counties are undoubtedly at the bottom of the education system. They have very limited access to resources and are hardly prepared to produce the Craftsman of the Nation. They have essentially become a buffer between junior secondary school and society, a conveyor belt for transporting the workforce from rural to urban areas, and a correctional facility for managing and disciplining students and ensuring their safety. Against this backdrop of rigid educational stratification, secondary vocational education is unlikely to lead to the fulfilment of students' hopes. These schools may impart some basic skills, but they are unlikely to equip students with the core competencies needed for social mobility, let alone with a respectable academic credential. From the moment students enter vocational schools, a ceiling forms between them

and the higher rungs on the social ladder.

In addition, vocational education is closely related to economic development. On the one hand, due to unbalanced regional development, local employment opportunities is insufficient, and students often enter the industrial and service industries in coastal areas, making it difficult to achieve a virtuous circle of talent training in vocational education and local economic development in western area. On the other hand, enterprises still mainly provide labor-intensive positions for vocational school students, which in turn affects educators' understanding of vocational education, making them less focus on skill training, and more on the cultivation of students' attitudes and habits. Therefore, the economic-oriented development model and the unreasonable employment system also limit the supportive role of vocational education to students.

### *8.1.2 Achievement Ideology and Growth Ideology: The Formation of New Aspirations*

#### 8.1.2.1 The Prevailing Achievement Ideology

In this study, vocational schooling shattered the original aspirations of the students, but at the same time shaped new aspirations. This shaping process and the content of newly formed aspirations have not been fully examined in previous studies. The findings of this study revealed that teachers tended to teach professional knowledge and skills in the classroom in a superficial and informal manner. Lectures often devolved into storytelling: teachers of different disciplines repeatedly told their students about the few bright graduates who had achieved an exciting future; teachers aimed to demonstrate the accessibility of success and encouraged students to learn from predecessors who had achieved success through personal struggle. The repetition of success stories was not part of the school's curriculum, yet it took up substantial teaching time. These stories reflected the attitudes and values of educators and constituted an important part of the school's formal curriculum (M. Apple, 1979).

In the 1980s, Chinese reformers replaced collectivism and egalitarianism with meritocratic principles under the influence of global neoliberalism. Personal struggle, competition, and success were defined as new values by dominant discourses that penetrated deeply into social life and the education system (Xu Zhao, 2016). Ethnographic studies have

shown that achievement ideology and a series of related educational practices were widespread across different types and levels of schools (M. Li, 2015; Liang, 2009). Within the new talent selection system and per the burgeoning individualistic ideology, educators vigorously promoted a single criterion of success: good academic performance. This one criterion, which would lead to a decent job and a good income in the future, was used to create a competitive atmosphere in schools. Students were encouraged to make social comparisons. Differentiation among students has come to be regarded as a normal phenomenon that can motivate students to improve themselves and make it easier for educators to select the most outstanding students (A. Kipnis, 2001a; Hongbin Li, Liu, & Zhang, 2012; L. Wang, Huang, & Schnell, 2013; Xu Zhao, 2016). The present study showed that even in vocational schools, which are considered to be full of disadvantaged students who have no academic future, teachers are accustomed to encouraging students to pursue success.

The prevailing achievement ideology in contemporary China has social and historical roots. The economic prosperity of the past thirty years has created massive opportunities in the job market. Occupational mobility has become a new life experience for Chinese people (Bian, 2002). The success myths created by individuals and groups have been widely spread by the media (Y. Sun, 2017, August 10; Juan Wu, 2010, August 26). People believe that they have the opportunity to succeed and that they are responsible for their own future development (Su, Cao, He, & Huang, 2015). China might be called a “land of opportunity”. However, these opportunities are not evenly distributed across different groups. The widespread belief in achievement ideology is cruel to students in vocational schools; these students are at the bottom of the education system, blocked from accessing opportunities and farther away from success than their peers. Although the state has recently used nationalist discourses to emphasize the importance of vocational education, which it has depicted as an incubator for “Craftsmen of the Nation” (Y. Lin, 2016), the state has acknowledged that quality should be prioritized over quantity, as only a small percentage of vocational students may become craftsmen. In T branch, there were only one or two “successful cases” among the students. The allegedly easy way out that vocational education is meant to provide is in fact out of reach for most students. Moreover, through the promotion of achievement ideology, the

school has shifted its responsibility in education to the students themselves, who are expected to take full responsibility if they do not succeed. Most concerning, the students did embrace this explanation.

Success stories were not always convincing, especially when students encountered difficulties in their lives. Internships proved to be a deeply frustrating experience for most students. What they saw and heard in the factory and their interactions with the workers made the students aware of the limited power of their academic credentials and the difficulties of social mobility. Surprisingly, though, the inconsistency between success stories and reality did not lead students to abandon their pursuit of success and belief in personal struggle. On the contrary, the fierce competition and the indifference in the interpersonal relationships the students formed during the internship only deepened the students' desire to reform themselves. In this sense, the hidden curriculum in the internship and the formal curriculum at school were not contradictory, but rather continuous, conveying a consistent message to the students: only through personal struggle and great effort can you change your disadvantaged circumstances. This message encouraged students to find new ways to achieve success, that is, to enter the labour market as soon as possible to start accumulating wealth and to obtain more qualifications that could lead to better jobs. In short, the experience of vocational education shattered the specific aspirations of the students but strengthened their holistic aspiration — their middle-class dream (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019).

Success as a specific goal is no longer pursued given the magnitude of obstacles in reality, but success as an abstract and holistic belief persists, and people believe that it can be achieved in alternative ways (Ratner, 2019). Here we can see the power of achievement ideology. However, SVS students have never enjoyed the experience of success. Under such circumstances, it seems achievement ideology should gradually become less convincing. Strikingly, though, growth ideology has formed clever logical loopholes in school education, providing alternative explanations that seem reasonable and convincing for students' difficulties with achieving success in their lives.

#### 8.1.2.2 The Power of Growth Ideology

In addition to teaching vocational skills, teachers emphasized the importance of

self-improvement in various areas. First, the principle of *zuoren* permeated almost all teaching practices and mainly contained three aspects: obeying the discipline, being polite, and cultivating good habits and displaying positive attitudes when completing tasks. Second, students were encouraged to improve their interpersonal skills by improving their language skills and emotional intelligence; teachers asserted that these two factors would help students get along with others more harmoniously and make enterprises more likely to appreciate them. Finally, students were encouraged to actively create opportunities to accumulate work and life experience and to broaden their horizons in order to deal with unknown challenges in the future. All of this was generally referred to as "learning things", which was claimed to be as important, if not more important, than learning skills. Teachers insisted that "learning things" would be beneficial to the students' career development.

The internships were consistent with the requirements outlined in the school's curriculum. Students were required to abide by the factory rules, respect the leaders, endure all the suffering caused by the labour system, and efficiently fulfil the factory's production requirements. In addition, interacting with others at the factory allowed the students to understand the usefulness of interpersonal skills. Students' lack of knowledge when they first entered the workplace helped them to realize the importance of experiencing society and accumulating experience and made clear that the internships would be able to facilitate this process. The students' aspiration of learning skills was shattered, but vocational education once again shaped a new aspiration for them: to learn things and achieve growth.

The promotion of learning things and growth can be summarized as *growth ideology*. Similar to achievement ideology, growth ideology was constantly instilled in the students throughout their schooling and internships. Under the influence of growth ideology, the students shifted from learning skill-related knowledge to improving their personal abilities, which were not related to skills. Strikingly, in order to improve their abilities, the things they needed to learn were all-encompassing, covering a great range of aspects.

The wide spread of growth ideology in secondary vocational education is based on the prevalence of *suzhi* discourse in contemporary China. Since the late 1970s, the use of *suzhi* in China has rapidly increased as a way to refer to both an individual's inherited

(natural/ genetic) and acquired (nurture/learned) characteristics (A. Kipnis, 2006). The popularization of this concept began with the government incorporating the related concept of human population quality (*renkou suzhi*) in its propaganda for its birth control policy (Anagnost & Comaroff, 1997). The emphasis on eugenics began to be juxtaposed with the demand for fewer births and was associated with the state's vigorous promotion of modernization (State Council of China, 1982). By the 1990s, human population quality had become a key term in policy and media to explain why China had not reached the level of development expected by the state and its people (Anagnost, 2004). The leaders of the country believed that the problems caused by the low *suzhi* of the labour force could be solved through education. In 1993, the *Outline of China's Educational Reform and Development* clearly stated that economic development would depend on technological progress and improving the *suzhi* of workers. Developing education, improving the *suzhi* of the entire nation, and turning the heavy burden of the large population into an advantage as human resources was pushed as the only way for China to achieve socialist modernization (Ministry of Education, 1993). The vigorous development of vocational education from the 1990s to the present has been carried out against the background of the state's concern about the *suzhi* of the labour force. Policy documents have repeatedly emphasized that secondary vocational education shoulders the arduous historical task of cultivating high-quality workers and hence is an important force for comprehensively promoting *suzhi* education, improving the *suzhi* of the nation, and strengthening the nation overall (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2008; State Council of China, 2019).

In the official discourse, the requirements for improving quality are aimed at "the whole nation". However, it is the rural people and migrant workers who are deemed as fundamental reasons for the backwardness of China (Anagnost & Comaroff, 1997; H. Yan, 2003). With the collapse of socialist equality, *suzhi* has increasingly become a comprehensive requirement for labourers, a moral judgement of the disadvantaged by the advantaged, and a criterion of self-improvement for those who want to climb the class ladder. *Suzhi* is the ultimate standard of self-improvement (Anagnost, 2004; A. B. Kipnis, 2008; H. Yan, 2008). Moreover, Kipnis (2006) pointed out that the requirements for *suzhi* were aimed at individuals

in modern times, and this concept covers almost all the characteristics of a person. No term can negate a person so comprehensively, from behaviours to thoughts, from birth to upbringing, like *low suzhi*. It consistently provokes anxiety and drives people to evolve themselves.

For SVS students, the label of *low suzhi* is always with them. It affects their views of themselves, and ensures that society is unlikely to recognize their academic credentials and skills. Receiving secondary vocational education brands them with the stigma of being bad students (Ling, 2015). As the descendants of rural people, the students must learn vocational skills and gain life experiences that are urban-focused and hence disconnected from the environment in which they grew up and the competencies they have developed thus far (Ge, 2003; Juan Liu, Liu, & Lin, 2012). Unlike the working-class identity of the lads in Willis's (1977) research, the status of vocational school students does not provide them with a sense of identity that they can be proud of. As Anagnost (2004) insightfully pointed out, their lives have been artificially deprived of value for the sake of capital accumulation. Indeed, the students were regarded as objects that needed to be reformed in every respect, from their speech to their thoughts to their behaviours.

Being at the lowest end of the *suzhi* spectrum, the students could achieve growth through improvement of any aspect, which leads them to develop aspirations about learning things. Learning things is considered to help students grow and ultimately believe to promote their success. Growth ideology efficiently supplements achievement ideology. The two ideologies together predispose students to perceive and interpret their success and failure in certain steps: (1) if they want to succeed, they must work hard; (2) if they fail to achieve success, it is probably due to their low *suzhi*; (3) however, the failures help them to develop themselves and gain growth, such as by accumulating experience, improving emotional intelligence, and expanding their horizons; (4) each piece of growth is continuously helping them to approach the success they desire; (5) as in the first step, all they need to do is work hard, and they will ultimately succeed. Influenced by the two ideologies, the students firmly believed in the importance of hard work and personal struggle. They also tended to perceive delayed success as normal and acceptable and to perceive failure, suffering, and unfair

treatment as part of growth, hence as tolerable and even valuable. Their disadvantaged situation within the existing social structure is obscured by growth ideology. In this sense, growth ideology is even more powerful and harmful than achievement ideology.

In summary, vocational education fails to provide students with the "good sense" that would enable rich reflection and criticism (M. Apple, 2013a). Instead, it strengthens students' identity as bad students, which is how they are classified by the state via exam scores, and disseminates the discourses of personal struggle, success, *sushi*, and growth in the dominant and effective culture of the state (Williams, 1977). As a hegemonic form, the practice of disseminating these values in secondary vocational education incorporates the aspirations of rural youths and their families to become middle class and leaves much room for them to flexibly interpret their experiences. The vocational education advocates success that conforms to how students imagine success; it goes beyond pushing the specific role of academic credentials in success. The vocational education emphasizes growth that is in line with students' desire for self-development, not just the role of skills in growth. When students realized that their original aspirations would be difficult to achieve, the school showed them that there were other possibilities in their life, and they could improve themselves in other aspects. In this way, even if the students experienced frustration with reality, the messages that education conveyed to students were still accepted.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, it is a salient fact that the experiences of the internships had continuous and consistent influences on students' aspirations. The requirements of vocational education for students have been deliberately designed to be as close as possible to the requirements of enterprises and the reality that students will face soon after their graduation. The main function of vocational education is to improve the *suzhi* of the labour force and promote employment, which is referred as "education for employment" by the state (State Council of China, 2002a; Wen, 2009). Meanwhile, the enterprises expect SVS students to be obedient and cheap labour, rather than the craftsman of the nation (J. Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2015b; M. Zhao, 2020). The so-called comprehensive improvement of their competency serves essentially only to satisfy the requirements of the capital for a labour force (X. Yan, 2013; X. Zhou, 2015).

## 8.2 The Practices and Strategies of Rural Youth

This study obtained rich data about students' lived experiences in vocational education, their attitudes towards the role of education and corresponding actions, the school's discourse and practices, the objective probabilities, and the students' considerations and choices during internship and employment. In this section, I illustrate the proclivity, strategies, expressions, and practices of the vocational education students in terms of aspiration and resistance, which together reflect the students' agency and creativity under structural constraints.

### *8.2.1 High Aspirations and Low Capacity to Aspire*

The students had experienced two setbacks while attending vocational education. The first setback was that, because the high school entrance examination had diverted them to vocational education, instead of the academic track, society now presumed they had low ability and morality and despised them for it. The second setback consisted of their negative internship experiences. During their internships, they learned that their academic credentials and skills might not enable them to obtain their desired jobs, let alone a higher social status, after graduation. After the second setback in particular imposed by structural constraints, the students actively adjusted their aspirations. The students and their families had hoped that the students would obtain higher academic credentials. Since their poor academic performance in junior secondary schools had dictated that they were not "college material" and left them with few opportunities to climb the social ladder by way of higher education (M. Cheng & Chen, 2018; Meyer, 1970), the students therefore chose to go to a vocational school. On beginning at the vocational school, they aspired to improve their academic credentials, learn skills, and find opportunities in big cities. However, after participating in the internship, the students realized that secondary vocational education would not provide them with sufficient academic credentials to obtain an ideal job or with anything more than rudimentary skills. Therefore, they shifted their aspirations to find alternative ways to succeed.

The aspirations of the Chinese rural SVS students had several unique characteristics. First, the students generally held high aspirations upon beginning vocational education and before participating in the internship. They hoped to achieve upward social mobility, which

they felt would entail no longer living in rural areas in the western regions. Their aspirations were not fundamentally different from those of their middle-class peers. Fu and Huang (2009), in their study on the new generation of migrant workers, observed the same phenomenon: young people were eager to transcend their pre-existing social class and had strong motivation to leave the rural world. A considerable number of migrant youths have internalized the notions of success instilled by the mainstream media; they dream of becoming modern and urban citizens, and they share the same aspirations as the middle class (Kaland, 2020; Wanning Sun & Miao, 2016; Hui Wang, 2014). This finding of my research also supported the view that lack of aspirations cannot account for the poverty of the disadvantaged youths at the bottom of society, as these youths seem to share similar dreams and aspirations about their future with their middle-class peers (Hoskins & Barker, 2017).

Second, the students did not fall into pessimism and despair when faced with setbacks, but actively regulated their aspirations. The students' awareness of structural constraints and their regulations of their own aspirations reflected the students' rationale, agency, and flexibility in dealing with reality. The study introduced the concept of *adaptive preference* to explain the changes in young people's aspirations. This concept refers to how people's preferences are regulated and constrained by their perception of opportunities, i.e., by what people can or cannot do in their social world (Elster, 1982; Nussbaum, 2001; Polesel, Leahy, & Gillis, 2018). People tend to adjust their aspirations, which are a type of preference, so that they can find satisfaction with their current situation. Adjusting their own aspirations allowed the young people to manifest agency and was an action that they could adopt in the face of difficulties. However, this action may be particularly detrimental to young people who are in unfavourable environments, because it diminished the students' motivation to pursue a good life. As Bourdieu (1977) argued, when objective probabilities are internalized as individual subjective hopes and expectations, the restrictive structure is strengthened. Many studies have demonstrated the process of internalizing the objective probabilities in the social world and its influence on people's aspirations and actions (Furlong, Biggart, & Cartmel, 1996; Marshall, 2002; Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007; Uno, Mortimer, Kim, & Vuolo, 2010).

Interestingly, even after being frustrated by structural constraints, the disadvantaged

youths still had high aspirations. Though they seemed to gain an understanding that they were situated in a social environment with limited objective probabilities, they were still deeply influenced by achievement ideology. Education and social media instructed them to "accept the norms and values of the dominant culture and strive to embody them", and that is what the students did (p. 127). However, the students' ideas and pursuits being consistent with the mainstream ideology cannot be interpreted simply as the students having been brainwashed by the mainstream ideology. The students did possess agency and subjectivity. Many studies on youth culture have warned that we must avoid the resistance/conformism dichotomy because resistance to mainstream discourse is not the only form of agency. Acceptance and endorsement of the mainstream culture and discourse can also reflect agency (A. Kipnis, 2001a; M. Li, 2015; John U. Ogbu, 1978). Several studies have revealed that youths in developing countries are eager to achieve educational aspirations, go to metropolitan cities, and obtain middle-class jobs, modern education, and lifestyles, even after they have encountered various obstacles (T. Brown, Scrase, & Ganguly-Scrase, 2017; Kabiru, Mojola, Beguy, & Okigbo, 2013). A state's publicity of education as key to social mobility and immersion in neoliberal globalization discourses do affect youth. Notwithstanding, receiving education in community colleges or working in larger cities may still be, in fact, the best way out for them. This was the situation for the participants in my study. The stories told by the mainstream discourse echoed their real anxieties about needing to find a way out and offered possible directions or feasible solutions (Wanning Sun & Miao, 2016). Students' efforts to seek information from schools and enterprises in order to find that way out for themselves was an important manifestation of their agency.

Nevertheless, guided by Zipin (2015)'s theory, we can conclude that although new aspirations were shaped, but cannot be regarded as *emergent aspirations*. After the frustration in touch with reality, students' new aspirations were generated, but didn't show much imagination of alternative futures, and were not substantially different from their original aspirations upon entering the vocational school. We can even say that, the new aspirations were also deeply influenced by the discourse of the state and the media, which was consistent with the expectations from their family and school, so these new aspirations could be best

classified as some blend of *habituated* and *doxic aspirations*. In his research on the aspirations of Chinese rural youths, Sier (2020) suggested that these youths might first have to give up their illusions and hopes about existing routes to upward social mobility if they want to develop emergent aspirations. However, these students' life experience tended to lack two key dimensions: *resourcing* and *capacitating*, as defined by Zipin (2015). In terms of *resourcing*, the SVS students had never learned to identify or make use of lived cultural resources that could generate new aspirations, rather than aspirations shaped by achievement and growth ideologies. These resources could also be referred to as "funds of knowledge", which are defined as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). In the China's urban-centric education, the local knowledge that these students were familiar with through their own communities was not considered as necessary or valuable. Their focus was constantly directed to cities, where they would need to leave behind their original habitus and knowledge systems. In terms of *capacitating*, the school's curriculum failed to increase students' understanding of the relationship between their own aspirations and local people's "scenarios, contexts and norms" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 83). It also failed to help students exercise their ability to reimagine and speak for the local worlds. In addition, the school did not help the students to learn beyond the boundaries of the school; family and community members were never invited to participate in discussions about the future, to define their needs, or to propose solutions together. Therefore, though the subjects continued to actively adjust their aspirations in the face of difficulties, they never penetrated into the structural constraints behind the plight of the rural areas and the underclass. This failure made it difficult for them to imagine a brighter future for local communities that could break past the social-structural limits, rather than reproduce them.

In other words, although the SVS students had high aspirations, their *capacity to aspire* was relatively weak. The continuous regulation of their aspirations reflected this lack of capacity to aspire. I do not intend to blame this lack of capacity on the limitations of individuals or to attribute it to the educators' negligence of educative capacitation. From the records of the school's history (T County Education Bureau, 2016; T County Gazetteer

Committee, 2011) and the narratives of senior teachers, we can glimpse positive interactions between the school and the local community in the first ten years after the school was founded. For example, around 1983, the school carried out scientific research on local crop species, allowing students to conduct experiments in their own fields and providing technical guidance to farmers in order to disseminate advanced technologies. The school also cooperated with the veterinary station to identify and treat the intractable diseases of local poultry and animals, and it distributed medicines to students who could help the residents to treat diseases of poultry and animals during the holidays. These stories indicated a close relationship between teaching practice and local production at that period, which is also recognized as the golden age of T branch. However, as the rural community struggled to form a holistic, long-term vision for itself and became subordinate to urban and developed areas, the educational system changed; a social environment without its own interests is unlikely to promote the development of young people's ability to move towards a more equitable society and to understand the world in a new way.

Finally, the students' pursuit of their aspirations did not reflect a level of enthusiasm that matched the optimism of the actual aspirations. In other words, the aspirations of the students were high and ambitious, but did not appear to be strong. Influenced by many experiences of failure, their aspirations could be characterized as holding-back aspirations, like glowing lights that could be seen but hung too far away to be reached. This characteristic was on display even in the students' early days of school. For example, the students hoped to realize the dream of upward mobility through vocational education, yet their choice of vocational school was rather arbitrary and interfered by various specific matters. Similarly, when students had to decide on a career after their internship, they waffled between pursuing work in the city or in the country; they had always been looking forward to a better life elsewhere, but they had never really planned for it and were not ready to take action towards it. The internalization of the reality of limited opportunities was reflected in the students' pursuit of their aspirations, rather than in the content of the aspirations. Their repeated failures left the students uncertain about whether their aspirations could be realized. Therefore, they adopted a cautious and pragmatic attitude, which constituted the core strategy of their action.

On the one hand, the students did not complain about others and maintained high aspirations which enabled them to continue living in an era of uncertainty. As Berlant (2011) wisely pointed out, young people cannot afford to live without aspiration, even if it only brings them disappointment and impairs their well-being. On the other hand, in the face of an uncertain future, even though the students were not overly fanciful, they kept an open mind to possible change. They did not drive themselves towards the realization of their aspirations but kept adjusting their actions as needed at any time. Meanwhile, they perceived failure as part of growth rather than as the collapse of their aspirations, ensuring they could always achieve self-consistency. In addition, situated in the urban-rural divide and the class relations of industrial capitalism (Hui Wang, 2014), the disadvantaged youth struggled to negotiate their vocational aspirations with their aspirations about life, family, and personal lives, regardless of whether they wanted to live in cities or the countryside. Therefore, rather than focusing on pursuing their professional aspirations, the students had to continuously adjust their aspirations and make compromises.

### *8.2.2 Resistance Without Penetration*

The students' purpose for staying in school was to obtain academic credentials and avoid downwardly mobile prospects. Yet whether in school or in the factory, SVS students exhibited resistance towards management and the demands of their leaders. The students disobeyed their teachers' requirements, violated school rules, did everything but study, and merely muddled along in general. These behaviours and actions were part of the students' reaction to realizing the limited utility of their degrees, a realization which in turn reflected their growing understanding of educational and social realities. Accordingly, the students wanted to find a way out for themselves that did not necessarily involve education and to obtain the rewards as soon as possible. However, consistent with many previous studies on Chinese youth resistance (A. Kipnis, 2001a; X. Zhou, 2011), there was no counter-school consciousness behind the students' perceptions and practices. They did not hate teachers or schools, but rather cherished their student identity, and they still held the belief that education could change their lives—they attributed their failure to achieve upward social mobility simply to being bad at studying. In other words, the students did not sufficiently penetrate the

function of the education system in maintaining the unequal social structure. Their resistance behaviours thus only took them further away from their goal of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Some of the resistance behaviours, such as refusing to work overtime and absenteeism, did successfully help the students achieve their goals. However, most of the resistance behaviours were small-scale and short-lived. They were also caused by physical fatigue rather than a profound understanding of the fate of their group. Therefore, the resistance ended when the immediate goals were achieved, without the formation of longer-term collective goals or more stable organization. The pain and suffering that the students experienced during the internship did not transform into actions, but instead were deposited internally, which aggravated their mental distress. In line with the judgments of some Chinese theorists, the workers of the new generation (i.e., SVS students) have indeed formed a certain consciousness, just as their predecessors did. However, that consciousness is profoundly different from the class consciousness of the workers in the twentieth century, its depth and breadth aside (Jianzhou Liu, 2014; Hui Wang, 2014). Therefore, it is not appropriate to make an overly optimistic estimate of the socially progressive effects of the resistance behaviours exhibited in the current situation.

More importantly, the new aspirations indicated that the students recognized the logic of achievement ideology, but at their age, they did not have a full understanding of the mechanism of social reproduction. They remained optimistic about their future and believed that they would find alternative ways to achieve success besides studying. They tended to attribute their failure to lack of effort and adjusted their aspirations to let them try other ways of achieving their goals. Moreover, the suffering and pain they experienced in the pursuit of success were largely neutralized by growth ideology. School education reshaped their understanding of learning, predisposing them to value experiences of failure, to accept the contradiction between reality and their ideals, and to regard suffering as a necessary way to grow. Under the influence of pervasive achievement ideology and growth ideology, students' dissatisfaction with and resistance to the existing social structure are suppressed, making it difficult to motivate them to pursue a more equitable and reasonable society.

The finding that resistance was restricted does not mean that the students have no subjectivity or that any possibility of resistance by the oppressed is foreclosed. The academic community is often eager to find evidence of resistance among disadvantaged people and to believe that they can empower themselves. However, many researchers have argued that this approach of seeking resistance for the sake of political correctness is not meaningful (Wanning Sun & Miao, 2016). Rather, the academic community must strive to clearly understand the obstacles and challenges encountered by disadvantaged people; only by doing so can the academic community hope to better understand self-empowerment strategies, limitations, and possibilities. Under the influence of neoliberalism, the education system was redesigned along with the country's economics, and the beliefs that educators instilled in students became closely tied to the new mainstream ideology (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009; Savage, 2011, 2017). Young students are now encouraged to pursue personal achievement and self-improvement, to compete with others, and to maximize the return on human capital. Not surprisingly, their thinking rarely penetrates the constraining social conditions. Instead, they conform to limiting their visions of success and rarely make themselves the subject of their own development. Therefore, it is important to rethink vocational education's lack of creativity, imagination, and emancipation.

In the literature review section, the importance of studying student agency has been illustrated. Here, this study re-emphasizes that it is very important and valuable to observe and understand the agency of rural secondary vocational school students. As for agency and structural factors, we are not trying to answer which are more important, but need to understand the complexity of reality through their relationships and interactions. In some cases, individuals are able to overcome structural barriers and across class borders. Under such circumstances, the role of agency is evident and easily noticed by researchers. In other cases, agency seems insignificant in the face of structural factors. This was the case in this study: the students' agency did not change the reality of their social reproduction. However, if the agency of students is therefore considered powerless and unworthy of the researcher's attention, this way of understanding agency deprives us of the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of this group. In this study, the students' aspiration and resistance are both

manifestations of their agency. We can see that students are not completely passive in the face of disadvantaged education, cruel labor regime and huge urban-rural divide. They use the existing resources to create the possibility of change, constantly adjust their aspiration according to the actual situation, and also generate some resistance behaviors. What we need to explore in depth is precisely why the role of the students' agency is limited, making it impossible for them to change the situation of replicating the fate of their parents despite their efforts? This study points out that vocational education enables students to internalize mainstream notions of success and growth, enabling them to remain self-consistency in the face of structural factors, thus cooperating with the process of class reproduction. With this insight, we can further consider how a new kind of vocational education is possible and how students' emergent aspirations can be formed.

### 8.3 Regulation of Aspirations and Social Reproduction

The present study sheds light on the role of aspirations in social reproduction among Chinese SVS students. MacLeod (2009) argued that regulation of aspirations may be the most important factor that contributes to social reproduction. Specifically, he believed that structural factors played a role in regulating aspirations. Even the Brothers who once had strong hope for the future gradually tempered their high aspirations under the impact of reality and ended up in a low social position. Suh's (2018) ethnographic work drew a similar conclusion: the shifting of aspiration played a key role in social reproduction among migrant children. When the migrant children's aspirations were levelled, the only possibility they could imagine was staying in local areas and doing the same low-end jobs as their parents. Unlike these two studies, in my study the social mechanisms of inequality were more subtle, as well as sugar-coated by the dominant ideology, which reduced the students' penetration of the mechanisms. Even after multiple setbacks, the students' aspirations remained high, rather than lowering. However, the fate of social reproduction among the students did not change. Therefore, the argument that lower aspirations contribute to social reproduction may not apply to the SVS students in rural China.

Some studies have also indicated that unstable aspirations may lead to poor personal development (J. O. Lee et al., 2012a; L. Liu, 2009a). Although the SVS students did not lower

their aspirations, the obstacles they encountered and their unstable identity did make them frequently adjust their aspirations. They were therefore unable to continue with their original aspirations of obtaining higher academic credentials and learning skills, which may make it difficult for them to acquire the advanced skills and core competences required for upward mobility. Appadurai's (2004) ethnography provided clues that it would be difficult for disadvantaged communities to achieve long-term wishes and desires if they were always distracted by immediate needs. My fieldwork similarly showed that the students often had to consider the needs of their families when choosing schools and jobs, which led to them being uncertain about whether they wanted to live in big cities or the countryside. This uncertainty may further contribute to reproduction of their disadvantaged position. Would stable aspirations help these youth avoid the fate of social reproduction? This study provided little evidence on this argument, but a number of studies on migrant youth have exhibited the limitation of stable aspirations (D. Ma, 2015; Sier, 2020; Wenzhong Sun, 2016). Even if students held stable aspirations about obtaining higher education and successfully entered a university, the students were still likely to face numerous challenges with employment in the city; their expectations for their future life remained difficult to realize, and they even became migrant workers themselves.

We could infer that the stability of aspirations does not play a crucial role in undermining social reproduction. A more important factor is whether students perform sufficient resourcing and capacitating when making decisions about their life and careers. The students were situated in a society that provided many options, but they were gradually realizing that not all these options were available to them. For example, they voiced that education, as a way out of their current social status, was not feasible for them, and they actively regulated their aspirations accordingly. This kind of regulation certainly reflected their rationality and subjectivity. However, their new aspirations, such as to pursue any qualifications that might help them make money right away, might not guarantee success (Gale, 2015). These disadvantaged youth lacked archives of experience on which to draw while navigating their options. Moreover, they had never interacted in ways or with actors that could help them evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses objectively, provide a rich

set of options for the future, cultivate their ability to overcome difficulties and reduce constraints, and open up space for them to develop their agency (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019).

Ultimately, the students seemed likely to replicate the fate of their migrant parents, despite their high aspirations. This situation should highlight that the students' agency, which was deeply influenced by habitus and dominant discourse, is different from agency which is creative and liberating. Lacking supporting resources, marginalized in the country's development, and subordinated in the production structure, these students are grappling with a plight that is embedded in the broader plight of western rural areas as a whole. According to Appadurai's (2004) profound understanding of aspiration, disadvantaged students tend to lack capacity to aspire, that is, the ability "to navigate the cultural map in which aspirations are located and to cultivate an explicit understanding of the links between specific wants or goals and more inclusive scenarios, contexts, and norms". The lack of capacity to aspire may be a crucial factor in the perpetuation of social reproduction. To improve their capacity to aspire, or to develop emergent aspiration, students must increase their awareness of structural constraints, abandon the illusion of becoming middle class, and directly participate in discussions and actions against the structural constraints. These efforts will require not only individual input, but also the joint contributions of the government, schools, and rural communities.

### 8.4 Practical Implications

In recent years, in order to promote industrial transformation, China has vigorously encouraged students to become craftsmen of the nation and, in tandem, promoted vocational education as key to training these craftsmen (D. He, 2016, February 29; H. Xu, 2018). Becoming craftsmen of the nation is the Chinese dream assigned by the state to the SVS students. However, the state has not given enough practical support for vocational education to shape these craftsmen beyond instilling becoming a craftsman as a personal goal. Data from the Ministry of Education show that most SVSs provide low-quality school conditions and have insufficient proportions of professional teachers. In many provinces, the financial investment in secondary vocational education is insufficient (J. Li, 2013, June 17; Ministry of

Education, 2017a; M. Zheng & Ning, 2014). Students thus face considerable challenges when trying to acquire the skills needed to become craftsmen. The output of vocational education in fact suggests that the aim of vocational education, especially vocational education in western counties, is to prepare a substantial and cheap labour force for labour-intensive industries. Higher vocational education has expanded its enrolment at a rate of one million per year on since 2019 (K. Li, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2020a). The inflation of academic credentials has steadily worsened with that expansion, turning secondary vocational education to "education for the disadvantaged."

This research suggests that governments at all levels should improve vocational education to create more favourable conditions for rural youth. This improvement will necessitate a series of specific measures, such as investing more material and human resources for secondary vocational education, improving supervision for the use of funds, upgrading teachers' skills and teaching quality, and setting standards for the practice of school-enterprise cooperation. More importantly, developing vocational education will require a systematic design process which is reformative and reflective. It may include changing the status of schools as labour force suppliers for enterprises, allowing enterprises to give guidance on school training plans, and forming a more effective skill training system. The situation of degree inflation must be addressed; the country needs an evaluation system for skill level other than academic credentials, and more room should be given for the promotion of skilled professionals. Establishing a more stable labour system and more reasonable remuneration will also help to guarantee skill formation.

In the educational process, teachers tend to encourage competition, make moral judgements about students based on students' academic performance, promote symbolic order and personal development that conform to dominant ideology, rationalize market principles, and shape highly individualized entrepreneurial actors (W. Brown, 2003; B. Davies & Bansel, 2007). This research suggests that both school teachers and social workers should reflect on existing educational ideas, improve the educational methods, and develop student-centred practices that are exploratory and problem-posing, rather than indoctrination-based (Freire, 1972). First, educators should provide a more complete picture of reality and cultivate the

reflective and critical awareness that students need to interact with the world. Students should be allowed to retain their habituated and doxic aspirations; as Zipin et al. (2015) pointed out, habituated, doxic, and emergent aspirations are always part of young people's efforts to fight for possibilities. But educators should elicit discussions with students about their aspirations and ways to achieve them with the aim of expanding students' horizons, improving their ability to acquire resources, helping them understand reality and themselves, and encouraging them to make their own judgments. Educators should not directly indoctrinate students with their own understandings of the world, even if educators' understandings are believed to be revolutionary and advanced. Impressing knowledge into students that is not based on equal communication and students' self-inquiry risks creating a new hegemony.

Second, educators should fully respect local knowledge and experience and develop rural-based and hometown-centered education. In fact, rural contexts can be rich environments for vocational school students to learn science and engineering skills (Avery, 2013). More importantly, educations should encourage students to apply local knowledge to local social life. Students' internships should be well designed as native-oriented and help local community to solve problems. It could help students to discover possibilities for transforming the world and serving society, which is very important for developing students' subjectivity and self-efficacy. Making school education and community development mutually reinforcing would greatly reduce structural obstacles for students and enables students to realize their own value and be their own masters in their work.

Additional findings and suggestions will inevitably emerge regarding the development of SVS students in the context of rural community development. Currently, the government often attributes the limited improvement of life situations in rural communities to a lack of enthusiasm and agency among the rural poor, that is, to lacking or weak aspirations (State Council of China, 2018a, 2018b). Some researchers have also concurred that a kind of "mental poverty" is at work, an idea that specifically suggests low aspiration, negative beliefs, and irrational decision-making among the poor (P. Chen & Wang, 2019; Hang & Hu, 2017b; Han Wang & Cheng, 2019; J. Zhang, 2019). Therefore, inspiring aspiration, or otherwise improving the aspirations of the poor, is a method that is often emphasized by the government

(Xi, 2017). SVS students who come from rural areas are often the target group of poverty alleviation (B. Chen, 2017, March 13). However, this study indicates that these young people are not lacking aspirations. Rather than igniting aspirations, promoting the development of creative and liberating agency and systematically reducing structural constraints may be a more effective method to help these students climb the class ladder. Several detailed suggestions are provided as follows.

First, community members, including the young students, should take part in extensive discussions about the community that address future possibilities and current difficulties. These discussions could provide opportunities for them to understand what the future really holds for the disadvantaged and what conditions need to change in order to create a better future. In such discussions, young people's awareness of structural constraints will increase, and they will also be able to make more objective judgements about the possibility of achieving doxic aspirations. Urban-rural disparity, regional differentiation, and unequal production relations will cease to be regarded as the status quo; rather than being taken for granted, these issues will become objects to reflect upon.

Second, community members should use unique local cultural forms, such as rituals, symbols, social organizations, and values, to express their collective appeals. The use of local culture is essential to cultivate identity and build consensus. In this process, cohesion will be strengthened among community members, even among people whose life situations are somewhat different. The practice of cultural expression helps to cultivate and exercise voice; it can allow the disadvantaged youths to demonstrate their presence and dignity and enhance their subjectivity in fighting for their own welfare.

Finally, community members should actively participate in actions, instead of surrendering the right of planning and developing their own community to others. They should participate in rural development projects led by the government and enterprises and strive ultimately to achieve autonomous management. In short, empowerment means increasing capacity to aspire, which is different from simply igniting aspirations.

## 8.5 Recommendations for Future Studies

First, future studies should continue to use the bottom-up perspective to focus on China's vocational school students, as these are students who have not received the same educational opportunities as regular secondary school students and urban students and who have long lacked voices in social science research. Many aspects such as the practices of vocational education, the interaction between schools and enterprises providing internships, students' emotions and interpersonal relationships, and the influence of cyberspace are worthy of further exploration. Studying these aspects will deepen the understanding of Chinese vocational education and its students, thereby laying a theoretical foundation for future intervention and policy making.

Second, longitudinal studies on the aspirations of vocational school students are needed to keep track of students' life trajectories, as the content and characteristics of these subjects' aspirations may undergo further changes as they have new life experiences. Researchers could keep in touch with participants in order to carry out multiple interviews at critical timepoints, such as when participants change jobs, get married, or begin raising offspring, just as MacLeod (2009) did in his research. Such studies would provide in-depth understanding of this group's hopes, aspirations, frustrations, and losses in life and work and allow for exploration into the impact of vocational education experiences on these life aspects.

This study also suggests the possibility of a rich comparative study in the future. The participants of my study were all students who chose to stay in school in order to get their diploma. However, almost half of the students interrupted their studies after participating in the first internship. The life trajectories of these two groups might differ in many aspects, including aspiration and attainment. A close comparative examination could provide valuable data for understanding the role of vocational education in changing the social class of rural youth. In addition, the present study did not reveal the difference in the formation of aspirations between male and female students in vocational education. Future research could focus on the gender difference in aspirations under the influence of schools, internships, parenting styles, family relationships, and gender division of labour. Finally, at time the

fieldwork was conducted, the county had no large industrial enterprises; in contrast, other counties may have large-scale enterprises that could support the local employment of vocational school students. Under such circumstances, the prospects of vocational school students and their career plans may be different, which is also worthy of further exploration.

Finally, according to the observations of this study, students' lack of capacity to aspire may be an important factor in them reproducing the fate of their parents. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct action research to improve their situation through practice. Researchers need to explore the needs of students, seek possible strategies for helping them escape their disadvantaged position, and empower the students to transform and enhance their awareness so that they have more resources to realize their aspirations. Researchers need to shift their roles to become promoters of these actions. We must commit ourselves to discovering and improving the overall capabilities of the community and to using existing resources to create spaces and platforms so that students can become co-researchers and active actors.

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