

From "Chosen Ones" to "Leftovers": A Historical Analysis of China's Vocational Education and Training System, 1949-2023

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines students' educational choices in China's Vocational Education and Training (VET) to explain VET's low social reputation. Using individualisation theory to analyse administrative records, interviews, and autobiographical stories, it identifies three historical stages of VET students' choices: (1) 1978-1991, when VET was "the first choice" for graduates; (2) 1992-2000, a period of polarised choices during the transition from a planned to a market economy; (3) 2001-present, when VET became "the last choice" under the socialist market economy. The study reveals how declining state endorsement and rising individualistic rationality shape students' decisions, providing insights into VET's evolving trajectory and influencing factors across eras.

Keywords: Vocational School Students, Individualisation Theory, Educational Choices, China, Low Reputation

1. INTRODUCTION

The low status of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a global phenomenon, particularly pronounced in China. Despite government efforts to elevate VET's status since 2012, its reputation has declined in recent years. This societal perception deters graduates and their families from considering VET, as parents favor other educational paths due to lower economic returns ^[1]. Even VET graduates lack the social esteem of their academic counterparts ^[2], hindering VET's promotion.

Educational choices are not purely individual but influenced by institutional structures ^[3]. In China, state and party policies have guided young people's choices across historical stages ^[4]. For example, during the planned economy era, VET enjoyed a positive image, aligning with socialist ideology's emphasis on the working class. However, VET's reputation has fluctuated across stages: the Socialist Era (1949-1978), Early Reform Era (1980s-1990s), Institutional Transformation (1990s-2000s), and the current era of increasing "Educational Desires" (2000s-present) ^[5]. Understanding the interplay between societal structures and individual variables in VET students' decision-making is crucial. Yet, little is known about how these choices have evolved historically ^[6]. This study addresses: How did VET students make educational choices across historical stages, and what factors contributed to these choices?

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Individualisation Thesis

Educational choices link structures with individual behaviors ^{[7][8]}. Using individualization theory, this study explores how vocational students navigate social and educational structures. Choosing VET can be seen as part of young people's individualization processes, where the self becomes a "do-it-yourself project" ^{[9][10]}. While individuals make choices, their life chances remain structured and predictable ^[8]. These processes are institutionally dependent, exposing individuals to institutionally generated risks ^{[11][12]}. Young people may blame themselves for failures ^{[7][13]}.

Most research on individualization focuses on the Global North ^[14], with limited empirical evidence from China, where constant state-sponsored institutional changes shape society ^{[15][16]}. Individualization in China resembles Western Europe, as "state power and politics have been the creators, not the creations, of a transformed society" ^[17]. It involves responding to institutional changes rather than pursuing

autonomous choices ^[15]. In the Reform Era, young people experienced shifts like the end of state-assigned jobs, forcing them to navigate the labor market ^{[18][19]}.

2.2 Educational Choice and VET Context in China

Individual educational choices significantly impact future education and labor market prospects ^[20]. A key issue is how social class origin shapes choices ^[21], embodying class differentials in educational attainment ^{[22][23]}. Upper-middle-class children tend toward academic paths, while lower-class children often choose VET ^{[24][25]}. In China, upper-secondary VET is viewed as a poor second choice, lacking parity with academic routes. This study explores historical changes and motivations behind choosing VET over academic education.

3. A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE VET SYSTEM IN CHINA

3.1 The Future Leaders of the Proletariat: The Socialist Era (1949-1978)

China's current VET system emerged in the 1950s, when VET was highly valued. Vocational education was delivered by danwei, with graduates guaranteed lifelong jobs ("iron rice bowl") ^{[26][27]}. In the 1960s, skilled labor and craftsmanship were promoted, with students seen as "future leaders of the proletariat" ^[28]. However, the Cultural Revolution (1960s-70s) disrupted VET: many schools closed or merged, and education shifted to political indoctrination, devaluing vocational training ^[29].

3.2 VET Students as "The Chosen Ones": The Early Reform Era (1980s-1990s)

In the Early Reform Era, the government prioritized training skilled workers. The 1980 Secondary Vocational Education Reform aimed to expand VET enrollment (vocational high schools, skilled worker schools, technical schools). VET remained prestigious, as graduates retained the "iron rice bowl" ^[28]. Competition for VET spots was fierce, and the 1985 "Decision on the Reform of the Educational System" further emphasized VET's importance. Admitted students were considered "the chosen ones."

3.3 The Institutional Transformation (1990s-2000s)

In the 1990s, marketization impacted housing, healthcare, labor, and education ^{[30][32]}. The government ended state-assigned jobs and prioritized higher education expansion ^[33] (Education, 2020). The 1993 "Outline for Educational Reform and Development" set this goal. Vocational schools lost state enterprise funding, requiring tuition fees and increasing job market competition ^[28]. With higher education expansion, VET's attractiveness declined ^{[34][35]}.

3.4 Increasing Educational Desires and "Left-over" Students (2000s-Present)

Market-driven job allocation removed VET students from the danwei system, forcing them into the labor market ^[36]. Higher education expansion fueled "educational desires" ^[25], increasing demand for university degrees. Mid-level jobs once filled by VET graduates now require university degrees ^[3]. The end of the "iron rice bowl" entrenched beliefs that manual work offers no security or status. A survey found only 1.3% of parents would send children to VET (Beijing Youth News). VET students are now labeled "left-over" with "inferior" academic records ^{[32][2]} and stereotypes of being "stupid and lazy" ^{[1][38]}.

Recent policies (e.g., 2019 "National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan") emphasize VET's equality with academic education ^[39]. Initiatives like secondary-university articulation aim to bridge the gap ^[40]. However, VET lacks parity of esteem, as economic returns are not evident. Parents still prefer academic education ^[39].

Below is a summary of key national policies shaping VET since the 2000s, illustrating government efforts to revitalise VET despite persistent societal bias.

Table 1 The Most Impactful National Policy Texts in China after 2000s

Number	Title	Year
1	Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Enhance the Reform and Development of the Vocational Education	2002
2	Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Developing the Vocational Education	2005
3	Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education	2014
4	Implementing the Construction Plan for Building High-level Higher Vocational Colleges and Majors with Chinese Characteristics	2019
5	Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2022 Revision)	2022

4. DATA AND METHODS

This study combines social history and historical periodization^{[42][43]}. It references VET historical studies in developing (e.g., Indonesia, Sri Lanka) and developed (e.g., Nordic countries) nations^{[6][44]} to describe choice shifts since 1978. Using "reflexive understanding"^[45] (Ahmed, 2022), it explores factors influencing choices, integrating social and personal history^{[46][47]}.

Data sources include: (1) official media, policy texts, and archives (e.g., China Pictorial, People's Daily Image and Text Database); (2) 18 autobiographies of 1980s-1990s VET graduates; (3) 2019-2023 surveys/interviews with 37 VET students (5 from 1980s, 8 from 1990s, 24 from 2000s); (4) 2018-2019 interviews with 14 transfer students (secondary VET to university).

Qualitative data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 11 Plus. Periodization validity was verified with international and Chinese experts.

5. RESULTS

Three stages of VET educational choice emerged, with varying influences of rational and cultural variables. The 1949-1978 period was excluded due to consistent economic/social systems and challenges interviewing pre-1980s students.

5.1 "The First Choice" (1978-1991)

In the early 1980s, education remained elite-oriented with low enrollment rates. High-achieving students competed for limited VET spots, as one 1980s student noted: "Only one in five candidates could eventually enroll" (E-I-3). Rural students favored VET to convert agricultural to non-agricultural hukou^[48], celebrated by villages (E-I-1). VET offered full scholarships, stipends, and guaranteed jobs (E-A-6; E-A-4). Despite limited higher education, VET graduates had stable careers (e.g., 1990 "Usage of Punctuation" example). VET quality was high, with enterprise-experienced teachers and close school-industry cooperation (E-I-5). Official propaganda portrayed workers positively, aligning with socialist modernization^{[49][37]}.

5.2 Changing Choices (1992-2000)

Marketization reduced industry/enterprise funding for VET, leading to self-financing and tuition fees (N-I-2). Rural families struggled to afford fees, causing dropouts (N-A-3). The 1997 "Opinions on the Reform of Enrolment" implemented nationwide tuition fees and ended job allocation. VET's attractiveness declined, with lower entrance scores and poor learning atmospheres (N-A-4). School-industry cooperation weakened (N-I-1), and graduates often worked in rural areas (N-A-7). Higher education expansion (1999) devalued VET diplomas (N-A-8), and state-owned enterprise layoffs increased unemployment (N-I-5). By 2000, VET's golden age ended. While official media remained positive, phrases like "no longer inferior" emerged, reflecting growing concerns^{[50][51]}.

5.3 "The Last Choice" (2001-Present)

VET's decline continued in the 21st century. Higher education expansion led to preference for academic paths, with VET lowering entry requirements. Students chose VET only if unable to enter academic high schools (Z-I-2), facing parental disappointment and social stigma (Z-I-3). Migrant children without local hukou were forced into VET (Z-I-9). The 2009 tuition-waiver policy failed to attract students, as it did not improve higher education or employment prospects ^[52]. VET learning environments were unattractive, with peers perceived as "bad kids" (Z-I-10). Enterprise internships were limited (Z-I-17), and students prioritized university admission (Z-I-13). VET diplomas were seen as insufficient for prestigious jobs (Z-I-11). Recent policies aim to bridge VET and academic education, but challenges remain (e.g., cultural shocks for transfer students, diluted skill training). Official media campaigns ("Attending Vocational Schools is No Longer Inferior") reflect ongoing stigma ^{[35][50][51]}.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

China's VET system has evolved from "chosen ones" to "leftovers" across three stages, aligning with enrollment data (Figure 1). Using individualization theory, this study shows how institutional changes (e.g., end of "iron rice bowl," marketization) drive individual choices. VET decisions reflect semi-structured, state-sponsored individualization (responding to institutional changes) and compromised structured behavior (balancing passive compromise and opportunism).

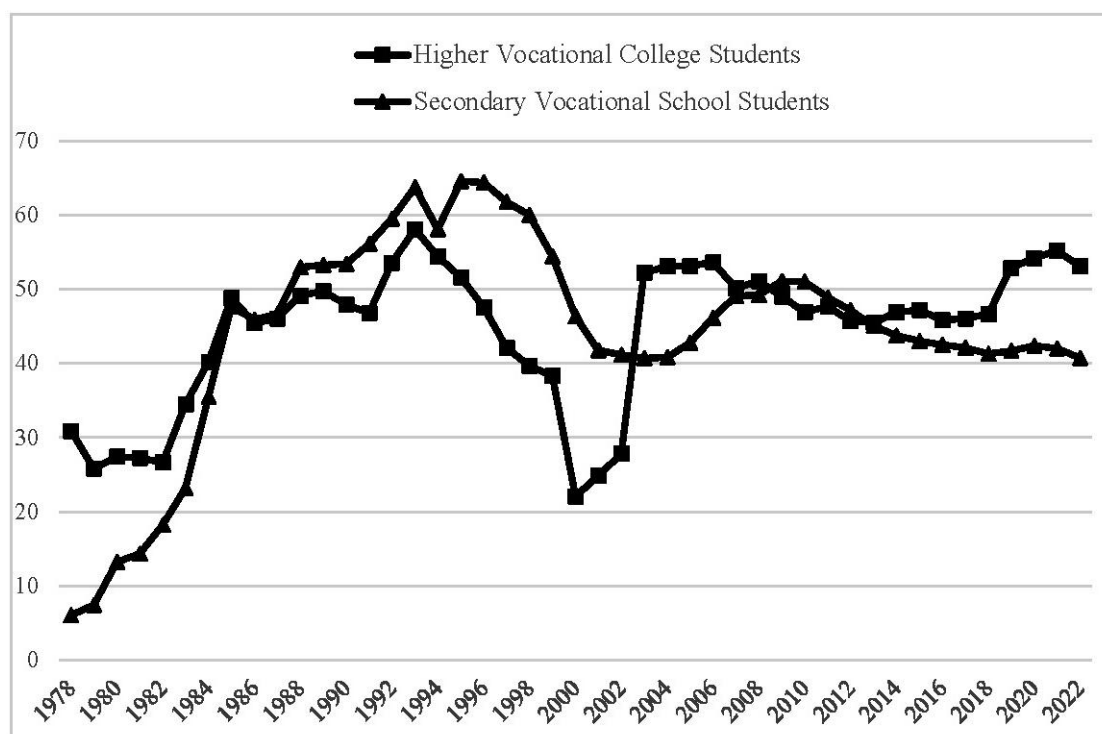


Figure 1. The Percentage of the Enrolment of VET Students (1978-2022)

Notes: (1) The values in Figure 1 represent enrollment ratios; (2) Data sources: National Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Communiqué on the Development of Education, Ministry of Education Statistics, Statistical Communiqué of the Ministry of Human Services, National Bureau of Statistics; (3) The researcher adjusted the statistical standards and criteria because the algorithm used in 2021 differs from that of 2022, and the algorithm used before 2003 also differs. The difference lies in whether technical schools are included among secondary vocational schools; (4) Starting in 2021, the enrollment ratio of higher vocational schools has been included in the ratio of vocational universities; (5) Enrollment numbers: From 1999 to 2002, the total enrollment in higher education included higher education, higher vocational education, adult education, and others. These numbers have been processed and corrected by the researcher.

VET's decline stems from changing societal perceptions, lower economic returns, and competition with academic education^{[53][5]}. Despite recent policies, parity of esteem remains elusive. Future research should explore VET's evolving landscape and strategies for achieving equality with academic education.

This study contributes by: (1) analyzing VET's historical trajectory under planned and market economies; (2) revealing complex choice dynamics; (3) highlighting VET's changing role in China's development. Limitations include limited geographic scope (eastern coastal cities) and reliance on qualitative data. Future research should expand data collection for quantitative historical analysis.

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