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Tertiary Vocational Education: Ideological Transformations in China's Higher Education

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Abstract: *This paper explores that as a result of the influences of globalization, the emergence of tertiary vocational education (TVE) and its further development in China are symbols of ideological transformations of higher education from Confucianism to vocationalism, and new vocationalism.*

Introduction

“Globalization tends to be seen in terms of the increasing economic integration of the global community under the forces of advanced capitalism” (Heyhoe, & Zha, 2004). “Global competition is increasingly being used as a rationale for governmental policy options” (Yang, 2003, p. 275). “Even in China, the largest country that declares its adherence to socialism, higher education is increasingly affected by global economic forces” (Yang, 2003, p. 279). Within this context, China has recently created a new component of its higher education sector: TVE, which is similar to postsecondary/higher vocational education in many other countries. With the rapid development of a market economy under the open door policy, high-level skilled workforce (e.g. senior technicians) is in great need in China. There is a kind of specific education to foster high-level skilled workforce in Western countries, such as community colleges in North America. Modeled after the successful experience of developed countries to cultivate high-level skilled workforce, Vocational and Technical Colleges emerged in 1996. It shows a significant transformation of educational ideologies. Based on the theoretical framework of Confucianism, vocationalism, and new vocationalism, this paper explores: (1) Dominated by the ideology of Confucianism, higher education is considered as a way for people to realize their goals—to be official-scholars. It is the rationale that Confucianism is the main factor hindering the development of TVE. (2) Understanding of vocationalism at Berg’s two levels is not suitable for the case of China. A system level will be helpful for people to understand that vocationalism is a positive factor injected into Chinese higher education system. (3) The further development of TVE calls for a new vocationalism vision.

Confucianism as an Ideology in Higher Education

As A set of beliefs, perceptions, assumptions, and values that provide members of a group with an understanding and explanation of their world, ideology provides a framework for “organizing, maintaining and transforming relations of power and dominance in society” (Fleras & Elliott, 1992, p. 54). “Although Confucianism is no longer used as the state ideology today, it remains a distinctive feature in the life and mores of the region” (Oldstone-Moore, 2002, p. 9). Hayhoe (1993, p. 305) argues that “Confucianism permeates Chinese society, particularly that of the intelligentsia”. As a dominant ideology, Confucianism has deep impacts on Chinese (Higher) education through the notion of Official-Scholar (OS)/Literati.

“The literati [OS] were the elite class in Chinese history by virtue of their mastery of

literary skills, particularly the texts of the Confucian Canon” (Thompson, 1979, p.112). “For more than two thousand years the literati [OS] have definitely been the ruling stratum in China and they still are” (Weber, 1964, p.108). “As a rule, the literati [OS] strove for princely service both as a source of income and as a normal field of activity” (Weber, 1964, p. 108). “For twelve centuries social rank in China has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth. This qualification, in turn, was determined by education, and especially by examinations (Weber, 1964, p. 107), which are known as Imperial Examinations (IE). “In IE, moral values always played a more significant role than specialist knowledge, and the examination texts were interpreted by the candidates in accordance with the prevailing opinion of the times” (CEDEFOP, 1987, p. 24). “China was administered by members of a ruling class who were educated as scholars of the classics and were experts in morality, rather than in any particular (technical) field (such as agriculture, law, commerce, or, later, industry and science)” (Ogden, 1995, p. 19). To pass IE entailed many years’ intensive study of the canonical texts. “As the preparation mostly took place in private schools and through private teachers, it was basically only wealthy families who could afford to have their sons educated” (CEDEFOP, 1987, p. 23). “Although the pathway to official position through the examination system (the so-called way of “providing one’s superiority and becoming an official” [xue er you ze shi]) was the narrowest and most difficult” (Hayhoe, 1992, p. 12), common people still believe that it is the only way to improve their social status. “Success in IE brought opportunity for an OS career that means status of privilege and success. Undoubtedly, it was this ambition that motivated the majority of students” (Thompson, 1979, p. 112). “In spite of the dramatic changes in China – political, economic and social, certain cultural continuities remain as a link between historical and contemporary educational interaction” (Hayhoe & Bastid, 1987, p. 272). “Several centuries after his death, Confucius came to be recognized as China’s ‘greatest sage’ ” (Smith, 1968, p. 32). “Confucius has generally been worshipped by the scholar-class only, and that worship seems to have developed in the schools” (Smith, 1968, p. 145). Dominated by the Confucian ideology, higher education has become a tool for people to realize their goals—to be OS. This is the rationale for us to understand the negative impacts of Confucianism on TVE.

Firstly, the goal to be an OS reflects people’s rejection of vocational education. The reason is that “in the social hierarchy of the Confucian State, officials occupied the highest position, above the peasants, craftsmen and merchants” (CEDEFOP, 1987, p. 23). “Preference was given to a classical (academic/general) education, which was the basic element in the preparation for a career in the administration, rather than to specialized education” (CEDEFOP, 1987). Academic/General education always has higher status than vocational education. Historically, this rejection of TVE led to the loss of TVE. In the early 1980s, a few local colleges were set up as the rudiments of TVE in China. A clear goal of preparing high-level skilled workforce was endowed on these local colleges by the government and they were collectively named as vocational colleges. At that time, however, tertiary vocational education was not accepted in the society. There was a common sense that vocational education and tertiary education are not relevant. Most local colleges had to give up their goals as vocational colleges and gradually lost their characteristics. People enrolled in those colleges were not for a

vocational purpose but for a credential of higher education. Unfortunately, now we are seeing a same history. Wu (2004), the Vice-Minister of Chinese Ministry of Education, argues that TVE plays a key role in facilitating Chinese higher education to a mass stage (the gross enrollment rate of 18 to 22 years olds reached 15%). There exists a problem in such a governmental argument. This achievement of TVE is inconsistent with its emergence with the purpose to fostering high-level skilled workforce. This problem reveals a vague goal for developing TVE, which will surely lead to the lost of TVE again. Can we let the same history replay again? Secondly, the goal to be an official-scholar fosters the environment of distaining TVE in the society, which causes graduates of TVE in disadvantages in employment. Most employers prefer graduates with general university degrees rather than those graduates of TVE. TVE is defined as the junior level of tertiary education and mainly focuses on two years of colleges, in which graduates receive not degrees but diplomas. Therefore, inequalities in employment make the further development of TVE difficult. It is true that TVE is challenged by the Confucian notion of OS. Development of TVE calls for an ideological transformation.

Vocationalism and TVE

Vocationalism is a belief that “state-supported education ought to do more to prepare young people for employment and be more oriented towards the full range of occupational destinations” (Coulter & Goodson, 1993, p. 1). It refracts strong political and economic impacts on higher education. The core is neo-liberalism, which is “a list of policy measures held to produce economic stability and growth” (Purdy, 2004, p. 3). Based on this rationale, “vocationalization refers to the idea of preparing for the market, and it applies to a wide range of subjects, programmes and diplomas that facilitate students’ sustainability for employment” (Kazamias, & Starida, 1992, p. 101). From the early 1990s, vocationalization of higher education has become a trend in higher education reform (Pratt, 1992; Gellert, & Rau, 1992; Lamoure, & Rontopoulou, 1992, Berg, 1992). However, “vocationalism is difficult to grasp” (Berg, 1992, p. 79). Berg (1992) argues that vocationalism can be understood at two different levels: one is institutional level, the other is curricular level. “At an institutional level people can look at the changes in the structure of the educational system by calculating the proportion of students following an academic course of study as against those taking vocational courses” (p. 79). At a curricular level, vocationalism can be understood as vocationalization of the curricula. It leads to reform in content of the curricula.

The trend of vocationalization of higher education in Western countries is at Berg’s curricular level (Pratt, 1992; Gellert, & Rau, 1992; Lamoure, & Rontopoulou, 1992, Berg, 1992). Adjusting the content of the curricula to more pragmatic in both universities and colleges is the main method. There seems, however, that something is missing in Berg’s two levels of vocationalism. For many countries, especially Western ones, the higher education system is dual. That means they have universities offer courses in academic disciplines while (most) colleges primarily offer vocational subjects (Berg, 1992). At this rate, China is a very different case. Before 1996, although the higher education system is composed of universities and colleges, there was no places for vocational education. Almost all colleges copied the model of academic/general education from universities. It reflected the lack of vocational education in a

tertiary level. So when responding to the need of a market economy and a worldwide trend of vocationalization of higher education, Chinese government must adjust the education system to reach the goal. Thus, TVE emerged in 1996, when the Law of Vocational Education was enacted. From then on, Chinese higher education system has become a dual system, which is marked by a newly established system of TVE. In this sense, I would add a third level to Berg's two levels of vocationalism. That is a system level. At this level, vocationalism can be understood as a positive factor injected into China's higher education. Besides diversifying the types of talents fostered by higher education, TVE provides access to higher education for numerous graduates from secondary vocational education, which was terminal education before TVE emerged. It is apparent that TVE is the bridge between vocational education system and higher education system. Such a connection has brought equality by helping more people realize their vertical mobilities through education. Compared with Confucianism, a major factor hindering the development of TVE, vocationalism is the dynamic for developing TVE. It is articulated in all policies that TVE is to educate students to be high-level skilled workforce for the society. "Vocationalization policies are often rooted in prevailing ideologies in society" (Lauglo, & Lillis, 1988, p. 30). Therefore, as an dispensable supplement of higher education system, TVE has impelled the ideological transformation in China's higher education.

As a matter of fact, the emergence of TVE just started to connect secondary vocational education with higher education system, because at this stage, TVE is not transferable, but terminal. Graduates of TVE are only expected to prepare for work. They do not have the opportunity to move directly to a higher level degree study after graduation. As a consequence, if TVE were transferable (now), most students would prefer to transferring to a higher level study for a degree rather than preparing for a job as the government expects. There is no doubt that at present, a transferable TVE will cause the demise of vocationalism in China. Thus the current situation of TVE as terminal education might be understood as an interim policy for the further development of TVE. In reality, with the rapid development of the global economy, new vocationalism has prevailed over vocationalism in the West.

New Vocationalism and TVE

"The competitive global economy, new forms of work organizations, and technological advancement are changes that influence postsecondary vocational education" (Yoo, 2001, p. 101). New vocationalism emerges and has gained a wide interest. As a new idea for education, new vocationalism is considered as the trend to develop community colleges [TVE] in 21st century's North America (Bragg, 2001). Bragg argues that "new vocationalism emphasizes career clusters or pathways that extend from the entry level to the professional level in career fields integral to the new economy" (2001, p. 7). Actually, China's higher education is confronting an upcoming context of new vocationalism. Hayhoe and Zha (2004) argue that Chinese universities are facing globalization. They point out that with a dramatic growth of economy under the open door policy, China does and is continuing to make an increasing contribution to the world economy in the future. All these result in the correspondent reforms in higher education to meet the requirements of a new context. Compared with vocationalism, "New vocationalism is more holistic in its educational approach by stressing complex collaborative relationships among educational sectors,

business and industry, and other entities” (Orr, 2001, p. 47). Orr (2001) suggests that community colleges [TVE] should be in the core of the complex system. According to a global competition, the future development of TVE in China might be in the same trend. In this process, the emergence of a transferable TVE, which will be the key for China to establish an integrated educational system, will be a signal for the next transformation of ideology from vocationalism to new vocationalism.

Conclusion

“Over twenty years of opening up to the world, China’s government has become more and more aware of the importance of higher education to ensuring the quality of the country’s workforce” (Hayhoe, & Zha, 2004). The emergence of TVE showed a departure from the tradition of Confucianism. However, the positive aspects of its legacy cannot be ignored, though Confucianism has been blamed as the main factor hampering the development of TVE now. “What Confucius emphasized that to be a truly educated person, one’s character must be formed by such precepts as benevolence, righteousness and integrity has been a goal of education” (Hayhoe, 1993). On the other hand, “vocationalism is critiqued because it does not provide students with a critical view of work and professions, nor with an adequate view of the role of labor in society” (Gorelick, 1998, p. 27). In terms of the positive legacy of Confucianism and the negative result of vocationalism, the ideological transformations in Chinese higher education should not be a simple replacement or combination of the news and the olds. Meanwhile, being related to different people in different areas, the ideological transformation might be consequently a systematic process of the government, the environment of employment, social recognition, and higher education (mainly in administration, curricula, students’ career consulting), etc.. Each part should not be overlooked.

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