

Education as Strategy: Vocational Reform and Social Mobility in Neoliberal China

by

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B.A., Beijing Institute of Technology, 2015

M.A., Columbia University, 2017

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək^wəḡən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək^wəḡən and W̱ SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the evolution of vocational education policies in China, analyzing how market forces, neoliberal ideology, and the centralized control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interact. I argue that while China aims to modernize and enhance its vocational education system to meet changing economic demands, these reforms serve dual purposes. On one hand, they aim to create a market-oriented education system that supports China's broader economic objectives; on the other, they direct migrant and rural populations into vocational tracks, masking deeper socio-economic divides and using education reform as a tool for political stability rather than social equity.

I situate China within the global trends of 'vocationalism' which promotes vocational education as a solution to economic and employment challenges. I then explore how vocational education reforms in China, articulated through the 1996 *Vocational Education Law* and its amendments, align with neoliberal trends that promote "suzhi" (quality) and "talent" to meet industrial demands. I also probe into China's unique governance model, which combines market-driven reforms with authoritarian controls to shape its education reform. This governance strategy allows for a prioritization of national economic objectives over educational equality and perpetuates class distinctions by directing disadvantaged groups into vocational paths.

I conclude that these reforms fail to uplift disadvantaged groups as claimed by state propaganda but only reinforce existing social stratifications. Empirical data for the thesis come from government reports, public media, secondary ethnographic literature and legal research.

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Introduction

The vocational education and training sector is considered crucial to recent economic reforms worldwide because of its direct linkage with economic developments (Chappell 2003; World Bank 2023). An effective vocational education system is recognized for its ability to serve multiple purposes such as facilitating school-to-work transitions, improving employment rates and aligning students' skills with dynamic market needs (OECD 2013). With the global youth unemployment rate reaching 14 percent in 2023, many nations are reforming and counting on the vocational education sector to better prepare students with targeted industry skills that allow them to transfer right into professional roles immediately after graduation (World Bank 2024).

As one of the world's largest and fastest-growing economies, China is actively upgrading and enhancing its vocational education and training system to keep up with the changing economic demands. This thesis argues that the evolution of vocational education policies in China reflects a strategic combination of neoliberal influences and the centralized control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By decentralizing fiscal responsibilities to local governments while maintaining strict control of the education sector, the Chinese government aims to create a market-oriented vocational education system that supports its broader economic goals. However, this strategy is implemented as the cost of directing migrant and rural populations into vocational education tracks to cover deeper socio-economic issues and the rural-urban divide. By expanding access to vocational education, the government promotes it as a tool for economic development rather than addressing the underlying inequalities.

This strategic position and economic governing logic of vocational education is rooted in the principles outlined in China's 1996 *Vocational Education Law*¹. According to the Law, vocational education is seen as an essential component of the national education system and serves as a critical driver for employment, economic development and social advancement. Since the enactment of the State Council's 2002 Decision on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education, reforming this sector has been a high priority for the Chinese government. This commitment extends through China's 14th Five-Year Plan² and the "Made in China 2025"³(MIC 25) national strategy, both of which focus on upgrading China's current manufacturing capabilities to foster greater self-reliance and transition from labour-intensive mode to a skill and technology-intensive system (Stewart 2015; Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). All these initiatives aim to develop highly skilled talents to move China's manufacturing base higher up, align vocational educational outputs with economic needs, and ultimately position China as a leading global manufacturing powerhouse (Hardy and Liu 2022; Zenglein and Holzmann 2019).

The OECD (2013) views skills as the new global currency, a view shared by the European Commission (2012), which advocates for investing in skills to improve socio-economic outcomes. As education aligns more closely with market needs, it is viewed not just as a way to acquire skills

¹ *Vocational Law of the People's Republic of China* was initially adopted at the Nineteenth Session of the Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China on May 15, 1996, accessed August 11, 2024, http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/laws_policies/201506/t20150626_191390.html Amended at Third Fourteenth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Thirteenth National People's Congress on April 20, 2022, accessed August 11, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_zcfg/zcfg_jyfl/202204/t20220421_620064.html

² Since 1953, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has issued the Five-Year Plans, which are key social and economic development blueprints for China's growth.

³ Launched in May 2015 under Xi Jinping's leadership, "Made in China 2025" is a strategic initiative aimed at evolving China from a low-tech, labour-intensive production hub into a high-tech manufacturing leader. This initiative is a part of the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans aimed at boosting China's manufacturing capabilities.

and knowledge but rather as a crucial economic investment (Kauppinen 2014). This neoliberal shift has redefined the understanding of education from a collective social responsibility provided by the state to an individual investment strategy. Students and parents now evaluate their educational choices based on potential financial returns, much like any other financial investment (Anagnost 2013). This transformation has made students into consumers in the educational market, where they consider the costs and expected benefits of their educational choices (Bansel 2007).

This market-oriented perspective on education has become widely accepted and is now normalized within policy and public discourses (Dill 2003; Steier 2003). Accompanying this shift, neoliberal reforms such as decentralization, marketization and privatization, are embraced by many countries to reform their education sector with a priority of market forces (L. Wang 2010). The treatment of education as a commodity reflects a broader neoliberal ideology that challenges traditional state-guaranteed public services and redefines citizenship (Chubb and Moe 2011). Within this framework, citizens are seen as entrepreneurial actors within the market, responsible for their own well-being and success based on market dynamics (Rose 1993; 1996). This shift changes the relationship between the state and its citizens, especially in the redefinition of rights and responsibilities within traditionally state-guaranteed sectors.

Despite significant government support and endorsement, vocational education remains underappreciated by the general public and is less favored by students and parents within China's education market. It is commonly perceived as an inferior level of education and labeled as 'education for the less able', with vocational graduates even stigmatized as hooligans (Chen and Pastore 2024; Ling 2015; Woronov 2015). This negative perception, entrenched by a long-standing tradition of degrading vocational graduates, makes lower secondary graduates reluctant to pursue a vocational credential unless their academic performance prevents them from obtaining an

academic degree (Ling 2015; Hansen and Woronov 2013). Many studies demonstrate that students from vocational backgrounds often face greater precariousness in their jobs and earn less in comparison to their academic counterparts (G. Wang and Wang 2023; Ling 2015; Koo 2016).

Contrasting with the societal view, the Chinese government and state-monopolized media both promote vocational education as the engine for economic growth and social development and paint it as an effective way for graduates to enhance their well-being. President Xi has repeatedly emphasized vocational education's significance, stating at national education conferences that it is an essential part of the national education system and offers an important pathway for young people to succeed and achieve. In 2021, he once again affirmed that vocational graduates have a 'broad future and great potential' (Xinhua News 2021c). Despite such high-level endorsements, the disparity between the public's perception and the official narrative suggests a significant disconnect that affects the societal value placed on vocational education.

Despite prevailing negative perceptions and the often precarious or working-class jobs in which vocational graduates find themselves, the state remains committed to directing more students toward vocational education. Policy directives actively push for a balanced enrollment strategy between general high schools and secondary vocational schools, aiming for a 50-50 ratio to channel more students into vocational tracks. This approach is designed to create a workforce with diverse skills that can support China's evolving economic demands. Moreover, the Ministry of Education's 2022 White Paper on the Development of Vocational Education in China revealed that 70% of vocational students come from rural areas, a statistic celebrated as a major success (MoE 2022e). The high enrollment rate of rural students in vocational education is seen as a key driver for rural revitalization, equipping these students with skills to contribute to their local economies (MoE 2022e).

To support this strategy, in 2006, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education co-initiated significant financial aid measures, establishing a comprehensive financial aid framework to assist economically disadvantaged rural students in completing their vocational education (MoE 2008a). According to the Ministry of Education, this system is aimed to expand access and contribute to educational equity. However, it also deliberately targets rural and migrant students and places them to serve the broader political objective of transforming vocational education into a tool for cultivating a skilled and adaptable workforce. This workforce is intended to propel China's industrial and economic ambitions by aligning educational outcomes closely with the country's developmental needs.

This thesis critically examines China's vocational education reform. By examining the changing vocational education policies, I aim to assess its role in promoting social equality, challenging whether vocational education reform genuinely uplifts disadvantaged groups as officially claimed. As many scholars have examined the role of vocational education in either perpetuating or challenging existing social stratifications, my analysis contributes by identifying the targeted population of the policies and adds to the discussion of societal implications of vocational education reforms to certain demographic groups.

Furthermore, understanding how vocational education is positioned within China's economic strategy provides insights into how the state understands and uses educational policy as a tool for economic modernization and industrial upgrading. By analyzing current vocational education policies and Laws and tracking their historical evolution, I aim to add to the empirical discussion of the evolution of some key terms such as '*suzhi*' and 'talent' throughout vocational education reforms and assess their changing effects on official discourse and public perceptions.

Moreover, it is important to investigate the CCP's governance model and understand how authoritarian control integrates with market-driven reforms in the context of vocational education reform. This unique form of governance offers a unique case study in the integration of neoliberal principles with centralized political control. My analysis also speaks to the literature on how neoliberal ideas are adapted or manifested in non-Western, authoritarian settings, contributing to a broader discussion on governance models in the literature on political economy.

The following major research questions will guide this thesis, with each chapter breaking them down into more detailed questions:

- 1) How do educational policies in China, especially vocational education reflect the intersection of market principles, authoritarian governance and global neoliberal trends?
- 2) How have the evolving definitions of key terms such as 'talent' and '*suzhi*' in vocational and higher education laws since 1996 reflected changes in policy direction, and how do these align with China's strategic goals for industrial and manufacturing advancement?
- 3) What factors influenced the recent amendments to the *Vocational Education Law*, and how have these changes affected the educational and social outcomes for migrant students in the context of China's neoliberal reforms?

Through exploring these major research questions, I will engage with literature on human capital theory, particularly Gary Becker's (1994) concept of how education links with employability and income by enhancing people's productive capacities and market value. I will also speak to the critics of this theory, such as Down (2009), Gillies (2011) and Livingstone (1999), who argue that it overly focuses on the economic value and transforming education into

a mere mechanism for economic advancement.

I will also situate my analysis in the context of neoliberalism and the global trend of vocationalism which focuses on the prioritization of job-specific skills. Drawing on Harvey's (2005) definition of neoliberalism and the perspectives of Rose (1993; 1996), Ong (2003; 2007) and Rofel (2007), I will examine how neoliberalism, as the key driving force behind global educational reforms transforms state-citizen relationships and manifests uniquely across different cultures. These perspectives will help me investigate China's particular approach to neoliberalism which merges authoritarian governance with capitalist market principles, and understand how this prompts the transformation of the state's role in education, shifting towards sole provider to facilitator (G. Wang and Wang 2023, 408; Harvey 2005).

Additionally, I will engage with the literature regarding the concept of '*suzhi*' (quality) which is central to contemporary Chinese governance and society. The Chinese government uses *suzhi* to shift the focus away from discussions of social class and structuring and categorizing its citizens officially (Kipnis 2007; 2006; Jacka 2009; Anagnost 2004; 2008; Woronov 2015). Relying on these scholarly works, I will examine how '*suzhi*' has evolved in official policies and explore its implications.

Focusing on the government-sponsored development of vocational education, I aim to examine both the social and ideological dimensions of this state initiative and identify the hidden and changing intentions behind it. One central theme running through the analysis would be the Chinese state's attempt to transition itself from a direct, omnipresent governing style to a more indirect approach that influences industry and enterprise involvement in vocational education. This governance strategy also extends to encourage and scaffold rural populations to seek vocational education as a path to achieve their goals. Beyond economic rationales, vocational education

reform also aims to produce new citizens capable of actively transforming themselves into high-quality human capital to contribute to the national economic and social ambitions (Yan 2008).

At the center of this analysis lies the state's attempt to create vocational institutions compatible with the market economy while normalizing and managing class disparities brought by the uneven economic development (T. Woronov 2015; Hong 2010). This strategy in essence focused on market efficiency at the expense of upward mobility of rural and migrant populations. Despite significant investments in vocational education aimed at increasing educational opportunities for these groups, the reform is in effect using education justice as camouflage. All the decentralization experiments aimed to divert social resources towards reinforcing and legitimizing the capitalist accumulation process. Targeting China's rural migrant students, the vocational education reform is designed to offer practical solutions to the socio-economic challenges exacerbated by China's neoliberal economic growth. Ultimately, the essence of these policies is to gradually integrate and co-opt citizens and societies into the broader market-driven agenda in the long run (Jayasuriya 2006; Hong 2010)

Methodology

In this thesis, I aim to apply a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative analysis to investigate the increasing role of vocational education in Chinese education policy. To meet my research objectives, I aim to use a combination of discourse and thematic analysis and keyword frequency analysis to dissect three educational laws, namely the 1996 *Vocational Education Law*, its 2022 amendment and the *Higher Education Law*.

I will start by using thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying and organizing insight into patterns of meaning or themes across a data set (Braun and Clarke 2012;

Byrne 2022). This method reveals collective or shared meanings and themes within the three laws, connecting them to the broader theoretical and conceptual frameworks such as neoliberalism and allowing me to have a deeper understanding of the laws' intended objectives and their changing language use. I conducted this analysis with NVivo 14, by familiarizing myself with the texts of the three laws. Through detailed coding, I identified and made notes regarding relevant data points and categorized them into emergent themes. By organizing and comparing my codes, some major patterns and themes emerged during the process that related to the evolution of several key concepts such as '*suzhi*', 'talent', 'entrepreneurship' and 'industry engagement'.

For the keywords frequency analysis, I employ Python and the Jieba library for keyword frequency analysis. This approach selects the most significant words from the text of the three laws without reference to any predetermined vocabulary, ensuring that the analysis is directly rooted in the documents' content (Siddiqi and Sharan 2015). This quantitative method helps me to strengthen the thematic analysis and provide an empirical basis to support and validate the identified themes as well as identify any keywords or key information that may have been overlooked in the thematic analysis.

Besides the above-mentioned two methods, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the primary approach to explore my research objectives. In general, CDA critically examines the ways in which language, ideas and practices create and reproduce meaning within social institutions, framing these elements in a specific historical context (Halperin and Heath 2020, 365). In exploring the three laws, this analysis will dissect language use, and compare keywords and themes of the three laws to understand the underlying power dynamics and authority relations that influence the hierarchical structure and reform of vocational education in China.

I will primarily focus on the discourses of ‘*suzhi*’, ‘talent’ and the increasing emphasis and requirement on industry participation and engagement in the vocational education sector.

The following section provides an explanation of data collection, data pre-processing and filtering methods, and tools used for conducting the analysis. Figure 1 illustrates a graphical representation of the process.

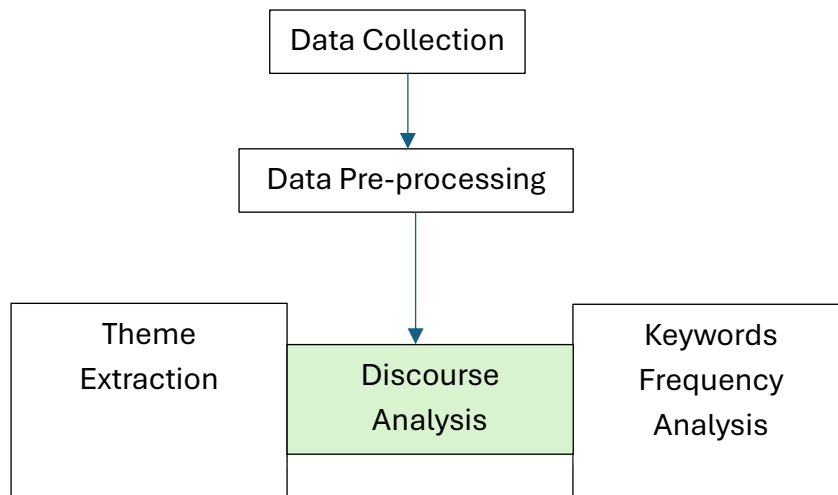


Figure 1. The Flowchart of the Methodology

Data collection

The data sets for this analysis consist of three educational laws sourced from the official Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China’s website. Given that all the authoritative versions of these documents are in simplified Chinese and only the 1996 *Vocational Education Law* has an authorized English version, I will conduct data processing in Chinese to preserve data integrity. This approach aims to prevent the loss of critical information and keywords that often occur during translation. For the results and discussion sections, I translate the findings into English, referencing the officially approved translation of the 1996 *Vocational Education Law* to ensure accuracy and consistency in translating key terms.

I will also use other empirical data sources to support my analysis. Primary data will be sourced from official government websites, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission of China. These agencies were key ministries that participated in the amendment process of the *Vocational Education Law*. Furthermore, the annual statistical bulletin on educational spending and basic statistics of vocational education published by the Ministry of Education will also be the foundational data for my analysis.

Given the state-monopolized nature of media in China, mainstream news outlets such as the China Daily and Xinhua News often reflect governmental perspectives on critical issues such as education. I will also use these reports to complement the analysis of policy stances. Furthermore, to deepen the understanding of the lived experience of migrant vocational students, I will also incorporate secondary ethnographic data. This will include studies conducted in vocational schools across China which will help me understand how rural migrant students navigate the process of inclusion and exclusion in vocational schools.

Data pre-processing

To prepare the data, I first transformed the original documents from the Ministry's website into text format for better processing. I then started by importing the raw data into the Python environment and cleaned the data by removing whitespaces, special characters, punctuations, and common but non-relevant words (like "the, in, a, an, and" etc.) to ensure the data quality. To accommodate the nuances of the Chinese language, I used the Jieba library, a specialized tool for Chinese text segmentation, to better help with the data processing and analysis. The Jieba library can help me segment the Chinese text into individual words and

phrases and establish clear word boundaries in the Chinese script, typically devoid of such markers. This processing resulted in a clean and structured dataset ready for further analysis.

I then employed Python's 'collection' module to count the occurrences of each word, which helped identify the most prominent keywords in the documents. With the frequency analysis results in hand, I extracted the most significant keywords from all three laws. These keywords were then cross-referenced with my thematic analysis to get the most relevant and critical terms for further discourse analysis.

Preliminary Chapter Breakdown

The thesis is divided into three major chapters, building on the major research questions introduced in the previous section. In the first chapter, I argue that the evolution of vocational education policies in China represents a sophisticated balance between neoliberal influences and the authoritative governance of the CCP. This balance allows for a mixed governance approach where certain government responsibilities are decentralized to foster market-oriented and employment-focused educational frameworks, while others are tightly controlled to align with China's national economic strategies and political stability. I draw upon Karlsen (2000) and Hawkins's (2000) concept of 'decentralized centralism' to discuss the implications of such governance styles in the reform of vocational education in China. I have used statistical data from sources like the Ministry of Education and the State Council to provide quantitative insights, such as the number of vocational educational schools and enrollment figures to reflect the impact of policy changes. I have also traced the evolution of China's major vocational education policy objectives to illustrate how this mixed governance style manages decentralization alongside retaining central control. Overall, the first chapter provides background information on the dynamics influencing China's educational reforms.

The second chapter discusses and compares the evolution of China's *Vocational Education Laws* with *Higher Education Law*. I argue that these legal changes align more closely with neoliberal trends and their emphasis on the development of 'suzhi' (quality) and 'talent' is to meet the industrial and economic needs of China. This emphasis also shows a shift towards market-driven and pragmatic approaches, particularly focusing on vocational education's integration with industrial and economic demands. I used statistical analysis of keyword frequencies across the three Laws to track shifts in the discourse. Drawing upon the discussion by Kipnis (2006; 2007), Anagnost (2004), Woronov (2015) and Yan (2008), I explore how 'suzhi' can be understood as a tool for constructing new social hierarchies under neoliberal governance and how it is implicated in educational Laws and public discourse. My analysis contributes to the understanding of how educational Laws respond to neoliberal principles and economic demands and adds to the discussion of how vocational education is strategically positioned to fulfill the demands of a neoliberal market economy while encouraging and forging certain types of citizens.

The third chapter focuses on the complex process behind the amendment of China's *Vocational Education Law*, the dynamics that influenced the reform process and its impact on migrant students. I argue that the rationale behind the government's push for vocational education reform is to create an "inclusive" social institution for rural populations that aligns with the state's priority of developing and enhancing its market economy. The government is trying to use vocational education to bypass the actual problem of the rural-urban divide and inequality rather than addressing the actual issue. I used empirical data from both government reports and mainstream media to explore the amendment process of the *Vocational Education Law*. It contributes to a better understanding of the hidden motives and conflicts that influenced the legislation. I also draw on Woronov (2015) and Hong's (2010) work to analyze how vocational

education serves as a tool for social stratification and class stability. Using ethnographic research by Woronov (2011a; 2015) and Ling (2015), I explore the gap between official discourse and students' actual schooling experience. The discussion on migrant students adds to the literature on educational stratification and social mobility, showing how state policies can reinforce existing class structures.

In the conclusion, I re-state the main argument of the thesis and point to some of its limitations and areas for future research. I argue that this state-led development of vocational education programs serves as a governance strategy aimed at directing rural populations to pursue vocational education as a way to fulfill their aspirations. The objective is to produce new citizens who can actively transform themselves into human capital to support the country's developmental needs (Yan 2008). Using education justice as camouflage, the expended access to vocational education for rural and migrant populations is often reluctantly accepted by these groups as their least and only viable option. This acceptance is not voluntary but is driven by a lack of alternatives among the rising credential inflation, where vocational education becomes a forced choice rather than a desired one. While this approach might temporarily address class disparities, its long-term effectiveness is questionable. Such measures might manage the current socioeconomic discrepancies but are not a lasting or right solution to the underlying issues affecting these populations.

Chapter 1 Educational Reforms and State Strategy in Neoliberal China

1. Introduction

Many scholars and international organizations such as the OECD (2006) and the World Bank (2007) have investigated the evolving role of education in primarily serving the economy while often neglecting its social and developmental responsibilities (Lynch 2006; Slaughter 1985; Olssen and Peters 2005; Dill 2003). The view that education is gradually turning into a market commodity has become normalized in both policy and public discourses (Dill 2003; Steier 2003). At the same time, neoliberalism introduces a new concept of citizenship that conflicts with the state-guaranteed rights in sectors such as education, health and welfare (Chubb and Moe 2011). Within this neoliberal framework, citizens are seen as economic maximizers and entrepreneurial actors, responsible for their own well-being and success based on market dynamics (Rose 1993; 1996). This ideology turns the state from a direct controller to a facilitator that supports market-driven and individual-centric approaches (Rose 1993; 1996; Rutherford 2005). Universities are expected to enhance their 'productivity' by preparing students for 'high-tech and high-return' careers, increasing channels for research funding, and contributing more to public service through research that fosters industrial development (Slaughter 1985). Moreover, it is becoming a common phenomenon that in many countries, even educational institutions funded by the public sector are expected to actively seek additional funding from private sources (Lynch 2006).

China is no exception to this trend. Since the late 1970s, transformative market reforms transitioning from a planned to a market economy brought about substantial shifts in governmental practices and priorities (Hannum and Park 2012). Since then, China has adopted a distinct form of neoliberalism that combines authoritarian governance with capitalist market principles (G. Wang and Wang 2023, 408; Harvey 2005). Within this framework, while the economy has embraced neoliberal principles such as marketization, privatization and urbanization, the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP) remains a firm control to adapt or assert its influence whenever necessary. This hybrid model allows for economic openness to foster growth yet ensures that such developments adhere to the strategic and ideological objectives of the CCP. This control serves multiple purposes, not only aligning educational outcomes with the state's broader political and economic objectives but also acting as an essential way to carry out the CCP's ideology and dominant position (Svensson 2023; X. Liu 2020a).

This blend has also allowed the Chinese government to reshape class relations and institutional frameworks to support a market economy while maintaining and arguably strengthening the authoritarian rule, in collaboration with the bureaucratic and transnational capital (Hong 2010). Many argue that this transition goes beyond mere economic reform, but also has changed how the public sector is managed and how social and educational policies are formulated (Wong and Flynn 2001; So 2003). During this transformative period, China's educational system shifted from a mechanism primarily promoting state ideologies to supporting economic and social development, which impacted social mobility and exacerbated inequality across the country. This effect was largely due to vocational education policies targeting rural and migrant students. These groups are used to support the current capital accumulation by aligning their skills with the needs of the industrial sector to ensure a supply of labour that meets economic needs (Hannum and Park 2012).

Many studies have investigated China's educational policies and transformation, focusing predominantly on their economic and social impacts or the outcomes of educational reforms (Koo 2016; Bai 2006; G. Wang and Wang 2023). However, in China, political factors are crucial for understanding the changes and ideological foundations that drive these changes in the education sector (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). Therefore, this chapter not only aims to

explore the educational reforms in China over the past three decades in the context of globalization and neoliberalism but also the dynamics between educational institutions and the CCP. Specifically, I have the following research questions:

- 4) How do educational policies in China reflect the intersection of market principles and authoritarian governance?
- 5) How has the relationship between educational institutions and the CCP evolved in the context of China's market reforms and global neoliberal trends?
- 6) In what ways have decentralization experiments in China's educational sector impacted the autonomy and governance of educational institutions?

The relationship between education and the CCP is complex. Unlike in liberal democracies where academic freedom is upheld as a fundamental right, in China's authoritarian regime, education is strategically aligned to serve both the political and economic objectives of the state (Sujian Guo 2012; X. Liu 2020a). This alignment leads to a more controlled and complex approach where educational goals are often shaped by national objectives.

Furthermore, in this chapter, I also aim to discuss the decentralization efforts in both higher vocational education sectors and explore the increasing involvement of non-state actors in education. This transition reflects a broader trend of reducing direct state control over education while still maintaining significant influence through mechanisms such as the presence of Party secretaries within educational institutions. To explore the evolving relationship between the education sector and the Party-state and assess the influence of the CCP across all levels of educational governance, I aim to tease out the most important question of how educational reforms and policies in China are tied to the overarching objectives of the Party-state. Additionally, I will

examine how these educational policies adapt and change in response to both the nation's internal priorities and its response to the global economic environment.

2. Education and the Chinese Communist Party State

2.1 Overview of the relationship between education and the CCP

In general, the political dynamics that influence educational reform are shaped by various political factors and policy-making processes, such as legislative procedures and stakeholder negotiations (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). According to Kingdon (1985), political factors within any system can be categorized into governmental and non-governmental actors. In the context of China, the governmental actors include the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the People's Congress and governments at various levels. The non-governmental actors include international organizations, transnational institutions, the media, interest groups, and the general public (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015).

Expanding on this framework, the governance of China operates through a parallel structure that combines administration with the CCP's organizational framework (X. Liu 2020a). The CCP maintains organizational structures at central, local and primary levels with each having its own Party organizations (X. Liu 2020a). Party and the government are closely intertwined and their functions are largely combined into one body, often referred to as the 'Party-state', which emphasizes the Party's dominant influence and establishes the basic structure of state power (Sujian Guo 2012). This hierarchy extends from the national level down to local governments and is organized through administrative divisions from national to provincial, and city to county levels. The operational aspect of governance is directed by various Ministries under the State Council and CCP Committees, which supervise subordinate units responsible for specific roles (X. Liu 2020a).

According to Liu (2017) and Guo (2012), the CCP works with all levels of government, using a network of Party organizations to implement policies to achieve national goals while at the same time controlling every level of government through this network from top to bottom. All state-owned institutions, including educational institutions and state-owned companies, also follow this structured governance. Therefore, the CCP is involved in various sectors such as education, public health, and the economy through its centralized leadership and network (X. Liu 2020a). This centralized political power enables governance across all sectors of the country.

In this sense, education in China is political in nature. Any reform within the education sector involves the need to address the relationship between educational policies and the Party-state. According to Huang, Wang and Li (2015), China has a long tradition of centralized educational policy during the Mao period. Education was simply perceived as a tool to promote state ideologies at that time. The Party-state has maintained exclusive control over the provision, funding, and administration of education (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). However, with the economic reform initiated in the 1970s, there was soon a series of experiments with different levels and extents of decentralization in the education system which aimed to fulfill the demands of the marketization of the economy (Hawkins 2000). In the meantime, Naughton (2008) observes that the CCP hierarchy was also evolving during this economic transition. The CCP is not isolated but rather actively shaped and adapted to the market transition, with the political hierarchy itself and its practices undergoing modifications in response to economic changes.

In 1985, the CCP issued the Decision on the Reform of the Educational System as the first step to experiment the decentralization in the education sector. The policy document proposed the

concept of a nine-year compulsory education⁴ and advocated for decentralizing the finances and management of primary and secondary education to local governments (MoE 2019). While the policy signals a trend towards decentralization, the discourse within the policy document still ambiguously emphasizes the CCP's dominant role in setting major policies and principles. Therefore, critics argue that this movement of the central government only shifted the financial responsibilities to local governments rather than delegating actual decision-making power (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015; Hawkins 2000). However, Mok (1997) contends that this transfer of financial and management power to the local level is a strong signal indicating that the state was intentionally withdrawing from its role as the sole provider of social services.

Following this experiment, the State Council released the Regulations for Running Schools Operated by Social Forces in 1997. This regulation promoted the involvement of various sectors of society such as corporations, social organizations, groups or individuals in funding and establishing private schools (State Council 1997). In 2002, the Law on the Promotion of Non-Public Schools of China⁵ was enacted. This Law specified that investors could receive reasonable returns from the profits of private schools in compliance with existing state regulations. These two regulations reflected the state's further move towards educational decentralization, explicitly involving the actual delegation of powers and fostering alignment between education and societal needs (Dong 2020). As a result, many private schools emerged in China during this period and

⁴In mainland China, there is a policy of nine-year compulsory education policy. This means that all students over six years old are entitled to free education at both primary schools (grades 1 to 6) and junior secondary schools (grades 7 to 9). The policy is funded by the government, so students do not have to pay tuition fees. In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China was promulgated, accessed August 11, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_zcfg/zcfg_jyfl/202110/t20211029_575949.html

⁵The Law of the People's Republic of China on Promotion of Non-public Schools was adopted at the 31st Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China on December 28th, 2002. The purpose of the law was to promote and support the development of private and non-governmental schools in China, accessed August 11, 2024, http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_zcfg/zcfg_jyfl/202204/t20220421_620261.html

education has gradually become a market commodity provided by competitive suppliers (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). Therefore, the cost and access to education started being influenced by market forces, and students gradually transformed into consumers who made choices based on their preferences and financial capacity (K.-H. Mok 1997).

Contrary to Hanson's (1998) proposed typical motivations for education decentralization, which include strengthening democracy, improving efficiency, redistribution of financial responsibility and promoting innovation and school-based development, many scholars argue that China's decentralization is motivated primarily by pragmatic principles, focusing on addressing the problem of insufficient resources with the ultimate goal of shifting the financial burden from central to local levels (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015; Hawkins 2000; Lai and Lo 2006). Furthermore, Hawkins (2000) contends that although China's decentralization generally aligns with Hanson (1998)'s definition of transferring authority, it remains ambiguous whether this process can be considered a full devolution. He further argues that in a system dominated by a single party like the CCP in China, it is unlikely that a true devolution of authority can happen (Hawkins 2000). This restrained decentralization is evident as the state maintains control over education, even within the private sector. Through the examination system, the state is able to extend its influence on private schools. Public examinations largely shape textbook selection and teaching content across all schools. Facing market competition, private schools are compelled to prioritize academic performance and enrollment rates to enhance their status (Wong Lai-ngok 2004). This focus on exam results effectively limits the autonomy of private schools in both curriculum and teaching.

Mok (1997) also contends that the rationale behind this decentralization was ideologies of market-oriented managerialism and economic rationalism emphasizing efficiency and competition. This distinct form of decentralization has its weaknesses and problems. Decentralization seems to

function well in economically prosperous areas, but less developed regions often find themselves struggling with resources and hoping for greater state involvement (Hawkins 2000). This led to the situation that certain provinces requested help from the central government to take more responsibility for the costs and management of education, a move that signals the potential change from decentralization back to re-centralization (Kai-Ming 1994).

Furthermore, this series of decentralization experiments also raised concerns in Beijing about the quality of education, especially in private schools where government oversight is limited (Hawkins 2000). Huang (2015) argues that decentralization in China does not necessarily lead to a diminished role of the state. On the contrary, the CCP remains a major player through various strategies of re-centralization or re-regulation. The central government used various governance strategies such as setting national standards, assessments and inspections to maintain its influence. Hawkins (2000) argues that the central government retains the ability to swiftly reassert its influence whenever necessary. Even private schools, which comparatively have more autonomy in setting educational goals, are still regulated by the Ministry of Education and the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education* (Wong Lai-ngok 2004). These regulations require them to submit annual reports and undergo annual inspections by local departments of education, human resources and social security. Following this reasoning, Karlsen (2000) proposed the framework of 'decentralized centralism' to interpret the Chinese government's role in educational reform. There were both elements of decentralizing and centralizing happening at the same time through the educational decentralization process. Specifically, while the central government sets national goals and standards for outcomes, the responsibility for implementation is delegated to local governments (Karlsen 2000; Hawkins 2000). Interestingly, while local governments hold more autonomy in policy implementation, the central government still holds the

key strategic powers. This decentralization often comes with a strong reassertion of central guidelines and regulations to ensure that local actions are consistent with national goals (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015; Ball 2008).

Although China's transition from a planned to a market economy has resulted in notable changes in government practices, the country's hierarchical and centralized political system continues to ensure that the central government retains significant control over the direction of educational reforms. Naughton (2008) argues that it is because critical economic and education policies are crafted by national leaders operating within the framework of an authoritarian political system. Therefore, the essential features and underlying rationales for these evolving policies are shaped by the political system's structure, showing how political considerations deeply impact policy direction in such a regime (Naughton 2008). This characteristic is particularly evident in the amendment process of the *Vocational Education Law*, which I will explore in the next two chapters.

2.2 China's Education in the Global Context of Neoliberalism

2.2.1 Higher Education in the Context of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is another crucial factor affecting the state's role in educational reform. According to Harvey (2005, 2) neoliberalism, as a theory of political economic practices, advocates strong private property rights, free markets and free trade as foundational economic practices. While China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 marketed its official transition to a market economy, it is important to note that neoliberal practices had already been introduced earlier under Deng's leadership. The WTO entry represented a continuation and acceleration of this ongoing process and started a new era of neoliberalization (Harvey 2005). This transition led to industrialization, urbanization, mass migration and privatization, all driven by the

global economic demands (Guo and Guo 2016). As a result of these changes, China has become the world's largest export country and now ranks as the second-largest economy worldwide (Pantekoek, Bartmann, and Lanz 2022). As China adapted to these global trends, the country is deeply integrated with the global economy and enhanced its connection with the rest of the world. These changes were not only political and economic but also happening in social and cultural spheres, affecting sectors like education (Guo and Guo 2016).

According to Newman (1996), higher education institutions naturally possess an international character since they engage with universally applicable knowledge. Therefore, universities are inevitably involved in an ongoing process of internationalization. According to the MoE (2020) statistics, over 703,500 Chinese tertiary students were studying abroad in 2019, making China a leading source of international students worldwide. By the academic years 2022 and 2023, China continued to be the largest contributor of international students, especially in the United States, with approximately 289,000 students holding this leading position for 15 consecutive years (China Daily 2024).

The rising number of Chinese international students in Western universities is not the only indicator of how China is embracing the internationalization of higher education and neoliberalism. The various strategic policy documents issued by the Chinese State Council also documented China's changes. In 2010, the State Council issued the National Program for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reforms and Development 2010-2020, which clearly stated that one of the objectives of the Plan was to leverage higher education to enhance the international competitiveness of the labour forces in response to the demands of the knowledge economy (State

Council 2010). In 2011, the 12th Five-Year Plan⁶ (2011-2015) stated goals to develop world-class universities and establish globally recognized centers for scientific and technological innovation (State Council 2011). Furthering these efforts, in 2019, China's Education Modernization 2035 Plan also proposed new pathways for integrating education with the global community such as enhancing international exchanges and cooperation, improving services for students studying abroad, and promoting international qualifications recognition (State Council 2019a). Wang (2014) argues that following China's transition to the market economy, the Chinese government's understanding of higher education has evolved from recognizing changes in global dynamics to using education as a tool to boost economic competitiveness, and ultimately shifted towards improving China's international status.

Following this internationalization trend, many scholars argue that higher education is transforming into an internationally traded commodity that consumers purchase to equip themselves with market-relevant skills (Altbach 2002; K.-H. Mok 1997). Accompanying this shift, neoliberal reforms such as decentralization, marketization, and privatization are embraced by many countries to restructure higher education with a priority placed on market forces (L. Wang 2010). Higher education institutions across different nations are now expected to align with national interests within the global market, placing a greater emphasis on the practical and technical aspects of higher education (Currie 2004). This shift reflects the broader project of individualism under neoliberalism. In this sense, people began to see educational achievements as something they should achieve on their own rather than 'public good' (Chiang, Papadakis, and Drakaki 2023). Many scholars who study new forms of governmentality in China have

⁶ The 12th Five-Year Plan of China was a set of economic goals designed to strengthen the Chinese economy between 2011 to 2015, accessed August 11, 2024, <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gifzgh/201109/P020191029595702423333.pdf>

observed the change where individuals now hold more responsibilities than once held by the state (Burchell et al. 1991; Woronov 2009; 2015). This trend, often referred to as ‘responsibilization’, is identified as a worldwide pattern as a part of broader neoliberal changes (Anagnost 2013; Lemke 2002; Woronov 2015). Many argue that this regulatory involvement also reflects the governmentality that influences how people see and think about themselves, guiding their decisions and behaviours, as reflected in the development of the human capital discourse and neoliberalism (Chiang, Papadakis, and Drakaki 2023; Burchell et al. 1991).

Xu’s (2011) research highlights how China’s universities are adapting to neoliberal governance by establishing career guidance centers that prioritize graduate employment rates, which have become a key indicator of university performance. This phenomenon not only reflects broader neoliberal policies but also transforms students as subjects directly influenced by market dynamics, where their success in the labour market critically impacts the perceived quality and reputation of their universities (F. Xu 2011). This approach is justified by the substantial impact higher education has on developing human capital, as a productive and adaptable workforce is crucial for economic development in a global market, especially as industries evolve and new opportunities emerge (Bloom 2004).

At the same time, with the central government’s experiments on decentralization, various sectors of society from corporations to social organizations and individuals were encouraged to invest in and establish private schools. The 1998 *Higher Education Law* formally introduced the concept of privately run higher education institutions. Following this, the establishment of joint ventures between domestic and international higher education institutions was further allowed (Lynch 2006). This expansion of educational providers has also led to the rise of transnational higher education and a broader trend of privatization within China’s higher education system (Mok

and Han 2017). According to the MoE's statistics, in 2022, private colleges and universities represent 25.36% of all higher education institutions in China. These private institutions in total enroll 9,248,900 students and account for 25.27% of the total enrollment in general undergraduate programs nationwide (MoE 2022a). Additionally, transnational higher education, as defined by UNESCO and the Council of Europe (2001), includes all types of higher educational programs where students are based in a different country from that of the degree-awarding institution. This form of education has been established in China since the 1980s. The number of transnational higher education programs has grown significantly, increasing from 2 programs in 1995 to 1176 by 2016 (MoE 2016).

Although neoliberalism is often discussed in the context of shaping state policies, there is also an ongoing debate about state governance and its relationship with rising global international organizations (Green 2007). Multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are increasingly influential in setting international educational agendas such as specific goals like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (K. King 2007). China has significantly enhanced its participation in these organizations after entering the WTO. The Chinese government intentionally plays a more active role in international dialogues and contributes to the development of educational policies, regulations, and standards, impacting both regional and international education frameworks (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). Some argue that such international influence erodes state power by aligning national policies with global market and organizational standards (Chimni 2004; Alvarez 2006). Others believe that states still remain a strong authority and are capable of maintaining control over their domestic agendas and managing the changes brought by

globalization (Scholte 2005). Huang (2015) contends that although some state powers and responsibilities are increasingly being shared by international or multinational entities, this does not necessarily indicate a weakened or decentralized Chinese state. In fact, the central government's concern is not to enhance or decrease the state's role but rather to identify which specific state functions need to be enhanced or weakened during this process (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). Jayasuriya (2001) criticizes this debate for failing to explore the relationship between globalization and state structures, noting that current perspectives fail to address how state structures are evolving with the new global political economy. Furthermore, Wang (2010) points out that it is important to recognize not just the potential shifts in state power, but also the transformation of state forms. These transformations are reactions to the dual pressures of maintaining control and adapting to the changing context of globalization (L. Wang 2010).

Following this reasoning, Li (2016) argues that the process of internationalizing higher education reveals distinct interactions between Chinese higher education institutions and the government, which is different from that seen in Western contexts. A major difference is the dual role of Chinese education institutions, particularly public universities, which actually function both as academic bodies and as extensions of the government implementing state policies and objectives (F. Li 2016). A key strategy in the reform of Chinese higher education has been the implementation of government ranking systems, which allocate and prioritize central funding to a select group of targeted institutions (Pringle and Woodman 2022). This system includes specialized initiatives at select universities such as Project 211⁷ and 985⁸, with the central government conducting annual

⁷ Project 211 is an initiative by the Chinese government to strengthen around 100 key institutions of higher education and key academic disciplines as a national priority. There are 112 universities in this project.

⁸ Project 985 was another higher education development and funding program launched by the Chinese central government. The goal was to create world-class universities in China. There were 39 universities in this project. Both these two projects involve the national and local governments allocating large amounts of funding to them to support the development of these universities.

reviews and evaluations to monitor the educational quality and operations of these institutions (Tian and Liu 2019). This institutionalized, government-backed ranking system not only elevates the status of these universities but also aligns them closely with the state's objectives. During the 1990s, educational reforms in China expanded higher education and placed these high-priority institutions under direct control by the Ministry of Education. Meanwhile, the fiscal responsibility and governance of other institutions were decentralized to provincial and local educational authorities (Pringle and Woodman 2022). Top-ranking universities receive substantial resources from the central government, while others experience funding disparities. This disparity reflects the patterns of uneven development and hierarchical city ranking in China, which are both administrative and symbolic (Pringle and Woodman 2022)

Tian and Liu (2019)'s research points out that despite efforts towards decentralization, the central government still holds a dominant role in higher education, including planning, guiding and regulating the higher education system. The central government not only provides a large amount of funding for public higher education institutions but also designs overall educational strategies and frameworks. According to Li, the influence of government regulation and oversight is penetrated into the daily operation of Chinese educational institutions, driven by the central government's political concerns and economic considerations (F. Li 2016). Wang's study (2010) also finds that the Chinese government dominates the higher education system in many aspects, with only minimal intervention from the market forces. This leads to a particular dynamic where decentralization and centralization are happening at the same time. When the central government aims to design and implement 'strategically important' policies to secure the state's legitimacy and maintain control over economic and social activities, the local educational institutions are required to come up with their own strategies which align with the framework of the national ones (K. H.

Mok and Han 2017; K.-H. Mok 1997; Hawkins 2000). Despite ongoing educational reforms within the broader neoliberal framework, the central government continues to be the major provider and regulator of higher education, just as it is for the whole public education sector (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015; F. Li 2016).

2.2.2 Vocational Education in the Context of Neoliberalism

As Brown and Lauder argue (2006), the world has already transitioned into a global knowledge economy, changing from an economy reliant on low-skilled labour to one requiring high-level skills. This new economy, based on Livingstone's (1999) idea, is characterized by four core features: knowledge-driven production; the increasing importance of higher education credentials; a more sophisticated professional and technical workforce; and elevated skills requirements for employment. Warhurst (2008) contends that the knowledge economy is now a central element of global policy. Traditional resources alone are insufficient to sustain a country's development; instead, the focus is shifting towards the development of knowledge and skills to promote social stability and economic development (Warhurst 2008). Policymakers have begun to realize the importance of knowledge and skills as key drivers of economic growth and are formulating policies to enhance such competencies to secure a competitive edge in the global market (Chappell 2003).

Vocational education is seen as critical for this economic progress. Major international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNESCO, and OECD have recognized vocational education's role in driving economic growth and are pushing for better job training and skill-development programs (Pilz 2017; Comyn and Barnaart 2010). According to UNESCO's (2011, 18) definition, 'vocational education is designed for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation or trade or class of

occupations or trades. Vocational education may have work-based components. Successful completion of such programmes leads to labour market-relevant vocational qualifications acknowledged as occupationally oriented by the relevant national authorities and/or the labour market.’ While this definition is clear and diplomatic in a way that most interest groups would agree, it lacks an analytical standpoint for understanding and assessing the evolving roles and transformations of vocational education on a national level. In the context of China, the amended *Vocational Education Law* provides a more specific definition: “Vocational education is a major constituent of the national education system and human resources development, and an important means to train diverse talents, pass on technical skills, and promote employment and entrepreneurship ”(Vocational Education Law 2022).

In this context, vocational education has become a crucial means for the Chinese government for human resource development. Following China’s accession to the WTO, the state recognized the skills gap between its labour force and the demands of a technology-driven global economy. To bridge this gap and position China competitively in the global economy, the Chinese government has intensively focused on reforming and expanding vocational education to ensure a continuous supply of skilled labour to support its neoliberal agenda (Koo 2016). The expansion of vocational education reflects this strategic priority. According to the MoE (2008b), in 1978, there were 4,700 secondary vocational schools in China with an enrollment of 704,000 students, representing 6.1% of all senior secondary education enrollments. By 2007, this number had increased significantly to over 14,600 secondary vocational schools with an enrollment of 8.1 million, and the total number of students in secondary vocational education surged to 19.87 million, accounting for 48.3% of all senior secondary education enrollments (MoE 2008a). This growth

shows the government's commitment to leveraging vocational education as a key strategy in solving the skills match.

The long-term goal of the reform and development of vocational education in China is to build a modern vocational education system aligned with the ever-evolving socio-economic conditions of China. Over the years, the objectives have been refined through various government policies (referred to in Table 1), transforming from one that initially focused on structural expansion to more dynamic goals. This shift includes adapting to economic and industrial changes, fostering deeper integration with industry, and aligning with global education standards. Each policy update has strategically deepened the connection between vocational education and industry needs, ensuring that the system not only meets domestic economic demands but also competes effectively in a globalized economy.

Table 1. Evolution of China's Vocational Education Policy Goals

Year	Policy Names	Objectives
1985	<i>The Reforms on China's Educational Structure</i>	The focus was to develop vocational and technical education with an emphasis on secondary vocational and technical education while actively expanding higher vocational and technical institutions. The aim was to gradually establish a comprehensive vocational and technical education system that ranges from junior to senior levels, is structurally sound, and facilitates communication with general education.
2010	<i>Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development</i>	To create a modern vocational education system that is adaptable to the transformation of economic development modes and industrial restructuring. It emphasized the concept of lifelong education and coordinated development between secondary and higher vocational education.
2014	<i>Modern Vocational Education System Construction Plan (2014-2020)</i>	To form a modern vocational education system that meets the needs of development, deeply integrates industry and education, connects secondary vocational and higher vocational education, and facilitates mutual communication with general education. This system

		was envisioned to embody the lifelong education concept, reflecting Chinese characteristics and achieving world-class standards.
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According to Markowitsch (2017), the Chinese government appears to have adopted a socioeconomic or labour market approach to reform its vocational education system. This approach suggests that economic logic strongly governs the vocational education policy in the context of neoliberal globalization (S. Liu and Hardy 2023; Markowitsch 2017). The government has made efforts to integrate vocational education more closely with the country's economic and industrial needs. In 2015, China launched the "Made in China 2025" (MIC25) national strategic plan that aims to upgrade its industrial and manufacturing sector. The plan aims to shift China's reputation for being the "world's factory" that depends on cheap, low-tech goods to become a leading global technological superpower by 2049 (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). The strategy targets ten core industries, including robotics, power equipment and next-generation IT and the vocational education system is being aligned with these priorities to ensure a steady supply of workers with the necessary skills in these fields. With a goal to foster innovations and companies that can compete on the global stage, China aims to use vocational education to solve its problem of economic transition and secure its position in global economic competition (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019).

In line with this initiative, there is an increasing demand for highly skilled workers. The central government then positions vocational education as the panacea to solve the problem (MoE 2021a). This commitment can be easily identified in various government-supported publications. For instance, recent policy statements such as "Integrating Vocational Education into Economic and Social Development" and "Deeply Understanding the New Role of Vocational Education in

the New Era” from 2024, both highlight vocational education’s crucial role in stabilizing and expanding employment. These documents, published on the State Council and the Ministry of Education’s websites, align vocational education with national strategies aimed at upgrading China’s industrial and manufacturing sectors (State Council 2024; MoE 2024).

As Liu and Hardy (2023) noted in their discourse analysis of the policy of the Implementation Plan of National Vocational Education Reform 2019, terms such as ‘market demand-oriented’, ‘demand-oriented’, and ‘market-oriented’ frequently appear in the policy documents, showing a strong neoliberal influence. This economic focus directs the government’s efforts to shape enterprises and citizen actions towards economic and social development (S. Liu and Hardy 2023). Many argue that this regulatory involvement also reflects the governmentality that influences how people see and think about themselves, guiding their decisions and behaviours, as reflected in the development of the human capital discourse and neoliberalism (Chiang, Papadakis, and Drakaki 2023; Burchell et al. 1991).

However, it is impossible to define China’s complex and ever-evolving political economy in an explicit Western neoliberal framework. Similar to the higher education sector, the central government maintains its influential role by overseeing the planning and regulation of the system. This centralized approach extends to formulating broad educational strategies and frameworks, delegating the responsibility for their specific implementation to local governments to achieve national objectives (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015; F. Li 2016). The central government still plays a crucial role in driving educational reforms and addressing challenges, reflecting the government-dominant nature of educational transformation within the broader context of state-building and globalization (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015).

2.2.3 The Special Role of the Party-Secretary Position

Besides the central government's influential role in setting the national education strategies and direction, a unique political element is integrated within nearly every educational institution in China from the primary to the tertiary level. This is embodied in the unique position of a Party secretary which is a common feature across all levels of education (X. Liu 2020a; Svensson 2023; Jian and Mols 2019). In Chinese universities, governance is split between the state administration and the CCP under what is called the presidential responsibility system led by the university Party committee (Svensson 2023). This structure was established officially by the 1996 CCP Regulations on the Work of Grassroots Organizations in Colleges and Universities and was further codified into the *Higher Education Law* of 1998. According to this framework, every university (including higher vocational colleges) is required to establish its own Party committee to oversee its operations (refer to Figure 1) (Jian and Mols 2019). According to the Law, the Party Committee is the highest decision-making body within universities. The Party secretary holds a critical position within this framework while the president along with the rest of the administrative team follow the Party Committee's directives and implement its decisions. Moreover, in public universities, the CCP maintains substantial control including the authority to appoint the university president and Party secretary, who are key leaders in the governance framework (X. Liu 2020a).

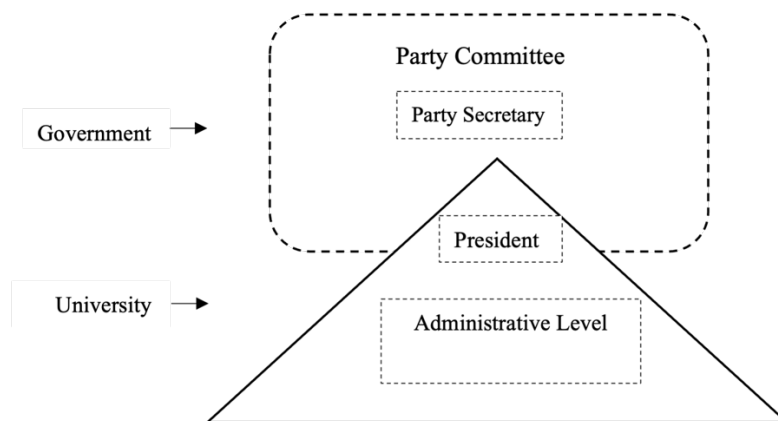


Figure 2. China's Tertiary Education Governance Framework

Liu (2020a) argues that the influence of the CCP extends beyond public universities, as many leaders of private universities are also Party members. Although private sectors are allowed or even encouraged to invest in higher education, the presidential responsibility system led by the university Party committee system remains critical in guiding the university. This involvement allows the CCP to maintain a certain degree of control over private universities and guide private universities to shape themselves to fulfill the country's growing educational demands. Such practices can help forge a consensus among private universities and reinforce the party's legitimacy within the private sector (X. Liu 2020a).

Not only in the higher education sector, in 2022, the CCP expanded its influence in primary and secondary education by issuing the "Opinions on the Establishment of the Principal Responsibility System for the Leadership of Party Organizations in Primary and Secondary Schools (Trail)". This directive aims to reinforce the CCP's control and replicate the presidential responsibility system from the higher education to the lower educational levels. The policy document specifically stressed that "the Party's overall leadership over education is the fundamental guarantee for running education well" and mandates the establishment of CCP cells in every school (CCP 2022). The Amended *Vocational Education Law* also specifically states that vocational training, which primarily focuses on skill development, must operate under the leadership of the CCP, adhering to socialist values and national education policies which further reinforces the CCP's central role in guiding this sector.

This expansion happens with the paradoxical presence of neoliberal influences such as marketization, privatization and decentralization, highlighting a complex dynamic where Party centralization coexists with progressive economic reforms (K. H. Mok and Han 2017; Karlsen 2000; Kai-Ming 1994). Despite the evolving neoliberal influences on state-education relations,

within China's authoritarian framework, the CCP decisively controls the policy direction. This control could serve multiple purposes, not only aligning educational outcomes with the state's broader political and economic objectives but also acting as an essential way to carry out the CCP's ideology and dominant position (Svensson 2023; X. Liu 2020a).

In the meantime, from elementary school through university, young Chinese are immersed in ideological and political education which combines Marxist ideology and Xi Jinping Thought today (Svensson 2023). This education not only fosters a strong sense of nationalism and a deep appreciation for Chinese history and culture but also introduces China's recent economic and geopolitical progress (Ambrogio 2017). This infiltration extends beyond textbooks and class settings. It also includes organized school visits to museums and exhibitions, and through social media apps and even TV historical dramas (Svensson 2023). Students come to university already well-versed in ideological and political education which is a compulsory element of their curriculum that was reinforced through policies implemented by the CCP and the Ministry of Education (Svensson 2023). Xi Jinping has also advocated for universities to become key sites for disseminating CCP ideology and his own philosophical contributions at many public conferences and speeches (Pringle and Woodman 2022). All these efforts demonstrate how ideological and political education in Chinese universities has transformed into a well-established system that institutionalizes patriotism and prescribes it as the appropriate ideological framework for students (X. Liu, Xiantong, and Starkey 2023).

Conclusion

The evolution of education policies in China illustrates a complex interaction between neoliberal influences and the authoritative control of the CCP. This complex interaction is not only shaping educational policies and their administration but is also reshaping how the state interacts with other stakeholders in the education sector. This includes the decentralization experiments of the central government and a growing role for non-state actors such as private enterprises and international partnerships in investing in education, which are increasingly important under China's expanding market-oriented and employment-focused educational framework. These changes raise important questions about the role of the government in shaping educational outcomes and their impact on students in terms of educational equity and access.

As Huang (2015) argues, educational reform in China has been characterized by a process of 'decentralized centralism.' The role of the government has been modified, in which some responsibilities of the government are decentralized, while others are more tightly controlled throughout the process (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015). This dual strategy allows the CCP to manage financial resources more effectively while still maintaining a critical role in the planning and implementation of educational policies that align with national economic strategies and political stability. The presence of Party secretaries within every level of educational institutions and the government's advocacy of non-state actors in investing in education demonstrates this mixed governance style. This system blends administrative control with political oversight to ensure that educational outcomes support the Party's broader objectives. Furthermore, this approach can also effectively help China's educational system to adapt to the global economic conditions while still adhering to the Party's ideological and political mandates.

As China tries to shift its reputation as the ‘world factory’ and continues to engage with global economic systems, the role of education as a tool for socio-economic development becomes even more evident. In the next chapter, I will specifically look into vocational education, a sector that has become more and more important in China’s educational strategy because of its direct links with economic development and labour market needs. I will analyze the amended *Vocational Education Law* alongside the *Higher Education Law* to explore how they align with China’s strategic goals of cultivating specific ‘talents’ to support its industrial and manufacturing sectors. This analysis will not only focus on the power dynamics and concerns of policy formulation in China’s rapidly changing economy but also examine how these laws are debated and implemented within the framework of CCP governance and neoliberal policy objectives.

Chapter 2 Comparative Analysis of Vocational and Higher Education Law in China

1. Introduction

On April 20, 2022, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) passed the amended *Vocational Education Law*. This is the first major amendment to the Law in 25 years since it was enacted in 1996 (Xinhua News 2022). This amendment is considered a key element among a series of governmental actions targeting the reinforcement of the nation's vocational education system, offering legal backing to this sector (MoE 2022d). In 2015, China launched the "Made in China 2025" (MIC25) national strategic plan that aims to upgrade its industrial and manufacturing sector. The plan aims to shift China's reputation for being the "world's factory" that depends on cheap, low-tech goods to become a leading global technological superpower by 2049 (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). The plan sets ambitious targets to increase the domestic content in core components to 40% by 2020 and 70% by 2025, enhancing China's position in the global production hierarchy (Kennedy 2015). While the state provides critical support through financial incentives and the establishment of innovation centers, the plan also emphasizes market-driven mechanisms, including strengthening intellectual property rights for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting self-regulated technology standards, with the goal of fostering innovations and companies that can compete on the global stage (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019; Kennedy 2015).

In line with this initiative, there is an increasing demand for highly skilled workers. The Chinese government has been investing more in vocational education with a sense of urgency to improve the technical capabilities of its workforce to support its broader strategy to advance its industrial and manufacturing sectors (MoE 2021a). The amended legislation now positions vocational education as a parallel stream to general education, stating that graduates of

vocational programs should enjoy equal opportunities for both further education and career advancements.

However, vocational education, despite its significant role within the education system of China, continues to be perceived as ‘less good’ compared to general education in Chinese society (Billett 2011; Wheelahan and Moodie 2017). Despite substantial political ambitions and financial investment directed towards this sector, it remains overshadowed by the university sector (G. Wang 2022a). Higher education still enjoys a more favourable position as it is associated with advanced academic learning appreciated by the traditional Confucian culture, while vocational education often becomes a pathway for students who are considered as ‘less good’ or even ‘failure’ in terms of academic achievements (Ling 2015; Woronov 2011; Woronov 2015; Mok 2001). This misalignment between state priorities and public perception presents a challenge for the Chinese government. While the government advocates more for the economic importance of a skilled workforce trained through vocational education, cultural preferences for academic learning and the less favourable socio-economic outcomes of vocational graduates continue to influence the public to prefer the academic path.

At the same time, the development of vocational education was never a standalone issue. It always has a close connection with economic, political and labour dynamics in China. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the vocational education system has experienced several rounds of adjustments and reforms in response to China’s changing economic conditions. During the Cultural Revolution, vocational education experienced a stagnating period that mirrored the political disruptions that hindered educational development (Wu 1996). Following this era, China’s economic reforms in the late 1970s started a phase of restoration and rapid advancement for this sector. This period of advancement was closely

linked to the country's shift towards a market-oriented economy and the growing need for a skilled labour force to support the nation's industrial expansion and economic growth (Wu 1996).

In this chapter, I aim to analyze three different educational laws that have been shaped in different political contexts and educational reform periods. I aim to conduct a comparative analysis of the 1996 *Vocational Educational Law* and its 2022 amendment, as well as the *Higher Education Law*. The analysis will focus on dissecting the content of these laws, contrasting their discourses, themes, and the evolution of their focus and objectives. More importantly, I aim to understand how these legislative changes interact with China's political economy. By situating educational legislation within the context of vocationalism and neoliberalism, this chapter not only seeks to understand the legal and institutional changes happening in the vocational education sector but also assess how China's educational policy responds to the economic challenges brought by neoliberalism and globalization. Specifically, I have the following research questions:

- 7) How have the definitions and discussions of 'talent' and '*suzhi*' evolved in the context of China's VE laws from 1996 to 2022, and what do these changes reveal about shifts in policy direction?
- 8) What do these changes reflect China's broader political and economic conditions, particularly in relation to its ambitions to upgrade its industrial and manufacturing sectors?
- 9) How are the concepts of '*suzhi*', 'talent', and industry engagement differently conceptualized and prioritized in vocational versus higher education Laws in China? What do these differences reveal about the underlying policy objectives and

educational priorities within each sector?

My focus is on the present portrayal of vocational education within the amended VE Law and seeks to understand the emergence of its current discourse. By evaluating the keywords and objectives of both the VE Laws and the *Higher Education Law*, I aim to understand the key elements that have influenced today's vocational education discourse. By tracing and comparing these elements back in time, I intend to demonstrate that changes in the discourse go beyond developing pedagogical levels to equip students with certain vocational skills. Rather, it aims to cultivate a new generation of youth equipped to support and contribute to China's engagement with neoliberal governance (G. Wang 2022b). These changes demonstrate a strategic repositioning of vocational education in both educational and economic systems. This sector evolves from simply providing basic skills to actively cultivating adaptable and entrepreneurial citizens who can navigate themselves in a globalized market economy (G. Wang 2022b).

2. Results and Discussions

Drawing from the thematic and keyword frequency analysis, I identified and selected 23 critical terms across the three laws. These terms include “international”, “industry”, “industry-teaching fusion”, “school-enterprise cooperation”, “entrepreneurship”, “practical training”, “certificate”, “labour”, “service”, “corporation”, “skills”, “technical ability”, “profession”, “employment”, “scientific research”, “*suzhi*”, “economics”, “talent”, “Secondary Vocational Education”, “Higher Vocational Education”, “county-level”, “nations” and “social security”. I statistically analyzed the word frequencies and generated a corresponding table (refer to Table 2). Based on these statistics, I constructed a bar chart (refer to Figure 3) to

visually compare the keyword frequency across the three laws. This comparative analysis of keyword frequencies serves as an initial step, laying the groundwork for a focused discourse analysis. This approach not only tracks the shifts in vocational education discourses but also sets the stage for an in-depth examination of the evolution and the underlying objectives behind the changes in the three laws. It serves as the foundation for a detailed examination of the narratives and rationales that drive legislative reform.

Table 2. Frequency Comparison of Selected Keywords Across Educational Laws

	Higher Education Law	Vocational Education Law 2022	Vocational Education Law 1996
international	1	1	0
industry	2	6	0
industry-teaching fusion	0	9	0
school-enterprise cooperation	0	5	0
entrepreneurship	0	7	0
practical training	0	14	0
certificate	6	16	7
labour	1	13	7
service	7	17	3
corporation	6	47	15
skill	10	40	6
technical ability	5	47	2
profession	2	316	140
employment	1	19	1
scientific research	29	2	1
suzhi	0	10	2
economics	5	9	6
talent	7	26	1
Secondary VE	0	5	2
Higher VE	1	12	4
county-level	0	12	7
nations	46	58	25
social security	4	2	1

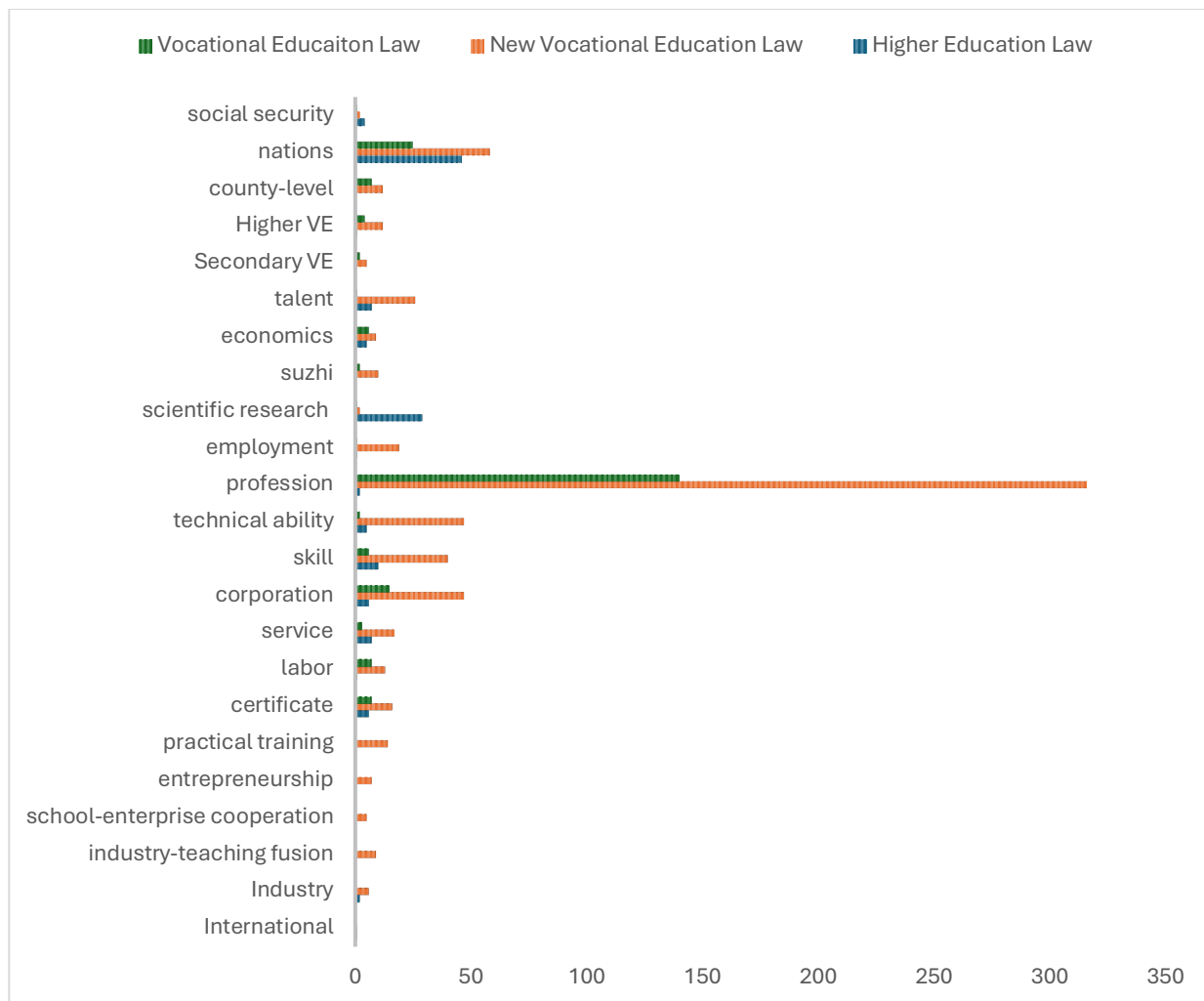


Figure 3. Comparative Horizontal Bar Chart of Keywords Frequencies

As shown in Table 2, this comparison shows the different focus each law places on different educational aspects. For instance, the amended VE Law mentions ‘employment’ 19 times, but only shows one time in the other two laws, demonstrating a clear emphasis on job outcomes. Moreover, ‘skill’ and ‘technical ability’ are recurring themes in the amended VE Law, highlighting its priority on equipping students with practical skills and competencies necessary for the vocational job sector instead of theoretical learning. The term ‘talent’, central to the discourse on educational development, also shows more often in the amended VE Law than in the others, indicating a more urgent demand or focus on talent cultivation in the

vocational sector, a trend that seems less pronounced in the higher education sector.

The term ‘*suzhi*’ is notably exclusive to VE Laws, with no occurrence in *Higher Education Law*, suggesting a particular focus on personal quality development in vocational education that is not explicitly highlighted in higher education discourse. In contrast, the *Higher Education Law* prioritizes ‘scientific research’ rather than ‘skills’ or ‘employment’, suggesting a divergence towards academic and theoretical contributions rather than the more pragmatic and employment-centric characteristic of the vocational sector.

The amended VE Law also introduces a fresh emphasis on ‘industry-teaching fusion’, ‘school-enterprise cooperation’, and ‘entrepreneurship’, which are concepts that were not found in the previous law or the *Higher Education Law*, suggesting a new approach to vocational education that is trying to merge industry needs and demands with educational practices. This may further lead to the question of how the government intends to shift its responsibilities or adjust its roles in the process of vocational education reform regarding industrial restructuring and upgrading.

The term ‘profession’ dominates the two VE Laws, with 316 occurrences in the amended VE Law and 140 occurrences in the original one, showing a direct push towards professionalization within vocational education. This trend also shows the increasing emphasis on diverse professional roles. According to Olssen and Peteres (2005), in the neoliberal framework, professions are often described as self-interested groups engaged in rent-seeking which contrasts with the traditional view of professions governed by intrinsic, subject-directed professional autonomy. The emphasis on professions of the amended Law further indicates the changes towards more market-driven influences and control mechanisms within vocational education.

At the same time, the amended VE Law has increased mentions of almost all the listed key terms compared to the previous ones, showing an expansive and more detailed legislative approach to the vocational education reform that happened in recent years. These frequency patterns as well as the thematic emphasis of each law can be used to track the evolving directions of vocational education policy in response to the broader societal and economic shifts that connected to the MIC25, with a stronger focus on integrating vocational training with industry needs and employment outcomes.

By comparing the results of both thematic and keywords analysis, the following section selected '*suzhi*', 'talent' and the increasing emphasis on industry participation as three critical entry points to dissect and understand the changing language and dynamics within the vocational education discourse. The rationale for selecting these three terms is because of their interconnectedness within the legislative framework. Rather than being stand-alone terms, '*suzhi*', 'talent' and industry engagement are intertwined, each influencing and reinforcing the other and also reflecting the core objectives of the reform of the vocational education system. This increasing focus on cultivating high-*suzhi* talent with the cooperation with industries within the vocational education discourse highlights the adaptation to globalization and the knowledge economy and it needs to be understood within the broader framework of neoliberalism. As an education system that is increasingly judged by its ability to produce employable, and adaptable graduates, analyzing how these terms are being used in legislative text can show the directions of vocational education reforms and how much it has been influenced by economic logic.

2.1 Educational Governance: Policy, Legislation, and Enforcement

In China, policies often serve as guidelines or strategic directions set by the government, while legislation refers to laws formally enacted by the National People's Congress or its Standing Committee and are legally binding (Xu and Mei 2018). Education legislation, such as the VE Law and *Higher Education Law*, establishes the legal framework and responsibilities concerning the governance of education, including the rights, duties, and standards for educational institutions and systems. These laws are usually positioned higher than those of the administrative and regional regulations (Xu and Mei 2018).

The amended VE Law mandates that the State Council establish a coordination mechanism for managing vocational education at the national level. At the same time, the Ministry of Education has the responsibility for overplanning, coordination and macro-management of vocational education in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and other relevant bodies. Additionally, local education authorities at provincial and municipal levels are also tasked with responsibilities in enforcing the Law in their specific regions, making sure that educational policies and standards are applied consistently throughout their districts and counties.

In Xu's (2011) analysis of *Labour Law* in China, she argues that laws are often used as governing techniques by the central government and party to implement particular policies aimed at promoting social order or enhancing subnational governance. Similarly, Law and Pan (2009) discuss how educational laws in China serve as practical tools in policymaking to address specific educational issues, and sometimes as a last resort, to hold different government levels accountable for implementing particular policies or addressing specific challenges. One of the significant changes to the amended VE Law echoes this approach by emphasizing that

vocational education is a type of education as important as general education. This amendment aims to rectify the deeply stigmatized perception of vocational education in China. By legally upgrading the status of vocational education, the government signals its intent to reshape public perception and convince people that vocational education is equally important. This change in the Law is celebrated by the Ministry of Education and many official media outlets as a big achievement for vocational education. Official interpretations of the Law also announced that this was a transformative moment for the status of vocational education, suggesting that the mere textual amendments have already solved the problem.

Similar to Xu (2011)'s observation on the *Labour Laws*, the main elements of the amended VE Laws are not enforced by the courts but serve to convey the central government's directives to local governments at all levels. These directives encourage the incorporation of national vocational education development objectives within their respective administrative areas and offer guidance on implementation strategies. As stated in Article 6, the amended VE Law specifically articulated that vocational education should follow a tiered management with the government conducting overall planning and local authorities taking on major responsibilities. Essentially, the amended VE Law aims to make sure that local governments align their vocational education development with the national industrial structure adjustment and technological upgrading. This further aligns with Peng's view that law serves as a tool through which the Party-state convey its messages and exercises its political authority (Potter 2003; Xu 2011). In this framework, the Party often begins reforms by testing policies that might eventually be formalized into laws. Therefore, policies can be considered as flexible and tentative while laws represent the refined outcomes of these experiments, representing a systematic and institutionalized approach (Potter 2003; Xu 2011).

This is particularly evident in the amendments to the VE law. The amendments to the Law did not just happen overnight, most changes in the Law already appeared in the previous government policy documents and underwent testing. In 2002, the Fourth National Working Conference on Vocational Education set the stage for these experiments. Following this conference, the Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education was issued. This Decision emphasized the need to “deepen the reform of vocational education management systems and to establish an education framework led by the government, supported by enterprises and industries, and actively engaging other social forces” (State Council 2002).

Following policies continued this direction, calling for the involvement of enterprises and other societal elements in developing vocational education. In 2005, the Ministry of Education’s “Intentions on Accelerating the Development of Secondary Vocational Education” encouraged reliance on industries and enterprises for the expansion of secondary vocational education and supported enterprises in establishing vocational schools. Furthermore, the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) proposed to establish a modern education system characterized by legal compliance, independent management, state oversight, and active societal participation. It aimed to reshape the relationship among the government, educational institutions, and society. This policy direction highlighted how the central government tested its ideas hoping to shift towards the decentralization of vocational education to market and social actors.

All these proposed changes in earlier policy documents are reflected in the amendments to the VE Law. These amendments institutionalized the outcomes of the previously tested policies, clarifying the roles and limitations of enterprises or local governments in this process.

In essence, the amended VE Law transformed these directives into a formal framework and used it to hold different government levels accountable for implementing particular policies (Law and Pan 2009). This institutionalization process reflects the central government's strategy of testing ideas before formalizing them into the legal structure, and possibly giving transitional time for local governments to adjust to these changes and further refine their implementation.

In the following section, I will analyze the key terms '*suzhi*', 'talent' and the increasing emphasis on industry participation as key indicators for understanding the evolving dynamics within the vocational education discourse. I aim to examine how changes in discourses reflect the directives of the central government and specify what it expects from local governments.

2.2 The Evolution of '*Suzhi*' in Educational Legislation

Based on the keyword frequency analysis results, '*suzhi*' stands out as a key term in VE Laws. The term refers to the perceived 'quality' of individuals or groups and is a frequent topic of conversation in Chinese society, sparking diverse discussions and debates. It occurred 10 times in the amended VE Law and twice in its original version, yet not at all in the Higher Education Law. This pattern indicates a strong focus on developing personal qualities within vocational education, an aspect which does not seem to be shared by higher education.

While *suzhi* is often translated and interpreted as 'quality' in English, based on my knowledge, such translation does not fully catch the nuances of this word. According to the Party theorists of population, *suzhi* integrates physical, intellectual and moral dimensions that interconnect to shape an individual's overall nature (Wu 1991; Kipnis 2007). This notion further suggests that *suzhi* can be understood as a concept that reflects a society's ability to engage with and adapt to its environment over time (Kipnis 2007). Thus, *suzhi* should be understood as a

notion involving both individual attributes and broader societal adaptability (Sun 2009; Kipnis 2006; Jacka 2009). The term has many different layers of meaning and can be subject to different interpretations and contestations (Kipnis 2007; Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003; Lin and Ghail 2017). At the same time, its flexibility allows it to be applied in many contexts, sometimes stretching the term so far that it loses its precise meaning, leading to what has been termed a “phantom-like” quality (Sun 2009). Scholars have also looked into *suzhi* in several contexts, investigating the different applications of *suzhi* discourse as a way to differentiate people’s quality, including the impact of the one-child policies (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005), the social standing of people with disability (Kohrman 2005), the conditions of laid-off workers (Hsu 2007) and migrant workers (Yan 2008; Xu 2000). Although English terms like “character”, “intelligence”, and “strength” all refer to specific human attributes that connect with the meaning of *suzhi*, it does not have a singular term and capture the breadth of *suzhi*.

Even though the term’s meaning is complex in nature, and lacks a universally agreed definition, it is a term of considerable significance in Chinese policy discourse, as it has gradually appeared more frequently in critical policy documents. Many scholars argue that the word *suzhi* has become central in shaping and developing new social hierarchies in China (Kipnis 2007; 2006; Jacka 2009; Anagnost 2004; 2008; Woronov 2015). The term itself is utilized to justify a wide range of social and political hierarchies, implying that people with higher *suzhi* are entitled to more resources, power and status compared to those with lower *suzhi* (Anagnost 2004; 2008).

The term became widely recognized in the late 1980s, in parallel with China’s economic reforms and the popularization of human capital accumulation theories (Hoffman 2010; Anagnost 2004; Woronov 2015). Kipnis (2006) traces the evolution and expansion of the *suzhi*

application and links it to two major events. In the early 1980s, the term was integrated into birth control propaganda as “population quality (*suzhi*)”, suggesting a blend of innate and nurtured human qualities, and promoting the idea that fewer people would lead to a better population ‘quality’. In the late 1980s, “*suzhi* education” became a guiding principle for educational policymakers, establishing itself as a central theme within educational policy discourse. The idea was that a higher quality of education would lead to a higher quality of the population. These two events initiated a transition in how ‘*suzhi*’ was perceived, from being a term representing inborn traits to a concept that embraces qualities developed through education and personal growth (Kipnis 2006).

In 1985, the CCP declared that elevating the *suzhi* of the people of the nation was the foundational aim of the education reform (Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party 1985). In the following year, the Chinese government passed the *Compulsory Education Law*. The Law established a mandatory 9-year education system that aims to guarantee the basic learning needs of children. The Law specifically articulates that the aim is not only to provide basic education but to also uplift the *suzhi* of the whole nation. Consequently, the term ‘*suzhi* education’ became a term closely linked with the development of human potential. Woronov (2003) contends that ‘*suzhi* education’ is in fact more accurate to be translated as ‘education for quality’ as it extends beyond the mere concept of ‘quality education’, as it is not restricted to the education system’s improvement but instead targets raising the quality of the population.

Keeping the importance of the *suzhi* in mind, the term only appears twice in the original VE law, specifically linking to the quality of workers and those receiving education. However, the amended VE Law elevates ‘*suzhi*’ as a strategic focal point, and this targeted approach reflects a deliberate effort to foster specific attributes or qualities of vocational students. *Suzhi*

is frequently cited throughout the Law as many as ten times. Article 1 of the General Provisions explicitly states that the Law's purpose is to advance the *suzhi* and technical capabilities of the workforce, thereby enhancing employment, fostering entrepreneurship, and constructing an educationally robust nation enriched with human resources and skilled society. It shifts away from simply enhancing worker quality towards reforming vocational education as a more complex and comprehensive term which can serve as a critical driver of a skilled and adaptable workforce. This new workforce with higher *suzhi* is seen as essential for developing a nation with rich human resources and a skilled society. This changing discourse reflects the recognition of the interconnectedness of education, skill acquisition, and broader economic and societal development, and links individual capabilities with the nation's strategic plans and aspirations. By prioritizing '*suzhi*' of the workforce and aligning vocational education with goals like enhancing employment, fostering entrepreneurship and constructing a skilled society, the amended VE Law indicates China's intention to transform its labour market into one that focuses on adaptability and quality.

Furthermore, within the text of the amended VE Law, '*suzhi*' is not just a standalone term. It is often coupled with other terms like 'quality of workers,' 'high-quality technical and skilled talents,' 'high-quality rural revitalization talents', and 'quality of the education receivers'. These terms all concentrate on elevating people's qualities rather than focusing on improving education quality. These combinations also emphasize a deliberate focus on the development of the workforce from solely technically proficient individuals to well-rounded professionals with a mix of practical, ethical, intellectual and physical *suzhi*. Specifically, the 'high-quality rural revitalization talents' further add another layer of meaning to the already omniscient *suzhi*, which refers to the specific qualities essential for rural poverty alleviation and

individual self-development.

The frequent use and pairing of *suzhi* with terms like ‘talents’ and ‘education’ echo the objective of the broader policy goal, that the vocational education sector needs a labour force that brings more to the table than mere technical skills. This vision aims to cultivate citizens capable of contributing to the nation’s modernization and economic growth, and also equipped with a set of skills that include innovation, adaptability and a strong work ethic. The inclusion of entrepreneurship in the amended VE law further demonstrates a commitment to innovation and the development of a versatile and creative labour force. These individual qualities are seen as essential for navigating the rapidly transforming global economy and at the same time advancing national interests.

This discourse, which locates *suzhi* in the vocational context, serves to link the “phantom-like” qualities of to neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2005, 2), neoliberalism, as a theory of political economic practices, advocates strong private property rights, free markets and free trade as foundational economic practices. Different countries have incorporated neoliberalism principles based on their unique historical, social and racial backgrounds (Ong 2007). As there is an ongoing debate about whether or not China is a neoliberal country, it is widely accepted that China has adopted a distinct form of neoliberalism that combines authoritarian governance with capitalist market principles since its economic reforms in the late 1970s (Wang and Wang 2023, 408; Harvey 2005). This blend has allowed the Chinese government to reshape class relations and institutional frameworks to support a neoliberal economy, in collaboration with the bureaucratic and transnational capital (Hong 2010).

In the studies of China’s neoliberal evolution, many scholars argue that in the 1990s, the state-society dynamics already shifted to a market-state interaction (Wang 2005; Greenhalgh and

Winckler 2005). While China shifted to the market-state interaction and seemingly diverged from its socialist roots, the Chinese government has never truly given up its authoritative power (Harvey 2005). In this sense, neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics goes beyond merely political or economic theory. In fact, it can be conceptualized as a framework for governing citizens and also reshapes societal expectations and norms (Burchell et al. 1991; Rofel 2007). As Jayasuriya (2006) contend, the methods of governing in China now have evolved to incorporate privatization and market-oriented reforms with existing social structures, rather than opposing the market principles. The unique manifestation of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics is evident in the amended VE Law which combined the market-state interaction with authoritative governance. Article 4 demonstrates this governmental approach, stating: “Vocational education shall be pursued under the leadership of the Communist Party of China in accordance with the socialist values and national education policies”(Vocational Education Law 2022).

The *suzhi* discourse in the VE Laws also advocates for education receivers cultivating a set of skills that include innovation, adaptability and strong work ethic not only for their own well-being and success, but also for developing a better nation-- ‘an educationally robust nation enriched with human resources and skilled society’(State Council 2010). This interplay of neoliberal and socialist narratives reflects a hybrid approach to governance. On one hand, individuals are encouraged to strive for personal success through continuous improvement of their *suzhi*. On the other hand, they are simultaneously framed as contributors to national goals by continuously improving their skills and adaptability. The *suzhi* discourse positions them within a national framework for development and modernization, which aims to combine individual ambition with collective progress.

Interestingly, beyond merely appealing to neoliberal reason, the *suzhi* discourse in the VE Laws also embodies a moral dimension. The language of the law that advocates the cultivation of strong work ethics and dedication to national development also aligns with the socialist ideas of collective advancement. This emphasis further reflects a governance strategy that combines state-centred control governance with a form of neoliberal governance that seeks to produce and encourage self-regulating and self-improving individuals. In this context, vocational education is framed as a crucial institution to cultivate entrepreneurial citizens, reinforcing the idea that individuals are not only responsible for their own success through continuous skill development and improvement of their *suzhi* but also for the nation's prosperity.

The objective of the *Higher Education Law*, however, diverges from the ones of the VE Laws. According to the *Higher Education Law*, its purpose is to 'develop higher education, implement the strategy of developing the country by relying on science and education, and promote socialist material and ethical progress.' It aligns higher education with the broader goals of socialist material and ethical progress, indicating an intent to advance not just the economic, but also the moral and cultural aspects of society. In contrast, the amended VE Law adopts a more practical stance, emphasizing the immediate economic needs by enhancing the workforce's capabilities and responding to the demands of modernization and economic development.

While both laws share the common goal of educational development as a means of nation-building and modernization, the two Laws have different focuses and reflect the roles each stream is expected to play within the broader educational and economic systems, as it is understandable and natural. However, most striking is the term *suzhi*'s absence in the Higher Education Law. This suggests that the discourse within higher education already presumes a certain level of '*suzhi*' with its focus on in-depth academic study, theoretical knowledge and

research capabilities rather than the applied, practical skills emphasized in vocational education. The distinction also reflects societal perceptions and hierarchies within education, where vocational training is often regarded as a pathway for those who are entering specific trades or technical fields, or even students who are considered as academically underperforming (Ling 2015; Woronov 2015). This reality further prompts a greater emphasis on *suzhi* in vocational education and it serves two purposes. On the individual level, it seeks to raise and boost the standing of vocational studies in a culture that traditionally privileges academic achievement. By giving vocational professionals a badge of high *suzhi*, it attempts to elevate the inferior status of vocational education. On the collective level, this emphasis shows a clear need for vocational students to cultivate their *suzhi* to stay in step with societies and the economy's changing needs. By cultivating individuals with high *suzhi*, vocational education is regarded as a means to promote the collective *suzhi* of the nation as a whole.

This inconsistency also reflects the ability of the term to blend with Chinese traditions of self-cultivation and improvement. It draws from a historical lineage where personal cultivation, power, and moral excellence, are conceptualized as an integrated form of mental, moral and physical *suzhi*, which are deeply rooted in Confucian thought (Kipnis 2007). The imprint of Confucianism profoundly influenced the Chinese education system and the whole society in every possible aspect. At the same time, learning and education have always occupied a central role in Confucianism (Hung 2016). The overall doctrine revolves around the self-cultivation of the *junzi*, who epitomizes the ideal of a Superior Man, distinguished by cultural refinement and nobility (Ivanhoe 2000; G. Wang 2022a). A *junzi* embodies the exemplary Confucian virtues and is characterized by a commitment to working and studying hard and the cultivation of qualities such as care, restraint, and sincerity (Hung 2016).

Following this reasoning, Confucius's educational philosophy focuses on the distinction between 'Tao' and 'Tool'. 'Tao' and 'Tool' represent the two opposite dimensions in the knowledge world, with 'Tao' referring to the non-material and metaphysical, while 'Tool' signifies the material and physics aspects (G. Wang 2022a). Within Confucius's educational framework, ethical and moral knowledge as the learning of 'Tao,' holds primary importance, while the practical and labourious knowledge associated with the learning of 'Tool' is considered insignificant (G. Wang 2022a). This dichotomy is mirrored in the objectives of China's *Higher and Vocational Education Laws*, reflecting a hierarchical education system that sustains Confucian values. It seems that the multiple occurrences of *suzhi* in *Vocational Education Laws*, as opposed to its absence in Higher Education discourse, can be partially attributed to this philosophical divide: students in the vocational sector, associated with 'Tool' are those in need of enhancing '*suzhi*,' while those in higher education associated with 'Tao' are believed to already have it inherent in their scholarly pursuit.

Moving beyond its roots in traditional thoughts, *suzhi* has been recontextualized by many scholars within the framework of neoliberalism, suggesting that it plays an important role in neoliberal governmentality and global capitalism (Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003; Kipnis 2007; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) see the growing focus on *suzhi* in population governance as a key move towards a more "neoliberal" approach to governance. They regard this approach as a move away from heavy-handed government enforcement to reduced direct control of encouraging individuals to manage themselves. Both Anagnost (2004) and Yan (2003) emphasize that the promotion and application of the *suzhi* discourse are fundamental to neoliberal governmentality that has reshaped the relationship between the state, market and individuals. They contend that *suzhi* represents more than an

attainable standard that is universally achievable. Instead, it serves as a metric of value that can be used to divide and label different social groups such as the rich and poor and also as a code for distinguishing and emphasizing the contrasts within society (Anagnost 2004; Yan 2003).

At the same time, Anagnost (2004) and Xu (2000) both view '*suzhi*' as a term that is being used to replace discussions of class in China. Anagnost (2004), in her critique of Chinese neoliberalism, points out that *suzhi* is used because it does not carry the political baggage of China's class struggles from the past. This has led to *suzhi* becoming a neutral term for talking about social differences. Xu (2000) also observed that the discussions around the 'population quality' have pushed aside class in the official ways of sorting and understanding Chinese society. This has made '*suzhi*' a reference point for understanding distinctions beyond class, including gender and origin. Xu (2000) also observes the irony that economic reforms have widened wealth disparities under the guise of improving this very notion of 'quality'.

It seems that the *suzhi* discourse has a dual character. On one hand, it upholds social hierarchies as it acknowledges and reinforces social stratification. Yet at the same time, *suzhi* also serves to naturalize and depoliticize these hierarchies, making them seem like a given part of the social order, and could be seen as a form of 'blame the victim' rhetoric, a process often associated with neoliberal thought (Kipnis 2007; 2006). Therefore, the *Vocational Education Law* might be seen as an instrument that encourages individuals to 'self-improve' within the existing social order, which potentially preserves the very hierarchies it seeks to address. This approach may lead to a situation where people from less privileged backgrounds are expected to continuously improve their '*suzhi*' to address systemic inequalities. In this context, '*suzhi*' is used not to eliminate class differences but rather to reframe them in a way that appears neutral and positive. Just as Yan (2003) suggests *suzhi* is key to how neoliberalism operates, as the

discourse both enables and hides the exploitation at play.

As Ong (2007) contends, neoliberalism has different manifestations and is shaped and reshaped by cultural, historical and racial factors. Indeed, the *suzhi* discourse in China also shows unique characteristics shaped by the nation's cultural context. Building on the earlier examination of Confucius educational philosophy, which contrasts 'Tao' with 'Tool', the discourse on '*suzhi*' could be seen as a complex mix of traditional Chinese social values and contemporary governance strategies. The Confucian way of continuously working and studying hard and the cultivation of qualities fits well within the *suzhi* discourse. The blend of Confucian ideas and neoliberal strategies also makes *suzhi* adaptable and highly acceptable in China's cultural context. The integration of *suzhi* in the vocational education policy also bridges the divide between higher education and vocational education, as it blurs the boundaries and hierarchies between these two sectors by putting the spotlight on improving "phantom-like" qualities that may never be fully realized. At the same time, this approach not only bridges the educational divide but also adapts traditional educational values to modern economic demands.

The *suzhi* discourse to some extent represents a unique model that combines traditional Chinese emphasis on personal cultivation with neoliberal strategies to manage social challenges. It serves as an example of how neoliberalism is adapted to fit local cultural and historical contexts. In this sense, '*suzhi*' discourse could be interpreted as a Chinese form of neoliberal governance that aims to foster a versatile workforce. This workforce is not only skilled in responding to the ever-changing economic demands but also proficient in the specific competencies that the market requires.

2.3 The Shifting Discourse of ‘Talent’ Across Vocational and Higher Education Laws

In addition to ‘*suzhi*’, the term ‘talent’ also stands out as a critical term. China’s emphasis on talent cultivation highlights its role in enhancing global competitiveness, which is evident in national policies. In 2010, China announced its National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)⁹; the Plan explicitly states that it will ‘give priority to education and turn China into a country rich in human resources’; this Plan is formulated to enhance citizens’ overall quality as the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is predicated on talents or professionals, and on education.’ In September 2018, at the National Education Conference, President Xi Jinping emphasized that China’s education focus should shift from ‘capacity’ to ‘quality’ to enhance its quality to advance national modernization (State Council 2018b). The following year, in response to this directive, the State Council released the country’s newest long-term education plan, China’s Modernization 2035 Plan¹⁰ to materialize this ambition. The Plan confirms this focus, aiming to ‘build a large-scale, and first-class talents cohort’ to turn China from a ‘largely populated nation to a largely talent-populated nation’ (State Council 2019a). This strategy sets the tone for China’s educational policy direction for the next 10 years. It builds on previous plans to enhance educational quality and accessibility, but also places more emphasis on the cultivation of well-rounded talents and enhancing life-long learning opportunities.

This emphasis on talent cultivation is also reflected in the three educational laws. The

⁹ China announced its *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development for 2010–2020* in July 2010. The plan outlines China’s commitment to give priority to education and to turn China into a country rich in human resources.

¹⁰ In 2019, the Chinese State Council introduced two key plans aimed at modernizing China's education system by 2035, building on reforms since 1978. These plans, the 2035 Education Modernization Plan and the 2018-2022 Implementation Plan, are part of China's goal to achieve socialist modernization and become a global education leader.

term ‘talent’ appears 7 times in the *Higher Education Law*, once in the original version of the VE Law and shows a significant increase in the amended one (mentioned 26 times). In the amended VE Law, the term is often associated with specific and technical skills, as indicated by phrases such as ‘high-*suzhi* technical and skilled talent’ and ‘high-*suzhi* rural revitalization talents’. Other mentions include ‘diversified talent’, ‘talent cultivation’, ‘industrial talent’, ‘talent demand information’ and ‘talent demand forecasting’. The term is repeated alongside the emphasis on technical and skilled talents, suggesting a detailed and systematic approach to talent development in vocational education. In contrast, in the *Higher Education Law*, ‘talent’ often appears as a standalone term, without the additional descriptive phrases that indicate a particular type of talent.

The difference in how ‘talent’ is contextualized in the *Higher Education Law* and the *Vocational Education Law* likely reflects each sector’s different educational objectives and priorities. According to the *Higher Education Law*, higher education aims to ‘cultivate high-level talents with a sense of social responsibility, a spirit of innovation and a practical ability, to develop science, technology and culture, and to promote socialist modernization’. Thus, the standalone use of ‘talent’ in the *Higher Education Law* reflects a broader view of talent cultivation that is not solely limited to technical or vocational skills but skills that can be applied across various disciplines.

On the contrary, the detailed treatment of ‘talent’ in the amended VE Law shows a targeted approach to the cultivation of specialized talents that aligned with the needs of the labour market and industrial development. The frequent association of ‘talent’ with specific industry needs, technical skills and labour demand forecasting all reflects the growing emphasis on aligning vocational education with economic development goals. In the original version of

the *Vocational Education Law*, the term talent only showed up once and linked simply to ‘cultivating talents and skilled labours’ without detailed descriptors. In the original version, the emphasis has been more on the general idea of talent cultivation without a comprehensive strategy for how different kinds of talent would fit into the broader economic plan. The revised law, however, reflects a more strategic approach that focuses on the specific types of talents and skill sets for current and future economic and labour market needs.

The evolution of the term in the two versions of the *Vocational Education Law* shows that the representation of ‘talent’ has evolved over time as well as the different types of ‘talent’ these laws intend to foster. Therefore, this leads to my questions: Are there any changes in the discourse surrounding ‘talent’, or has it acquired new layers of meaning? To truly understand how discourses, power dynamics and their implications have come to shape the changes surrounding ‘talent’, I have also selected several key policy documents from different time periods (referenced in Table 4 and Table 5) to trace and analyze the progression of ‘talent’ within these educational policies in both vocational and higher education sectors.

Table 3. Summary of the Evolution of the Objectives of Vocational Education (1991-2022)

Time	Policy documents/laws/regulations	Talent Cultivation Objectives
1991	<i>Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Developing Vocational and Technical Education</i>	Senior operators with strong technical skills.
1996	<i>Vocational Education Law</i>	Teaching vocational knowledge, developing vocational technical abilities, conducting vocational directions and raising the <i>suzhi</i> of the education receivers in an all-round way.
2002	<i>Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education</i>	High- <i>suzhi</i> workers and practical talents on the front line of production and service.
2019	<i>National Implementation Plan for</i>	Efforts will be made to cultivate high-

	<i>Vocational Education Reform</i>	<i>suzhi</i> labourers and technically skilled talents.
2021	<i>Opinions of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education</i>	Cultivate more high- <i>suzhi</i> technical and skilled talents, skilled craftsmen and great national craftsmen, and provide strong talent and skill support for the comprehensive construction of a modernized socialist country.
2022	<i>Amended Vocational Education Law</i>	It is an important part of the national education system and human resources development, and an important way to cultivate high- <i>suzhi</i> technical and skilled talents, pass on technical skills, and promote employment and entrepreneurship.

Table 4. Summary of the Evolution of the Objectives of Higher Education (1998-2018)

Time	Policy documents/laws/regulations	Talent Cultivation Objectives
1998	<i>Higher Education Law</i>	Train people to become senior talents imbued with the spirit of creativeness and the ability of practice, to develop science, technology and culture and to promote the socialist modernization drive.
2015	<i>First Amended-Higher Education Law</i>	Cultivate high-level talents with a sense of social responsibility, a spirit of innovation and a practical ability, to develop science, technology and culture, and to promote socialist modernization.
2018	<i>Second Amended-Higher Education Law</i>	Cultivate high-level talents with a sense of social responsibility, a spirit of innovation and a practical ability, to develop science, technology and culture, and to promote socialist modernization.

Based on the two charts, it is noticeable that higher education consistently emphasizes developing high-level talents with a blend of social responsibility, innovation, practical ability and dedication to advance science, technology, culture, and socialist modernization. Over two decades and two rounds of amendments to the Higher Education Law, the main objectives and

goals have remained stable, reflecting a stable and solid vision for the role of higher education in national development. In higher education, 'talent' is less about immediate market demands and more about cultivating leaders and thinkers with a broader vision to contribute to the ultimate goal: socialist modernization.

However, the vocational education objectives have shown a more dynamic evolution. Initially, the focus was on general development with professionals with strong technical skills, but over time, the objectives became more specific, highlighting the need for talents with particular skills to meet the demands of the labour market and industrial development. The associated terms like 'employment' and 'entrepreneurship' also reflect a strategic shift toward specialization and alignment with economic goals. As Brown and Lauder argue (2006), the world has already transitioned into a global knowledge economy, changing from an economy reliant on low-skilled labour to one requiring high-level skills. This specific type of 'talent' needed by the knowledge economy compels the vocational education system to respond more to the skill requirements of employers and markets and to be better designed to prepare students for their economic roles (Grubb and Lazerson 2004).

In the amended VE Law, the stated objectives emphasize cultivating 'high-*suzhi* technical and skilled talents' with a clear focus on passing on technical skills to promote employment and entrepreneurship. The amended VE Law reflects a discourse that supports a more adaptable and responsive education system, not only passing on technical skills but also capabilities that support employment and entrepreneurial success. The underlying rationale is that there is a need for a different model of education. Through the new model of vocational education, a 'new' type of student will emerge, one who can adapt to the changing present with skills and is prepared to meet the evolving demands of the labour market (Fejes 2010). However,

it overlooks other aspects of education, such as critical thinking, and creativity which are equally important for individual development as these elements are not mentioned in the law.

This is a broader trend not only in vocational but in higher education more broadly as it increasingly emphasizes employability and market-desired skills while marginalizing humanities and essential intellectual skills. In Xu (2011)'s study, universities have established career guidance centers that focus on employment rates, which are critical in evaluating university performances. The goal of these career centers is to transform students into competitive job-seekers in the labour market that contribute to the economy. In this sense, university students become neo-liberal subjects, shaped by and subjected to the ever-changing economic conditions (F. Xu 2011).

Moreover, China's Education Modernization 2035 plan also points out the direction for enhancing the competitiveness of the higher education system. These include the development of academic disciplines, promoting entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for undergraduates, and research and academic development for postgraduates (State Council 2018b). This embrace of 'vocationalism' is evident and the Plan reflects a strategic commitment to equipping students with specific skills and knowledge for employment, aligning with the economic necessity for developing a highly trained workforce capable of producing high-quality and value-added products in both local and global markets (Hayward 2004; Grubb 2006; Grubb and Lazerson 2004; Ryan 2003; Hickox 1995).

Moreover, the term '*suzhi*' is also closely linked with 'talent' in the context of vocational education. It frequently appears in descriptions like "high-*suzhi* technical and skilled talents", indicating a qualitative measure of the abilities that these talents are expected to possess. It elevates the types of technical and skilled talents that are being cultivated, not just in terms of

skill but also in overall quality. Zhao (2020) also points out that the concept of ‘talent’ is now shaping new kinds of people and setting standards for populations as the objective of China’s state governance. The combination of the discourses regarding ‘*suzhi*’ and ‘talent’ blur the boundaries between education and governance, using vocational education as a tool to instill not only technical skills but also specific values that align with the state’s objectives. This dual role of education as both a provider of skills and a shaper of citizen behaviors highlights how governance extends into people’s everyday lives (Burchell et al. 1991; Rofel 2007; Foucault, n.d.).

The way ‘talent’ is described in the VE Law also echoes the MIC 2025’s objectives. The Plan’s goal is to upgrade Chinese industry by enhancing efficiency and integration with global production chains (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). At the same time, a key element mentioned in the strategy is the cultivation of skilled talents capable of supporting these industrial upgrades. The combination of the *suzhi* discourse further aligns individual aspirations with the nation’s modernization goals while reinforcing a particular vision of the ideal ‘talent’. However, this inclusion has been taken for granted as good, unproblematic and neutral, at least in the legal texts. The citizens produced throughout education appear as a seemingly neutral subject that is supposed to possess high *suzhi* and technical skills. This assumption is highly problematic since vocational education indeed shapes specific kinds of citizens and establishes new relations between citizens, states and the labour market (Fejes 2017). Essentially, these legal descriptions of ‘talent’ are not simply about fostering skills but ensuring that as China’s economy grows and expands, the abilities and qualities of its workforce can evolve in step and support its broader socioeconomic progress (Lin and Ghail 2017).

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding ‘talent’ plays distinct roles in both vocational

and higher education. In vocational education, ‘talent’ is closely linked to ‘*suzhi*’, emphasizing practical skills, adaptability, and the everchanging economic needs of the labour market. In higher education, the concept of ‘talent’ is framed more broadly as it includes competitiveness, and scientific research, aiming to develop graduates who can support China’s long-term economic ambition. These differing focuses on ‘talent’ reflect the priorities of each sector but together shape the map and vision of China’s talent cultivation, where both sectors eventually contribute to the nation’s economic development.

2.4 Enhancing Vocational Education through Industry Collaboration

The recent amendments to the *Vocational Education Law* have expanded to a total of 10265 words from the original 3447 words. This increase in content allows for more detailed guidelines and specific requirements for implementing the new educational strategies, indicating a thorough legislative effort to enhance vocational training. These changes are not only significant in terms of word count but also reflect a broader commitment to aligning educational outcomes with market demands and workforce readiness.

The amended VE Law now specifically indicates a strategic shift towards a more industry-integrated approach in vocational training. The amendments introduce new and critical terms such as ‘industry-teaching fusion’, ‘school-enterprise cooperation’, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘practical training’. These terms signify a shift from traditional vocational training to a model that emphasizes direct collaboration with industry. All these terms have never appeared in the *Higher Education Law* or the original *Vocational Education Law*, but all serve as critical terms in the revised version. The term “industry-teaching fusion” is mentioned 9 times, “school-enterprise cooperation” 5 times, and “practical training” 14 times, highlighting their central role

in the new law. Unlike the original law, these terms suggest a more dynamic interaction between vocational institutions and the industry sector, aiming to enhance students' practical skills and employability.

The amended law specifically advocates for the combination of 'knowledge and practice, work and study' through programs like apprenticeships, internships and training aiming to deepen cooperation between vocational institutions and industry. It also aims to construct high-level vocational education training bases, which integrate learning with professional training, ensuring that students gain hands-on experience that is directly applicable to their future careers. This new direction is closely aligned with workforce readiness, meeting industry needs, and fostering innovation. More importantly, it also reshapes the power dynamics among various stakeholders – including government, vocational institutions, enterprises, industrial organizations, and other market players. By doing so, it redefines the roles and responsibilities of the government concerning the governance of vocational education. It repositions the role of government relative to market actors, introducing a new framework for interaction and cooperation. This realignment indicates a more collaborative approach, where government oversight is balanced with increased input and engagement from industry and other market participants. This aim is to foster an education system that is responsive to the needs of the economy and supportive of practical educational practices.

These changes did not happen overnight. Since 2002, the reform of vocational education has increasingly become a top priority for the Chinese government. According to China's 14th Five-Year Plan¹¹, more work must be done to advance the training of highly skilled talent in

¹¹ The CCP has been issuing Five-Year Plans since 1953 as a central part of China's social and economic development strategies. These plans allow the party to set economic targets, policy priorities and reform directions for the country. The 14th Five-Year Plan of China was published on March 5, 2021, the plan covers the period from

advanced manufacturing and modern services industries. In 2002, the State Council issued the “Decision of the State Council on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education.” This core document emphasizes the need to “enhance the reform of the system governing vocational education and establish a diverse framework for managing education under government leadership, supported by enterprises, fully leveraging industry roles, and actively involving various social forces”(State Council 2002). This approach aimed to leverage the strengths and resources of each sector to enhance educational outcomes. Subsequent vocational education policies have consistently supported this direction. In 2005, the Ministry of Education issued the “Decisions on Accelerating the Development of Secondary Vocational Education”, which proposed “depending on industries and enterprises to advance secondary vocational education, while also encouraging and supporting these enterprises to establish vocational schools independently.” It further emphasizes the role of private and semi-private players in education.

Further elaboration came with the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020). This plan explicitly states, “The aim is to establish a modern school system that functions in accordance with the law, operates independently, is overseen by the state, and engages actively in society, and to forge a new type of relationship between the government, schools, and the community.”

The above-mentioned policy documents all advocate for broader participation and involvement from various stakeholders in the development of vocational education. Throughout this period, policies have been aimed at advancing the decentralization of vocational education, shifting more control to market and social actors. This shift was legally solidified with the

2021 to 2025 and outlines the country’s economic and social development goals for the next five-year period. The Five-Year Plans are a crucial tool used by the Chinese government to guide the country’s long-term development.

amended Law, which explicitly states, “The State encourages the development of vocational education at various levels and in various forms, promotes the diversified operation of schools, and supports the broad and equal participation of social forces in vocational education.” In this sense, vocational education is regarded as a quasi-public product that involves the public sphere and the economic market, actively involving the interests of schools, enterprises, industrial organizations and other stakeholders. This evolution reflects the government’s strategy to gradually transition from being the sole provider towards leveraging additional resources from the private sector to invest in vocational education. This approach not only diversified funding but also enhanced the sector’s ability to respond to market demands.

In contrast, the *Higher Education Law* states that “The State formulates plans for the development of higher education in accordance with the needs of economic construction and social development, organizes institutions of higher education and actively develops higher education in a variety of forms.” Additionally, Article 13 specifies that “The State Council shall provide unified guidance and administration for higher education throughout the country.” This indicates that the State retains the primary responsibility for planning and developing higher education, with minimal intention of relying on external sectors.

Table 5. Evolution of the Vocational Education Policies and Social Actor Engagement (1998-2018)

Time	Document Name	Description	Reliance on Social Actors
1996	<i>Vocational Education Law</i>	Trade organisations, enterprises and institutional organisations shall, pursuant to the law, perform their duties to carry out vocational education.	Low
2002	<i>Decision of the State Council on</i>	Enhance the reform of the system governing vocational education and	Moderate

	<i>Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education</i>	establish a diverse framework for managing education under government leadership, supported by enterprises, fully leveraging industry roles, and actively involving various social forces.	
2005	<i>Decisions on Accelerating the Development of Secondary Vocational Education</i>	Depending on industries and enterprises to advance secondary vocational education, while also encouraging and supporting these enterprises to establish vocational schools independently.	High
2010	<i>National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development(2010-2020)</i>	The aim is to establish a modern school system that functions in accordance with the law, operates independently, is overseen by the state, and engages actively in society, and to forge a new type of relationship between the government, schools, and the community.	High
2022	<i>Revised Vocational Education Law</i>	The State encourages the development of vocational education at various levels and in various forms, promotes the diversified operation of schools, and supports the broad and equal participation of social forces in vocational education.	High

The differential approaches to governance in vocational and higher education in China can be understood through the lens of neoliberalism, adapted uniquely within the Chinese socio-political context (Ong 2007). As Rose (1993; 1996) contends, within the neoliberal framework, the roles of the state and individual have changed. It turns the state from a direct controller to a facilitator that supports market-driven and individual-centric approaches. In vocational education, this shift is manifested through an increased reliance on social actors. The role of the state evolves to encourage and support these actors in order to enhance the education system's

responsiveness to market needs. Furthermore, the concept of ‘responsibilization’, is detailed in neoliberal discourse and the amended *Vocational Education Law* whereby responsibilities traditionally held by the state are now transferred to individuals and local entities (Anagnost 2013; Lemke 2002; Woronov 2015).

The amended VE law strongly emphasizes the blending of work and study through programs such as apprenticeships, internships and training, now aiming to help people reach their potential by providing more access to different forms of education (McCarthy and Dimitriadis 2000; Olssen, Codd, and O’Neill 2004). Aligned with the commitment to enhanced industry integration in vocational education, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Education released a work plan in October 2019. This initiative mandates that medium to large-sized private enterprises establish apprenticeship-type programs by 2022. This plan also includes a strategy to conduct pilot projects in 50 cities to integrate industry and education in the next five years and develop regions with industry-specific educational frameworks that reflect unique local characteristics. Shanghai is leading in this area having fully launched its modern apprenticeship system in 2019 and has trained over 8,600 apprentices by now (MOHRSS 2019). This decentralization observed in *Vocational Education Law* allows greater autonomy and innovation at local levels and fosters a more diversified and adaptive education environment that supported by the local industries and market.

In contrast, higher education still remains under more centralized control, as opposed to the “quasi-public good” compared to vocational education. While vocational education rapidly adapts to labour market dynamics, higher education seems to maintain a broader, more foundational focus that aligns with the traditional ethical and moral knowledge as the learning of ‘Tao’ as it aims to ‘develop the country by relying on science and education and promoting

socialist material and ethical progress.’ These goals still need consistent and strategic oversight and management by the state, ensuring that educational outputs align with broader socio-economic objectives rather than immediate market needs.

In this sense, China embraces certain neoliberal philosophies, such as enhancing individual potential by advocating the continuous improvement of citizens’ *suzhi* and diversifying educational pathways like providing multiple vocational training and internship programs. It applies these principles selectively across different educational sectors. Vocational education leverages neoliberal governance models to foster practical, employment-oriented training directly linked to economic needs, but higher education continues to operate under a more unified and centralized framework to achieve long-term developmental goals. Drawing on Ong (2007)’s idea, the interaction between neoliberalism and China’s local features impacts the formulation of educational policies. As there is an ongoing debate about whether or not China is a neoliberal country, it is widely accepted that China has adopted a distinct form of neoliberalism that combines authoritarian governance with capitalist market principles since its economic reforms in the late 1970s (G. Wang and Wang 2023, 408; Harvey 2005). According to Hong (2010), this blend has allowed the Chinese government to reshape institutional frameworks to support a neoliberal economy, in collaboration with the bureaucratic and transnational capital (Hong 2010). It is evident that this transition goes beyond mere economic reform, but also has changed how the public sector is managed and how social and educational policies are formulated (Wong and Flynn 2001; So 2003).

Conclusion

This chapter discusses how both higher and vocational education in China has increasingly aligned with neoliberal trends, reflecting a shift towards a more market-driven and pragmatic approach. Vocational education, in particular, has closely integrated with industrial and economic needs set forth by the “Made in China 2025” initiative. The changes observed in the amended VE Law emphasize the development of ‘*suzhi*’ and ‘talent’ to meet China’s goals for industrial modernization. All these changes highlight the cultivation of practical skills and the enhancement of the workforce’s quality and adaptability, aligning with neoliberal ideals of efficiency and competitiveness.

At the same time, higher education continues to stress scientific research, yet it too has become more commodified, treating students and their educational pathways as marketable assets within the job market. This divergence reflects the distinct roles that vocational and higher education are expected to play in China’s socio-economic development. Such differences also indicate the central government’s power in shaping and directing educational policies, to make sure that both streams of education work together to support the nation’s socioeconomic strategies and the evolving needs of its economy. The redefined role of both streams not only serves to support China’s industrial strategy but also intertwines with the nation’s socio-political objectives, showing how the government integrates educational policies within the national development agenda.

Moreover, the comprehensive amendment to the VE Law also aims to elevate vocational education to be on par with general education and elevate its traditionally lesser status within Chinese society. However, despite the government’s intention to position vocational education not merely as an alternative or secondary path, the outcomes fall short of the policy intentions. For the

next chapter, I will explore the actual vocational schooling experiences of migrant students. The disparities point to the instrumental use of vocational education reform by the government as a tool to stabilize the social order and encourage ongoing capital accumulation, sometimes at the cost of addressing the systemic issues affecting marginalized groups in the education sector.

Chapter 3 The Amended Vocational Education Law and Migrant Students

1. Introduction

The *Vocational Education Law*, enacted in 1996, remained unchanged for 25 years before its first amendment in 2022. The amendment process began in 2008 when the National People's Congress (NPC) first proposed to update the Law (China Daily 2021). Over the following years, the Ministry of Education undertook the task of drafting the amendments, resulting in submissions reviewed in 2011 and 2020. However, the first attempt went through several rounds of deliberation but never managed to get actual progress due to contradictory views from various stakeholders (MoE 2023). It was not until 2021 that the second draft was approved by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (SCNPC) and forwarded to the NPC for voting (China Daily 2021).

This extensive amending process, from its initial proposal to the formulation of its framework and structure, involved multiple Ministries, vocational institutions and industry associations (MoE 2023). Although legislative procedures in China have grown more transparent, the precise dynamics remain largely concealed from the public. Publicly accessible information about the actual contents of the consultations and debates is limited. Therefore, the influence of different stakeholders on the amendment can only be gauged by examining the final terms of the Law. Investigating how the changes were collaboratively formulated and examining the evolution from the initial drafts to the final version of the amended VE Law could provide crucial perspectives on how different stakeholders interact with the proposed changes and understand how the Chinese government positions and understands vocational education. Therefore, for this chapter, I will focus on analyzing the amended VE Law as well as the previous drafts to track the evolution throughout its drafting process and the rationale behind the government's push for vocational education reform. I aim to look at the major themes and issues that emerged during the

drafting process and analyze the key debates and their implications following the enactment of the amended VE Law.

Key policy documents such as the Implementation Plan on National Vocational Education Reform, Opinions of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education and China's Education Modernization Plan Towards 2035 constitute a series and the latest efforts in government policy designed to improve and reform vocational education (State Council 2019b; 2019a; 2021a). The logic behind this significant reform is that a modernized vocational education system needs to be established to better prepare the workforce to meet current and future economic demands, supporting China's ambition to upgrade its manufacturing and industrial sectors (Zenglein and Holzmann 2019). Furthermore, as President Xi emphasized in his speech at the national education conference, strengthening this sector is important for fostering the talent and skills to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation (Xinhua News 2021b).

However, there is a gap between this 'Chinese Dream', which is interpreted as the combination of both Confucian ideals and contemporary profit-oriented capitalism, and the actual experience of 'class sorting' faced by migrant students affected by vocational education policies (Woronov 2016; Brown 2022). The government's instrumental approach to vocational education reform often diverges from the lived experience of migrant youth. Many scholars argue that the primary aim of elevating the status of vocational education is to create a stable social environment supportive of sustained and adaptive capital accumulation in response to changing economic conditions (Liu and Hardy 2023; Hong 2010). Given this context, I will explore the following research questions in this chapter:

10) What were the key factors driving the amendment of the VE Law, and specifically

how did various stakeholders such as government agencies influence the final provision of the Law?

11) How do the educational experiences and social integration of migrant students reflect the socio-political effects of neoliberal reforms and state policies in China?

Understanding neoliberal practices as involving both economic and social governance, I aim to investigate the state's attempt to shape vocational institutions that align with the market economy while normalizing and trying to calm the tensions among different social classes through vocational education (Hong 2010; Hansen and Woronov 2013). Within this broader context of vocational reform, I also aim to examine the state-supported expansion of vocational education targeting specifically rural migrants. I chose this program for in-depth analysis because it represents a strategically planned and government-led initiative that aims to redefine governance priorities under the new policy framework. Moreover, it involves not just educational policies but pedagogical practices that significantly influence class dynamics and identities in China (Hong 2010; Woronov 2016; Ling 2015).

The empirical data for this chapter comes primarily from the relevant government websites and mainstream news media in mainland China. The opaque nature of China's law and policy-making processes makes it difficult to have a direct methodological analysis of the legislative process. Therefore, most information about actual policymaking comes from publicly available documents. Additionally, I will also rely on secondary data to depict the everyday life of migrant vocational students and analyze how rural migrant students navigate the process of inclusion and exclusion in vocational schools. I will situate the analysis within the ethnographic details that scholars have observed and documented in China. I will also examine how migrant vocational students interact with the infrastructure and environment of vocational institutions and assess how

government educational policies influence their educational and social integration. Specifically, I will explore how the state attempts to reconcile differing class interests through vocational education reform and how this interacts with the state's governance under neoliberal influence.

2. Amendment Process of the VE Law

2.1 Brief history of vocational education law in China

In July 1994, the State Council issued the Opinions on the Implementation of the Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China which in Article 17, emphasized the “strengthening the educational legal system and the governance of education according to law” (State Council 1994). The document stressed the need to accelerate the pace of legislative processes in education and called for the urgent formulation of several education laws. The legal realization of this document came with the enactment of the VE Law in 1996, which mandated the state to establish and enhance a structured vocational education system.

The original VE Law was developed under the context of enormous upheaval, with Deng leading China towards a “market-oriented socialist economy”. This era focused on prioritizing economic development and modernization through major policy reforms and increased international cooperation (Tsang 2000, 590–91). Since its inception, the VE Law has positioned vocational education as a state concern and as an engine for economic development, social progress, and employment assurance.

Following the enactment of the VE Law in 1996, it was not until 2008 that proposals for its amendment were first considered. It was at the legislative working meeting of the Standing Committee of the 11th National People's Congress that the amendment of the VE Law was prioritized (MoE 2023). This amendment was the only legislative plan for education laws during

that session, and it was requested to be completed within five years. In 2010, the Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020) again highlighted the necessity of ‘building and refining a legal system for education.’ The Plan specifically stated that the VE Law needed to be updated to align with the evolving needs of economic and social development and education reform.

Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the leadership under Xi Jinping has placed a significant emphasis on advancing the development of vocational education. Under Xi’s guidance, the Implementation Plan on National Vocational Education Reform (IPNVER) was passed in 2019. This plan was followed by the release of 15 relevant policy documents and deployment documents within three months, establishing a framework for vocational education development over the next 5 to 10 years (Liu and Hardy 2023). All these policies were designed to further leverage vocational education as an engine for economic growth and social development (Liu and Hardy 2023). Over five to ten years’ time under the plan, the vocational education system is set to gradually shift from a government-led framework to one that is driven by the market. Enterprises are strongly encouraged to support the development and delivery of vocational education, including the establishment of practical training bases (State Council 2019).

Under this context, the amended VE Law was designed to support the primary objective of enhancing employment opportunities and meeting industrial growth demands. The ultimate goal is to provide a supply of high-*suzhi* human resources that are essential for accelerating economic and social development and strengthening the nation’s competitiveness on a global scale (State Council 2019a). The IPNVER, in alignment with Xi’s directives on education, outlines the strategic design for vocational education in this new era (Liu and Hardy 2023).

2.2 Timeline of the drafting process for the Amended VE Law

Since the start of the amendment process in 2008, the Ministry of Education established a working group composed of educational professionals and experts from relevant departments to draft the amendments to the VE Law (MoE 2023). By 2009, the working group had mobilized experts from various Ministries, industrial enterprises, scientific research institutes, and vocational institutions to conduct field research and investigation in several provinces (Sui 2011; Xing 2020). By the end of 2009, the Ministry of Education's working group completed the first draft. In 2010, the Ministry of Education issued a notice requesting local education departments and vocational education institutions to provide feedback on the first draft (Sui 2011). After conducting a wide range of consultations, the working group revised the draft again and announced that the draft was ready for review by the NPC (Sui 2011). However, the first draft failed to go to the final stage. The precise reasons for this failed attempt were kept from the public due to the opaque nature of the law-making process, with only vague explanations indicating the lack of inter-ministerial agreement among various stakeholders according to the Ministry of Education (MoE 2023). This represented the first attempt to amend the VE Law.

Since then, the amendments to the VE Law have been postponed. Between 2010 and 2018, the central government issued several policies aiming at enhancing vocational education, including the National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) the Modern Vocational Education System Construction Plan (2014-2020), and the Decision on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education system. These policy documents all proposed the idea of establishing mechanisms to encourage industry participation in the coordination of vocational programs and to support stakeholder participation in their development. This concept later emerged as one of the biggest changes in the amendments to the VE Law.

It was in 2018 that the Standing Committee of the 13th National People’s Congress (NPC), resumed the amendment of VE Law as part of its legislative planning (Xing 2020). In the following year, the State Council issued the Implementation Plan for the Reform of National Vocational Education to support the legislative effort. This plan explicitly showed the direction of the reform of vocational education to align with the labour force demands and set specific requirements for the amendment of the VE Law, such as promoting the integration of vocational schools with industry and establishing a vocational education system that is supported by various bodies (State Council 2019). Based on this plan, in December 2019, the Ministry of Education released its second draft and solicited opinions from the public (Xing 2020). In 2021, this draft reached the final stages of review and voting at the NPC, leading to the Law’s enactment in April 2022. Following this, local governments have successively established specific regulations or measures to implement the amended VE Law.

The table below presents the development of the VE Law from its initial enactment in 1996 through various drafts to the amended version of 2022. It shows both the continuities and changes within the legislative framework governing vocational education over this period.

Table 6. Comparative Chart of Vocational Education Law Drafts

Feature	1996 VE Law	2011 Draft	2019 Draft	2022 VE Law
Key Focus	Education system, implementation and guarantee of VE.	Expanding roles of stakeholders, detailed roles for educators, and industry participation.	Integration of features of previous Law and draft.	Further refinement of the VE system, and alignment with economic demands and emphasis on legal structures.
Total Chapters	5	9	8	8
Total Articles	40	73	60	69
General Provisions	11 Articles	11 Articles	11 Articles	13 Articles

The System of VE	5 Articles	-	6 Articles	6 Articles
Implementation of VE	9 Articles	-	11 Articles	13 Articles
The Guarantee of VE	13 Articles	-	7 Articles	9 Articles
Vocational Institutions and Training Programs	-	16 Articles	9 Articles	10 Articles
Teachers and Education Recipients	-	15 Articles	9 Articles	10 Articles
Industry Guidance and Participation	-	8 Articles	-	-
Government Responsibilities	-	11 Articles	-	-
Legal Liability	-	6 Articles	5 Articles	5 Articles
Social Support	-	4 Articles	-	-
Supplementary Provisions	2 Articles	2 Articles	2 Articles	2 Articles

The 1996 VE Law, consisting of 5 chapters and 40 articles, was designed to establish a basic legal framework for vocational education from the ground up. It reflects China's broader legislative strategy during its economic reform era, aiming to create a structured environment for market-driven growth. As Clarke argues, the majority of the Chinese state's legislative activities since economic reform are aimed at providing a legal framework supportive of a market economy (cited in F. Xu 2011, 58). By establishing a legal framework for vocational education, the Law clearly stated that it sought to standardize and support the development of a skilled workforce, essential for the 'economic and social development and employment'. Although general and short, the Law focused on the overall system structure, implementation and supportive measures. It also lays the groundwork for future expansions and reforms.

The 2011 draft reflects a significant expansion and bold changes, and it further shows the influence of the market economy on the legislation. It expanded to 9 chapters and 73 articles,

almost doubling the previous version. This version reflected a more detailed and proactive approach, introducing the roles of teachers and students, and most importantly, incorporating industry participation and other social actors in developing vocational education. The overall structure and framework also represented a significant departure from the original Law. By 2019, the second draft was refined to 8 chapters and 60 articles and seemed to synthesize and integrate the elements of the previous two versions together. While this version did not specifically dedicate chapters to industry and social support like the 2011 draft, these aspects were subtly incorporated into the specific articles, reflecting a more sophisticated approach that integrated broader societal and industrial needs without overly prescriptive measures. The structure and framework of this draft showed greater similarity with the 1996 original version. In the final 2022 version, the structure of the 2019 draft was largely preserved, with only minor changes to specific articles.

The actual drafting process of the law went over more than a decade. One can assume that the extensive revision process also mirrored the disagreements among stakeholders regarding the necessary changes, the responsibilities for implementation, the execution methods, and the desired outcomes. Thus, this sets the stage for the following section, in which I aim to focus on investigating the dynamics of competition and collaboration in the drafting process among different stakeholders and examine how they contribute to the final amendment of the Law.

2.3 Major themes and issues raised during the drafting process

2.3.1 Stakeholders involved in the drafting process

Due to vocational education's unique role in employment and labour force development in China, it has historically been jointly managed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of

Human Resources and Social Security since 1978 (X. Wu and Ye 2018). By that time, secondary and higher vocational institutions were to be under the purview of the Ministry of Education, while the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security were responsible for the non-formal vocational education system such as technical schools and various vocational training programs (X. Wu and Ye 2018; J. Wu 1996). Additionally, the State Council also bears the responsibility of coordinating this sector across various levels.

This approach is not unique to China but rather a common international phenomenon. For example, vocational institutions in France are co-managed by different Ministries with different funding sources and goals (CEDEFOP 2019). The Ministry of National Education is involved through public school curricula, while the Ministry of Higher Education is responsible for relevant research and innovation related to vocational education. The Ministry of Labour focuses on formulating and implementing government policies on labour, employment, and vocational training (CEDEFOP 2019). In Germany, vocational institutions are managed by the education departments of both the Federal Government and the States. However, the Ministry of Economics and Technology along with other relevant ministries, also have the authority to recognize vocational training occupations through legislative acts officially (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2012).

However, the issues of multiple administrative bodies and overlapping responsibilities sometimes could lead to problems of unclear responsibilities and complications in the decision-making process. These challenges were particularly evident in the drafting process of the VE law in China. According to the Ministry of Education, this complexity was a key reason the 2011 draft failed to go through the final stage. Even though the specific reasons remain unrevealed to the public, the Ministry's official website explicitly stated that there were disagreements among

relevant ministries regarding the scope of changes in vocational education that prevented the amendments from moving forward smoothly (MoE 2023).

In order to solve this problem, shortly after the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) resumed the amendment process of the *Vocational Education Law*, the Ministry of Education requested the State Council to establish a better system to support the amendment work (State Council 2018a). In the same year, the State Council approved the establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Vocational Education under the State Council (referred to as the Joint Conference). This Joint Conference consists of nine departments and agencies, including the Ministry of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, the State Taxation Administration and the National Rural Revitalization Administration (State Council 2018a). The Ministry of Education taking the lead in this group, coordinating efforts to streamline the process of the amendment.

The deliberate inclusion or selection of these nine agencies indicates how the Chinese government intends to approach vocational education reform and how the Chinese government perceive and positions vocational education. Each ministry brings its sector-specific insights and ensures that vocational education reform is not treated in isolation. As a matter of fact, the Joint Conference system is designed to embed vocational education within larger economic, industrial, social and financial frameworks. The role of the Ministry of Education goes without saying, here I want to explore the roles and responsibilities of the rest of the agencies. I will examine how their specific functions contribute to the evolution of vocational education and reveal how these changes

are reflected in the amended Law. To achieve this, I have created a comparative table (see appendix 1) to compare the 1996 Law and the 2022 Law, aligning specific articles with corresponding ministry responsibilities to identify new perspectives or changes this Joint-conference system brought to the amended Law.

The order in which the nine agencies are introduced in the Joint Conference is also worth noting, as it indicates their respective importance or relevance regarding vocational education. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) are the top two ministries mentioned in the system. The NDRC is responsible for overall national economic planning and social development, including medium- and long-term development plans (NDRC 2024). At the same time, the MIIT is responsible for determining China's industrial planning, policies, and standards and monitoring the daily operations of industrial branches (MIIT 2024). Placing these two ministries at the forefront of the Joint Conference system points to the direction of vocational education reform - a closer alignment with national economic development and industrial planning.

The NDRC's role has significantly evolved. Initially referenced in just one article in the 1996 Law, the NDRC now has three detailed articles in the amended VE Law, with an expanded focus that includes employment, entrepreneurship, and industrial structural adjustment. Between 2001 and 2003, the NDRC arranged for a total of 800 million yuan from State bond funds to support vocational education. In 2004, the NDRC further proposed the "Special Construction Plan for Promoting the Development of Vocational Education," which aimed to support the construction of 1,000 county vocational education centers over four years, with an annual allocation of 500 million yuan (MoE 2004). This Plan represented an investment of 1.5 billion yuan over three years,

and it demonstrated an innovative use of State bond funds to strengthen vocational education infrastructure nationwide (MoE 2004; NDRC 2023).

The MIIT has also stepped up its role in the amended VE Law compared to its subtle presence in the 1996 law. The amended Law now includes three articles that emphasizing the integration of industrial needs with vocational education. This change specifically focuses on developing skills essential for the manufacturing and technology sectors, which are areas crucial to advancing China's industrial strategy guided by the MIC 2025. These changes all demonstrate a strong push to combine vocational training more closely with China's economic growth and industry needs, making sure that education and economic goals go hand in hand.

Besides the economic and industrial integration, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and the National Rural Revitalization Administration's roles in the amended VE Law are also worth exploring. Specifically, it is worth investigating the latter one as an agency within the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs selected to be in the Joint Conference system. Formed in 2021, the National Rural Revitalization Administration took over from the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development after Xi's declaration of a 'complete victory' in eradicating absolute poverty in China (Xinhua News 2021a). Despite its ongoing focus on combating poverty and promoting development in rural areas, the agency has removed the explicit reference to poverty alleviation in its name, aligning with the government's assertion that extreme poverty has been eradicated in the country.

Since taking office, President Xi Jinping's government has granted massive funding to what is now China's most extensive poverty-reduction campaign. From 2016 to 2020, China allocated 20 billion yuan per year to end extreme poverty, totalling 146.1 billion yuan by 2020 (State Council 2020). It is argued that the issue of poverty in China is highly politicized as the

government is concerned that poverty could lead to social instability and undermine the regime's legitimacy (Duckett and Wang 2014; Boullenois 2020). Throughout these initiatives, vocational education has played a crucial role. In 2022, the Ministry of Education released the White Paper on the Development of Vocational Education in China. According to the report, more than 70 percent of students in vocational schools come from rural areas, and they have become a driving force in the fight against poverty and the revitalization of the countryside (Ministry of Education 2022).

Furthermore, the introduction of the National Rural Revitalization Administration in the Joint Conference System has also shifted the amended VE Law from simply promoting vocational education in rural areas to establishing a comprehensive rural-oriented vocational education system. This new system focuses on organizing agricultural skill training, fostering entrepreneurship, and enhancing employment opportunities and aims to cultivate and attract high-quality talents to support rural revitalization.

In 2021, the State Council issued the Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talents which explicitly states that “the key to rural revitalization lies in the people” (State Council 2021b). This logic underlines that poverty stems fundamentally from human subjectivity itself. As Yan (2008) argues, to effectively eradicate poverty, the poverty-relief strategies must undergo a fundamental transformation from addressing financial poverty to enhancing individual capabilities and self-reliance and implementing the strategy of ‘cultural poverty relief.’ The same logic applies to the changes in the amended VE Law. The shift is expressed as requiring rural people to change themselves: from being passive recipients of vocational training to active participants who pursue skills acquisition, being more entrepreneurial, and transforming themselves to the kind of high-*suzhi* talents to achieve rural revitalization. The amended VE Law specifically pointed out that the

means to achieve this is through vocational education. Article 10 clearly states that the state will support vocational education focused on rural areas. This includes organizing training on farming skills, entrepreneurship and labour skills for people returning to the countryside, and vocational training, so as to train high-*suzhi* talent for rural revitalization.

It is this discursive link between *suzhi*, poverty alleviation and rural revitalization that mobilize the rural people to seek vocational education as a path to achieve their goals. This change in the amended VE Law further indicates that the VE reform is not only focusing on the ‘economic logic’ but serves another key purpose, which is to produce new human beings who have the consciousness to turn themselves into high-quality human capital to drive economic and social improvements (Yan 2008). As Jayasuriya(2006) argues, there has been a growing awareness worldwide of the social shortcomings of economic development overlooked in the era of ‘hard-edged neoliberalism’. As a result, within the neoliberalism framework, many social policies have been adapted to foster the ‘socialization of neoliberalism’ by aiming for goals like poverty alleviation and establishing social safety nets. However, the essence of these policies is to gradually integrate and co-opt citizens and societies into the broader market-driven agenda in the long run (Jayasuriya 2006; Hong 2010).

Besides the focus on rural revitalization, the amendment also emphasizes a critical evolution in the financial structuring and funding sources for VE. Building on the foundation set by the 1996 VE law which advocated for diverse funding channels, the new amendments further emphasizing the optimization of expenditure structures and ensure that the investments are meeting the workforce demands. Most importantly, the amendments also expand funding sources by facilitating private and international donations to vocational training programs.

While foreign stakeholders are banned from investing in China's compulsory education segments, vocational education is an area that explicitly welcomes foreign investment. Given the CCP's cautious approach to foreign investments in the educational sector, this openness reflects China's strategic intent to upskill its workforce as a pillar of continued economic growth, aligning vocational education with broader economic plans and inviting foreign investment to play a role. Moreover, the amendments also granted the local governments more authority, such as granting local governments to use the unemployment insurance funds to support workers in upgrading their vocational skills. In 2023, the NDRC along with seven other departments jointly published the guideline on the Implementation Plan to empower and enhance the integration of industry and education through vocational education for the years 2023 to 2025 (NDRC 2023). A key feature of this Plan is its focus on categorizing and reviewing the three main types of funding sources for VE: allocations from the central budget, local government special bonds, and local government medium- and long-term loans. More importantly, the Plan promotes the use of diverse financial resources at all levels, including commercial loans, industry-specific special bonds in the social sector, funds from international financial organizations, and foreign government loans. It can be said that the central government is leveraging all parties to fund and develop vocational education and shifting its fiscal responsibilities to other social actors (NDRC 2023; China Daily 2023b). This flexibility enables more targeted and effective use of available funding resources, directly benefiting vocational training programs.

The Joint Conference system has also engaged the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) in this effort. SASAC has been critical in leveraging state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to support vocational education. Specifically, Article 50 of the amended VE Law encourages SOEs to offer internships and accept students from

vocational schools. This approach not only provides practical training opportunities but also seamlessly integrates vocational education into the workforce development pipeline. Not only in the SOEs, since 2013, BMW Brilliance Automotive Ltd. (BBA), based in Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning, has operated a vocational training program in collaboration with local vocational schools. This program is designed to create practical and industry-related courses that meet the dual needs of educational institutions and enterprises. Currently, BBA is working in partnership with two vocational colleges to expand this program. Each year, the company selects students from these institutions for on-the-job internships, offering them potential employment opportunities upon completion of their studies (Xinhua News 2023). At the same time, the State Taxation Administration (STA) plays an essential role in incentivizing private sector involvement. Article 27 introduces financial incentives for enterprises deeply involved in school-enterprise cooperation, including tax and fee reductions, thereby promoting industry-education integration.

Collectively, the roles of the Ministry of Finance, SASAC, and STA, as well as financial planning and regulatory enhancements, highlight the government's intention to integrate vocational education more closely with market and industrial developments. This shift promotes greater market independence for vocational education, transitioning it from a primarily public service to one with strong market characteristics. The amendments aim to shape vocational education as a more dynamic sector capable of independently engaging with and adapting to market and industry demands.

2.3.2 Current Vocational Education System Structure in China

The current education system in China mainly consists of two stages. The first stage, as mandated by the *Compulsory Education Law*, is compulsory and lasts nine years. This includes

six years of primary education followed by three years of lower-secondary education, which students may complete in either an academic or a technical and vocational school (Wang and Guo 2019). The second stage is non-compulsory, including upper secondary level education and higher levels.

As illustrated in Figure 3, after completing compulsory education, examinations begin to play a critical role in educational stratification and mobility in China (Hannum, An, and Cherng 2011). The Chinese education system is often described as a model of ‘meritocracy in action,’ where access to each higher level of education is strictly determined by students’ exam results (Jin and Ball 2019). Therefore, students need to take the High-school Entrance Exam (HSEE) to determine their further placement. Based on the examination results, students are streamed to either academic high schools or secondary vocational schools according to their academic ability. The current ‘meritocratic’ education system deeply aligns with the country’s cultural heritage, reflecting its historical ties to the educational structures and selection processes back to Imperial China (G. Wang 2022b). Woronov (2016) argues that the HSEE can be understood as a form of ‘class sorting’ in China, where students who do not perform well in the exam are directed to pathways that lead to working-class positions. The upper secondary education normally lasts three years, after which students compete to enter tertiary level education or directly enter the job market (Hannum, An, and Cherng 2011). Furthermore, Huang argues that examinations essentially serve as tools of centralization by the central government. Both the HSEE and the National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as ‘Gaokao,’ are effective control strategies, which are overseen and determined by national authorities such as the Ministry of Education (Huang, Wang, and Li 2015).

For academic upper-secondary students, the HSEE is only the first step. Students need to attend the College Entrance Examination (CEE) to enter tertiary education. The test results may lead them to an academic university or a vocational college. In contrast, a vocational upper secondary graduate only needs to attend a transitional exam, which is normally carried out by individual colleges to advance to vocational colleges (Chen and Pastore 2024). Meanwhile, these graduates also have the option to take the National College Entrance Examination. This alternative path might appear to be a viable choice, but it comes with certain restrictions. Specifically, it imposes restrictions on the majors available to them and limits the choice of academic universities they can attend (Chen and Pastore 2024).

At the same time, under the general education system, the current vocational education framework is hierarchically structured into three levels: primary, secondary, and higher, with the majority of vocational institutions operating at the secondary level. Primary vocational education is integrated into the nine-year compulsory education system. These programs typically require three to four years and integrate general junior high school curricula with specific vocational and technical training (X. Wu and Ye 2018, 9). Aiming to equip students with practical skills and general knowledge, these programs are mostly situated in remote and less-developed rural areas. However, the importance of primary vocational education is drastically decreasing as the focus shifts towards secondary vocational education (X. Wu and Ye 2018, 9).

Secondary vocational education, as specified in the 1996 Law, was first designed to be the backbone of China's vocational education system as it serves the practical purpose of imparting technical knowledge and cultivating skilled workers when higher vocational education was less common. According to the 2022 Statistical Bulletin on Education Development released by the Ministry of Education, secondary vocational schools enrolled 4,847,800 students, accounting for

approximately 34 percent of the total junior high school graduates (MoE 2022a). Despite this significant intake, the state continues to push for a greater balance in enrollment between general high schools and secondary vocational schools in many policy documents.

In 2014, the Guidelines for Effective Enrollment Management in Secondary Vocational Schools explicitly stated that streaming should guide 50 percent of junior middle school graduates to secondary vocational schools. It was the first time that a MoE policy document specified such a target ratio. Building on this directive, the 2021 edition of the Guideline further reiterated the need for regions with a lower proportion of vocational to general education to invest more resources in secondary vocational education and to increase enrollment ratios.

Building upon the foundation of secondary vocational education, higher vocational education belongs to the education at tertiary levels. This level of education is provided by higher technical and vocational institutions that admit graduates from both general high schools and secondary vocational schools (X. Wu and Ye 2018, 11).

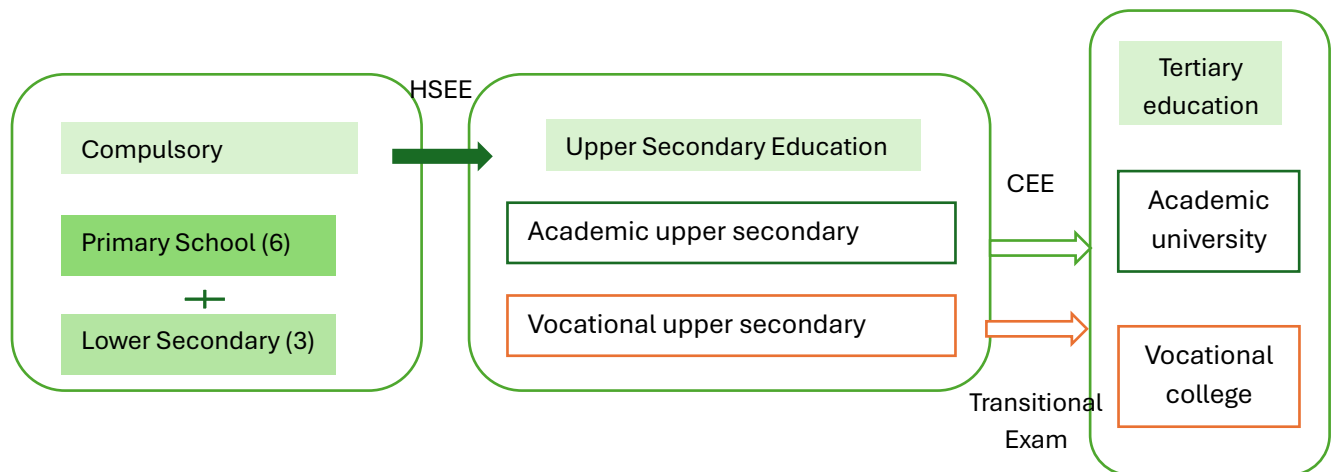


Figure 4. Education System in China

2.3.3 The Issue of the Streaming Policy

The streaming policy after the nine-year compulsory education has been a subject of significant debate and concern, primarily because of the deep-rooted stigma attached to vocational education (Schulte 2013). Therefore, one of the major and debatable changes during the VE law's amendment process is the streaming policy. The original 1996 VE Law mandated that the state shall implement the streaming of students at different stages mainly after junior middle school to strike the balance between general and vocational education. While the Law itself did not specify a target ratio, relevant policy documents issued by the MoE in 2014 clearly stated that 50 percent of graduates should be directed towards secondary vocational schools.

Following the MoE's direction, provincial education departments have issued relevant documents and notices regarding this issue. For example, Fuyang City in Anhui Province requires separate admission processes for students from previous years, and top general high schools cannot admit students who retake the HSEE (China Education 2022). In Heilongjiang Province, middle schools are not allowed to recruit students who intend to repeat their studies, and retaking the HSEE is strictly prohibited. Furthermore, schools in Luzhou City, Sichuan Province, are not allowed to enroll students who retake the HSEE (China Education 2022). Woronov (2016) contends that the HSEE has become more daunting than the notoriously competitive CEE, as failing the HSEE equals blocked access to China's expanding urban middle class. Under these strict measures, the streaming policy has brought tremendous pressure on parents and students. The underlying fear is that pursuing vocational education might result in downward social mobility, relegating students to a lower socioeconomic class.

Following these strict measures, the change in the VE Law regarding the streaming policy has attracted significant attention. In the amended Law, Article 17 has been revised to: "The state

shall improve the educational structure, balance educational resources, and advance the coordinated development of vocational education and general education at different stages after the completion of compulsory education based on local conditions.” The shift in terminology from ‘streaming’ to ‘coordinated development’ seems to suggest a softening of the compulsory aspects of the transition, reflecting a more flexible approach to educational planning that adapts to local needs.

This change quickly became a hot topic on Chinese social media, as it addressed a major source of anxiety among students and their parents. Only five days after the amended Law was adopted, many news outlets reported and interpreted that the language changes in the new law imply there would no longer be a strict division of students into vocational or general education after compulsory education (China Southern News 2022; Souhu News 2022; Daily Economic News 2022).

The Ministry of Education soon held a press conference to address and clarify that there were misinterpretations regarding this change. Chen Ziji, Director of the Ministry’s Department of Vocational and Adult Education, clarified that the amendments only aim to enhance the coordinated development of vocational and general education, emphasizing that both pathways are of equal importance (MoE 2022b). From the stance of the MoE, the Law does not aim to end the streaming policy but modifies it to be more adaptable and less rigid. Instead of a strict 50-50 split, the amended law introduces flexibility in the proportion of students directed towards vocational education, allowing adjustments based on local conditions. In another conference, Chen further stressed the necessity to hold onto the streaming policy. He highlighted that secondary vocational education has been instrumental in boosting employment and regional economic development and improving people’s livelihoods (China Daily 2022).

Despite the previous policy documents specifying a targeted 50-50 ratio between general and vocational education tracks, the actual distribution of students across different regions was never equal. In mainland China, the 31 provincial administrative regions are directly governed by the central government, yet each has its own economic and social development pattern and plans. Within the general guidelines set by the CCP and the Ministry of Education, provincial-level CCP committees and education departments have the flexibility to adjust regulations to better fit local economic needs (X. Liu 2020b). As a result, different provinces developed slightly varied policies concerning the student ratio between general and vocational tracks to suit their specific local contexts. According to the MoE (2021b) Education Statistics, in 2021, Beijing directed 70.9% of students towards general education tracks, significantly above the national target, with Tianjin at 65.9% and Shanghai at 64.6%. However, regions like Sichuan directed only 52.9% of students towards general education, with Guizhou at 53.2%, Jiangxi at 53.4%, and Xinjiang at 53.9%.

In more economically developed areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, a larger proportion of students have the opportunity to pursue general education, which is typically seen as superior and linked to greater educational and career opportunities. These regions often enjoy more educational funding and resources, and broader access to top-tier universities, which may explain the higher enrollments in general education. However, less developed regions tend to adhere more strictly to the targeted ratio, possibly reflecting the limited educational resources or a strategic emphasis on aligning education with local economic needs, such as quickly fulfilling job demands in specific industries.

In this sense, the HSEE effectively serves as a means for class sorting, as the government has already predetermined the quota for students directed towards vocational education, no matter how they perform in the HSEE or their personal preferences. This situation highlights the direct

role of both central and local governments in leveraging HSEE as an assessment tool to reinforce the existing social hierarchy rather than alleviate it. According to Allen (2018), this meritocratic education system acts as a facilitator for neoliberalism. It encourages the fragmentation of individuals and extends competitive and entrepreneurial behaviors into every aspect of daily life.

With the amendment of the VE Law, the streaming policy has been modified to be more adaptable and flexible and allows for adjustments in student distribution based on local conditions. This change, while intended to provide flexibility, raises questions about potential inequities: will this change exacerbate the existing disparity by further marginalizing less-developed regions in terms of access to general education? The regional disparity also reflects that developed areas not only have more resources but also an economic structure that supports the development of general education, while less developed areas are stuck with the pre-set ratio and limited opportunities. This further creates a divided educational system where students' futures are heavily influenced by their geographic location, potentially perpetuating the existing cycles and restricting social mobility.

3. Rural Migrant Students and Vocational Education

Who exactly are the students being channelled into vocational education? A study conducted by the China Development Research Foundation (2019), which examined 30 secondary vocational schools across Guangdong, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces, revealed that 70% of their students come from rural areas. The Ministry of Education's 2022 White Paper on the Development of Vocational Education in China not only confirms this statistic but also celebrates it as a significant achievement. According to the Ministry of Education, the high enrollment rate

of rural students in vocational education is seen as a crucial driving force for rural revitalization, transforming these students into contributors to their local economies (Ministry of Education 2022).

Within this group of rural students, there is a significant proportion of them are migrant students who have followed their rural parents to the city. China's economic opening-up policy has dramatically increased the disparity between its rural and interior regions and its wealthy coastal regions. Over the past several decades, hundreds of millions of people have left their rural hometowns and flooded into urban cities in search of higher-paying jobs and a better life. By 2021, already 292 million migrant workers had settled in China's major urban areas (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). The rural subsistence economy has played a critical role in supporting the labour-intensive capital accumulation process by providing a cheap and flexible supply of rural labour (Hong 2010; Andreas 2009)

In contrast to previous decades, a growing number of migrant workers now bring their families with them to urban areas, rather than leaving their children in their hometowns (Liang and Chen 2007). This shift in migration patterns has exacerbated the educational challenges faced by migrant children. The household registration system in China, known as the *Hukou* system, was originally established by the Chinese government to control population mobility and is now considered the primary barrier preventing migrant children from having access to the same educational resources as their urban peers (J. Li, Gu, and Zhang 2015).

Under the *Hukou* system, Chinese citizens are required to register and obtain their household registration status and are only permitted to work, live, and attend school at their registered place (Kwong 2004). In the 1980s, following the economic reforms and opening up, and to address urban labour needs, rural migrant workers were gradually permitted to work and reside in urban areas (Chan 2010). However, their legal identity remained that of "peasants," and were

systematically denied access to certain state-funded urban social services, including education. Migrant children inherited the rural *hukou* from their parents and, therefore, are pushed into a similar life trajectory as their parents, referred to as “fate” by their parents and “class reproduction” by scholars (Woronov 2015).

Migrant children, even those who were born and raised in urban cities, are still considered ‘rural’ rather than ‘urban’ and certainly are not treated as ‘local’ residents. According to the MoE’s (2014) Education Statistics, approximately 60% of local junior high school graduates nationwide were able to continue their education in general high schools. However, this opportunity was afforded to less than 40% of migrant students nationwide. More specifically, in 2017, only 14.1% of rural migrant children in Guangzhou, a pioneer in China’s open policy and its most export-reliant province, managed to gain admission into general high schools. Similarly, in Shenzhen, the figure was around 24% (Han 2019).

At the same time, according to the 2022 Statistical Bulletin on Education Spending released by MoE, investment in vocational education saw the most significant increase. Specifically, funding for secondary and higher vocational education expenditure reached 323.8 billion yuan and 339.2 billion yuan, with a year-on-year increase of 9.1 percent and 10.5 percent respectively (MoE 2022c). Additionally, the Ministry of Finance (2022) reports that the central government has steadily increased its investment in the transfer of funds to local vocational education programs. In 2022, these investments reached 30.257 billion yuan. This figure represents a 2.5 billion yuan increase from the previous year. The increase is higher than the overall growth in education fund transfers for the same period (MoF 2022).

Although the state has invested significantly in developing and expanding vocational schools, many argue that vocational education has failed to provide migrant youth with adequate

opportunities for upward mobility but only serves to achieve a desired workforce for economic development and social stability (Koo 2016; Ling 2015). This critique is part of a broader discussion on how vocational education expansion is intended to address the rural-urban divide and social tensions caused by China's economic reforms (Hansen and Woronov 2013; Woronov 2015). As Hong (2010) argues, the Chinese government's focus on rural development, vocational education, and employment shows an innovative approach that tries to integrate social issues with economic goals. These policy shifts towards expanding vocational education to migrant students can be interpreted from several perspectives. On one hand, this trend can be understood as a reaction to widespread criticisms and social tension, aiming to mitigate any challenges to the government's stability. In this sense, it addresses shortcomings or problems brought by the previous economic reforms. At the same time, these policies can also be seen as a progressive response to the economic advancements China has experienced. As China went through economic policies of opening up, urbanization and increased higher income levels, there has been a growing focus on enhancing educational opportunities for marginalized groups. Thus, these policies reflect a response to the achievements of the economic transition and aim to foster an environment that supports continuous capital accumulation. Furthermore, these policies can also be seen as a strategic move to distribute benefits in a way that strengthens government authority and consolidates the CCP's power in the face of new political and economic circumstances (Naughton 2008).

In the meantime, vocational education in China is closely linked to the nation's role in the global market economy. Since its economic reform, China has been developing an economy driven by foreign direct investment that is characterized by low wages and low-tech export manufacturing (Hong 2010). From 2000 to 2015, manufacturing contributed to about 32% of China's GDP and

accounted for 89% of its merchandise exports, making China more specialized in the sector than any other large developing economy (World Bank 2024).

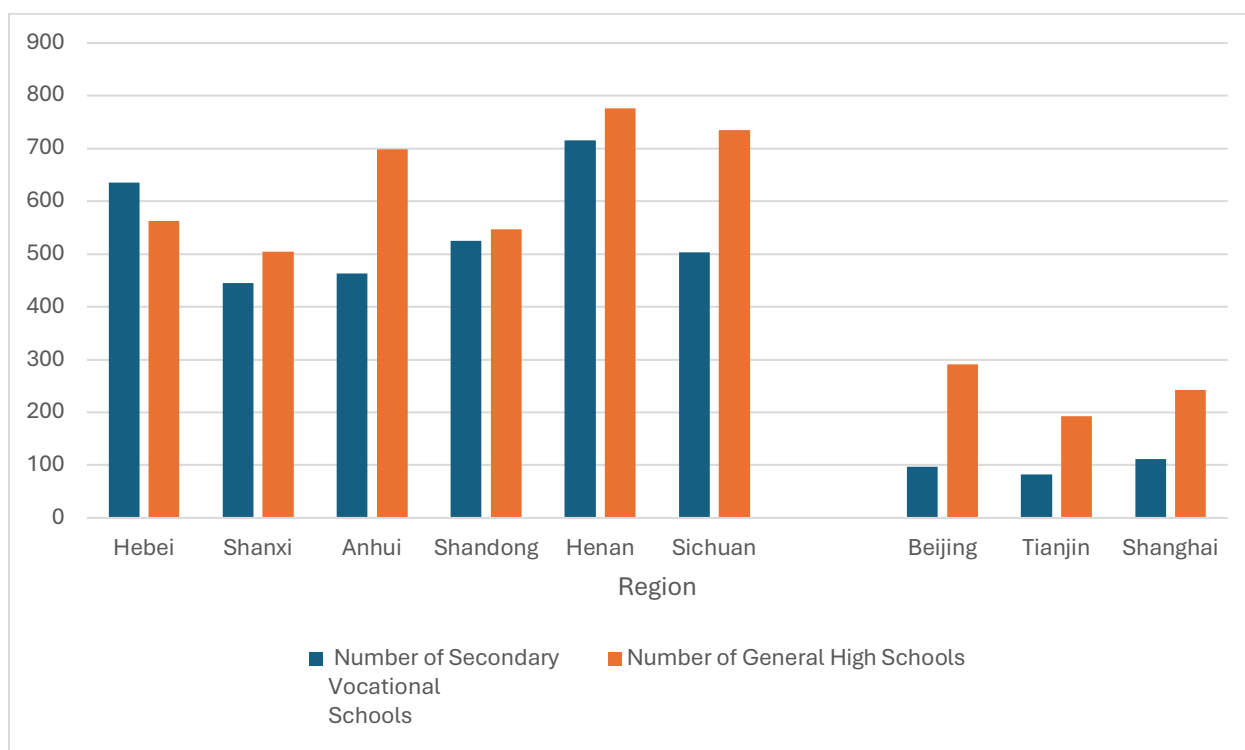
Despite significant economic growth, its impact on employment has been rather limited. Millions of rural migrant workers have been integrated into the urban industrial economy, often finding themselves in temporary, low-paid, and manual jobs, usually unwanted by urban dwellers (Chan 2010). Initially, enterprises benefited from the availability of these low-cost and flexible rural workers. However, many contend that such an exploitative and informal employment model is unlikely to sustain China's labour-intensive economic growth in the long run (Chan 2010; Dustmann 2015; Liu, Zhang, and Feng 2021). Furthermore, the marginalized status of migrant workers can even lead to social instability (Keung Wong, Li, and Song 2007; Knight 2013). During the 2008 global economic crisis, the previous situation of labour shortage quickly turned into unemployment among migrant workers (Chan 2010; Cai and Chan 2009). In response to the extensive rural-to-urban migration and the paradoxical situation of labour surplus and unmet labour demands in coastal manufacturing sectors, secondary vocational education has emerged as a strategic institutional solution to stabilize the labour market (Hong 2010).

Given that China's current economic growth strategy still heavily relies on low-cost and flexible migrant workers, vocational education became the handmaid to further mobilize and commodify the labour force. By 2013, labour-exporting interior provinces, such as Hebei, Shanxi, Anhui, Shandong, Henan, and Sichuan, had already expanded their secondary vocational education to a larger size. In Hebei, the number had even surpassed that of its academic secondary education (MoE 2008b). Meanwhile, major cities like Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai still enjoy the benefit of having larger academic secondary schools than vocational ones. To support this strategy, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education initiated significant financial aid measures in

2006, introducing the Opinions on the Establishment and Improvement of the Financial Aid Policy System (MoE 2008b). This initiative allocated 800 million yuan to assist 800,000 economically disadvantaged rural students to complete their vocational education (MoE 2008a). This comprehensive financial aid framework, according to the Ministry of Education is aimed to expand its reach and contribute to educational equity. However, this framework specifically targets rural migrant students to support them to fit into the larger goal of transforming vocational education into a crucial tool for developing a skilled and adaptable workforce ready to meet the demands of China's industrial and economic ambitions.

Figure 5. Comparison of Secondary Vocational and General High Schools across Provinces in 2013

(Data sourced from MoE 2013 National Education Statistics)



Furthermore, in 2017, the State Council's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for National Education specifically advocated for the expansion of senior high school education in the central and western

regions, with a particular focus on expanding secondary vocational education (State Council 2017). Given this demographic differentiation and policy direction, it is clear that the government intends to channel rural youth through vocational education from the interior provinces to urban employment. As early as 2003, the State Council has already advocated that major cities and eastern coastal regions should lower or waive tuition fees for rural students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and facilitate their employment, in order to enhance the transfer of new rural labour (State Council 2003). Notably, this target on rural education is also part of the agenda for the construction of a ‘new socialist countryside’ that started in 2006 and aimed at providing equitable educational opportunities (Ahlers and Schubert 2013). Despite these intentions, the language of “education justice” frequently appeared in government policies and was used by local authorities and enterprises to justify the exploitation of cheap student labour (Hong 2010).

With this underlying rationale of transferring and commodifying rural labour, the expansion of vocational education primarily serves industrial enterprises by providing a steady and cheap supply of student workers to sustain the labour-intensive mode of economic growth. Therefore, the vocational education system is in nature designed to train rural youth to view themselves as disciplined workers.

Based on the result of Woronov (2011a) and Ling (2015)’s ethnographic research in Nanjing and Shanghai, the second-class and inferior status of vocational schooling also fosters a culture of “passing time” among students, where migrant youth actively explore urban consumption and entertainment while disengaging from schoolwork. Skeggs’s (2014) research shows that working-class subjects in the UK are often marginalized and portrayed as having a ‘negative self of value,’ implying a lack of intrinsic worth. Similarly, migrant students are often perceived as lacking *suzhi*, which translates to a deficiency in the qualities required for academic

success (Lu, Koo, and Pun 2019). Teachers in vocational schools also contribute to the “passing-time” culture by giving unprepared lectures, assigning little homework and ignoring students’ lack of focus. However, the non-compliance and “passing time” culture of migrant students are not due to the cultural rejection of academic values, but rather a sense of deprivation brought on by their rural *hukou* status and stigmatization that vocational schooling falls short of the requirements of proper academic education.

Interestingly, such cultural practices do not perpetuate working-class cultural identities, but rather demonstrate that cultures have been internalised in vocational schools. Instead, the time and space provided by vocational education allow migrant students to explore, acquire, and become familiar with certain urban habitus and urban ways of living. Therefore, vocational schools further blur the line between rural and urban and enable migrant youth to form new social relations with their urban peers, which was impossible for their parents’ generation (Ling 2015, 113).

In addition, vocational schools not only serve as the unique site for migrant youth to challenge and cross the natural boundaries of rural and urban but also provide a transitional period for them to negotiate their identity and a sense of self from school to the labour market. Even though vocational education has long been viewed as a less desirable option than academic learning, it still gives parents and migrant youth the chance to live up to the idea that more education is better. Migrant families are willing to accept vocational education as a viable option for their children because it is still a way to avoid a future in farming and to secure a job that may offer greater financial stability than in the past (Hansen and Woronov 2013, 247).

The unique setting of vocational schools not only creates the conditions for migrant youth to explore the boundaries of rural and urban, but also exclusion and inclusion. Being excluded from higher education and upward mobility, migrant youth are by no means passive victims of

state policy. In fact, they demonstrate strong agency in exploring and challenging the traditional norms and principles underpinning their “rural identity”. By forming new social networks and bonding with local peers, migrant youth thereby actively integrate into urban life and empower themselves in a manner unimaginable to their parent’s generation (Ling 2015, 131).

As a result of the *hukou* barriers and associated restrictions on educational eligibility, the central government’s policy of institutional segregation of migrant youth emphasizes the direct involvement of the local state in the reproduction of a social hierarchy in which migrant youth fill the gap of economic needs and inherent the title of migrant workers from their parents. Migrant youth have a strong desire to obtain educational credentials, while only finding themselves with undesirable and low-wage jobs after completing vocational education.

Moreover, with the implementation of state-led policies on vocational education, I argue that a pluralistic perspective needs to be adopted to examine the development of vocational education in China. The expansion of vocational training has increased the chance for migrant youth to receive post-compulsory education, but it has failed to boost their chance for upward mobility. These young people’s futures are shaped by the neoliberal time and the global forces in labour markets, which only serves to intensify their sense of despair and frustration as they realize how difficult it is to climb up the social ladder and obtain an urban identity. Given the condition that such development is occurring in a complex context characterised by the influence of neoliberalism in conjunction with various ‘Chinese characteristics’, the future focus of vocational education should not only be economically driven but also to promote a more progressive and equitable approach to migrant youth (Koo 2016).

Conclusion

It is clear that the investment and expansion of secondary vocational education as an “inclusive” social institution for rural populations aligns with the state’s priority of developing and escalating its market economy and enhancing global competitiveness. This particular approach targeted the rural population as a mode of redistribution, under the term of ‘education justice’, not only redistributes resources but also extends neoliberal values to shape the formation of China’s future workforce.

As both Burchell (1991) and Rofel (2007) contend, neoliberalism involves not only embracing market freedom in the economic sector but also adopting a ‘technology of governing’. Providing greater access to vocational education for the rural population can be considered a revisionist strategy, which comes from neoliberalism under the guise of promoting educational justice (Hong 2010). To rationalize the endorsement and advocacy for the expansion of vocational education, the Chinese government frequently highlights in the media or government reports where rural students have improved their standard of living through vocational education.

Overall, the vocational education reform represents a more sophisticated and socially oriented mode of governance. What makes this new mode of governance unique is the neoliberal notion of redistribution combined with the centralized control of the Party-state’s authoritarian rule. However, this mode of governance has some limitations. Specifically, in secondary vocational education, the official discourse of ‘educational justice’ extends beyond merely moral or political terms. Instead, it combined the social concerns and economic priorities together. With this human capital approach, the government is trying to bypass the actual problem of the rural-urban divide and inequality rather than addressing the actual issue. Therefore, the tension between managing

conflicting interests and sustaining the established mode of economic growth and capital accumulation will continuously define China's governance mode (Hong 2010).

Conclusion

The vocational education reform in China has a profound impact on the nation's social and economic development, as it is not only closely connected with the country's economic advancements but also the lives of rural and migrant populations. Central to this reform is the state's strategic intent to develop a modern vocational education system that can better serve the country's economic ambitions. This ideal system was designed to support the ongoing capital accumulation within the global neoliberal context while at the same time managing class interests. Many argue that the necessity for vocational education reform is driven by global trends since China's reform and opening up to the world (Dahlstedt and Fejes 2019; Liu and Hardy 2021). Therefore, such changes are closely connected to China's ambition to achieve economic growth and to be the leading global manufacturing powerhouse. To achieve these ambitions, students are required to be entrepreneurial, master a skill and become flexible and adaptable to change.

Within this context, there arises a clear demand for a reformed educational model. Vocational education was given the purpose of cultivating a new type of students, equipped with targeted industry skills to fill the changing demands of the labor market. The new type of students should be willing to improve themselves and have a sense of responsibility for themselves and others.

In the context of China's education reform, political factors also play an undeniable role. The vocational education sector serves as an ideal place for the CCP to test its 'centralized decentralization' strategy as the central government sets national goals and standards for outcomes while shifting the fiscal burden and responsibility for implementation to local governments and private enterprises (Karlsen 2000; Hawkins 2000). This strategy is evident in the amendments to the Vocational Education Law, which promote greater involvement of industries and other social actors in vocational education. At the same time, it increasingly emphasizes developing 'talents'

and '*suzhi*' as these are the key qualities that the government seeks in vocational graduates. This new and ideal workforce filled with talents and high *suzhi* workers is seen as essential for developing a nation with rich human resources and skilled society. This changing focus shows that education, skill acquisition, and broader economic and societal development are intertwined: individual capabilities are linked with the nation's strategic objectives. It also demonstrates a governance strategy that combines state-centred control governance with a form of neoliberal strategy that seeks to produce and encourage self-improving individuals motivated to improve for themselves but also for the nation's prosperity.

However, the expansion of vocational education in China presents a paradox for rural and migrant students. While the expansion seemingly offers better educational opportunities, it may in reality channel these students into a predetermined path of working-class roles. Qin Hui's concept of 'low human rights advantages' speaks to this issue. On one hand, the government uses high-level endorsements and financial aid to attract rural and migrant students into vocational tracks. On the other hand, it implements strict streaming policies and facilitates direct connections between vocational institutions and industries, creating seamless pathways from education to employment. These systemic strategies form a self-reinforcing cycle that directs these students into specific job positions. This system not only economizes on training costs but also reduces the cost of human labor in order to maintain artificially low prices that benefit economic expansion.

However, in this case, the rural and migrant students' educational choices are constrained. Despite their personal preference, they have little to no room for negotiation or to escape from this predetermined path set by the government or the labor market needs. This raises critical questions about educational equity and social mobility. The systemic exclusion of migrant students from

higher education opportunities is unfair. It further reflects a broader pattern of educational disparity between urban and rural populations deeply rooted in every aspect of Chinese society.

However, what is striking is that this government-sponsored channelling of rural and migrant populations in China emerged without political controversy. Rather, the inclusion of rural and migrant populations has been taken for granted as good, unproblematic and even celebrated as a big success according to the report of the Ministry of Education. This is highly problematic as vocational education has the power to shape specific types of citizens and influence their relationships with the state. Through vocational education, the government is effectively engineering social structures and economic roles. The official narrative surrounding vocational education often portrays citizens prior to vocational education as ‘lesser’ subjects, implying a need for continuous self-improvement, requiring transformation to achieve higher ‘*suzhi*’ and skills. As the central government deepens its decentralization efforts, it paradoxically tightens its control over citizens’ life paths, determining their social and economic futures.

Ensuring that rural and migrant populations have equal access to higher education as their urban counterparts is essential. It is simply unfair to determine their majors, schools, and future careers based on the needs of the government or labor market. Overall, the vocational education reform represents a complex and socially oriented mode of governance. What makes this new mode of governance unique is the neoliberal notion of redistribution combined with the centralized control of the Party-state’s authoritarian rule. Policymakers must find a way to balance economic needs with individual rights and aspirations, ensuring that the pursuit of national economic goals does not come at the cost of educational equity and social justice. Addressing these issues is essential not only for the affected demographic groups but also to evaluate whether this distinct form of neoliberalism combines authoritarian governance with capitalist market principles can

foster a just and sustainable model of social and economic development in the long run (G. Wang and Wang 2023, 408; Harvey 2005). My thesis contributes to the existing literature by providing rich empirical material that explores the complex relationship between neoliberal policies and state control in China's vocational education reform. Through comparison and analysis of important legal documents and ethnographic research of rural and migrant populations' vocational schooling experiences, my thesis offers insights into the challenges of balancing economic needs with individual rights and aspirations.

Limitations and Future Directions

My analysis comes with certain limitations. First of all, in my second chapter, I conducted a comparative analysis of the 1996 *Vocational Educational Law* and its 2022 amendment, as well as the *Higher Education Law*. The analysis focused on dissecting the content of these Laws, contrasting their discourses, themes, and the evolution of their focus and objectives. The data processing was conducted in the original Chinese language to preserve data integrity and avoid losing critical information that often occurs during translation. However, I acknowledge that later on the translation of the keywords and preliminary findings might lead to a potential loss of nuanced meanings, despite efforts to ensure translation accuracy.

Furthermore, while the use of secondary ethnographic data enriches my understanding of the lived experiences of migrant students, it also means I have less control over the quality and scope of the data. The ethnographic studies primarily focus on economically developed areas in Southern China, such as Jiangsu, Nanjing, and Shanghai. This regional specificity may not fully represent the diversity of vocational student experiences across the country. As mentioned in Chapter 3, within the general guidelines set by the CCP and Ministry of Education, provincial-

level CCP committees and education departments have the flexibility to adjust regulations to better fit local economic needs (X. Liu 2020b). Therefore, there might be some potential variations in policy implementation and local economic conditions that are not uniformly captured in the data.

As exemplified in Li and Seeberg's (2022) study, the vocational schooling experience can vary based on factors like gender, region of residence or economic status. Many scholars have demonstrated that vocational education in China tends to reinforce social stratification and class disparities. Li and Seeberg (2022, 203–4) bring a different lens, concentrating on the experiences of female vocational students in western rural areas of China (Koo 2016; Ling 2015; T. Woronov 2015; G. Wang and Wang 2023). Their interviews reveal that despite vocational education's perceived inadequacies, it to some extent serves as a measure of empowerment to Western rural female students and provides them with a transitional place to navigate their role in the urban economy. Focusing on the agency of rural students, vocational education can serve as an agent of change and enable these students to acquire certain skills necessary for economic independence.

As my thesis focuses on the institutional and structural side of vocational education reform, the agencies of rural and migrant students are also worth investigating. Despite the state's efforts to govern citizens through vocational education and also reshape societal expectations and norms, the agency of students plays an important role in this dynamic. Rural and migrant populations by no means are just submissive subjects, they actively engage with and respond to these educational policies.

Prior to 2006, migrant children's educational rights were not met even at the most basic levels (Lu & Zhang, 2004). A large number of school-aged migrant youth were excluded from formal education systems in urban cities (Cheng 2011; Ming 2013). In response, migrant communities established their own schools, although with limited resources and poorly trained

teachers, demonstrating their resilience and creative ways to respond to the educational barriers (Cheng 2011). The enactment of the Amended *Compulsory Education Law* of 2006 marked a turning point. The Law mandates local governments to ensure migrant children receive the same basic educational standards as others, leading to substantial improvements in their schooling conditions (Liu and Jacob 2012). By 2020, nearly 85.8% of migrant children attended public schools in urban cities, approaching the national enrollment rate of 89.2% (MoE 2021a). This improvement demonstrates the crucial role of community protests and advocacy in driving legislative changes in educational access and equity. Although this was just one contributing factor, it shows how student agency can influence educational policies.

My thesis lacks sufficient data to probe into this dynamic and examine how students' agency interacts or resists vocational education reform. This lack of data on student perspectives leads to further questions about the sustainability of the current state's governance model and the extent to which student agencies can challenge or influence the status quo of educational policies. As the current policy only aims to align with the labour market needs, these policies inevitably fall short in creating new pathways and opportunities for upward social mobility. Further research is needed to explore whether student agencies can shift the policy directives or have a positive influence on creating opportunities that challenge the current socioeconomic hierarchies.

Moreover, over the past few decades, China's rising profile as a donor on the global stage and its unique aid modalities have sparked discussion. Along with this progress, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹² also brought more than 400 higher vocational colleges in China

¹² China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was initiated in 2013 by Xi Jinping's government. This initiative includes a series of investments, infrastructure and development projects that aim to connect East Asia with Europe. It is also considered the core piece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy strategy. James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

and enterprises to ‘going global’ (Xinhua News 2023). These institutions and enterprises were encouraged to cooperate in running schools and programs overseas through initiatives like the Luban Workshops¹³. In this case, vocational education not only serves the national economic goals and development needs but also China’s foreign policy and the economic needs of countries and regions along the BRI initiative (Ruoxiang 2020).

Moreover, the Luban Workshops are directly supervised by China’s Ministry of Education, and the trainings are conducted under strict governmental control (Billett 2020). This fact presents an ironic contrast to their portrayal by the official discourse as a bridge for cultural and international communication (China Daily 2023a). It further reflects the authoritarian nature of the CCP’s governance model. This situation also raises deeper questions about how the CCP’s unique governance model operates in other countries where it lacks its current authority. As the CCP tries to shape societal expectations and norms in China through vocational education, what would be its purposes by globalizing this approach? It is worth investigating how China promotes vocational education, often considered domestically as a less desirable educational path to the global market and how China uses educational programs to project its soft power. China’s establishment and promotion of the Luban Workshops should be examined in conjunction with its national economic objectives, foreign policy goals and strategies for the internationalization of its education system to align with global market expectations.

¹³ The Luban Workshop is a Chinese international vocational training program designed to promote China’s vocational education models and practices globally. It encourages cooperation between Chinese vocational schools with foreign educational institutions, enterprises and governments. China Daily, “Luban Workshop: a bridge of cultural, people-to-people communication between China, foreign countries,”2023, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0427/c90000-20011976.html>

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Appendix

Appendix A. Comparative Analysis of the 1996 and 2022 Vocational Education Laws: Article Alignments and Ministry Responsibilities

Ministry Name	Relevant Articles in the 1996 Law	Relevant Articles in the 2022 Law
National Development and Reform Commission	<p>Article 6 People’s governments at various levels shall incorporate the development of vocational education into the plans of national economic and social development. Trade organisations, enterprises and institutional organisations shall, pursuant to the law, perform their duties to carry out vocational education.</p>	<p>Article 7 The people's governments at all levels shall incorporate the development of vocational education into their national economic and social development plans and align it with employment and entrepreneurship promotion, transformation of the growth model, industrial structure adjustment, and technological improvement and upgrading.</p> <p>Article 14 The state puts in place a sound modern vocational education system that meets the needs of economic and social development, engages programs with businesses, puts equal emphasis on both school-based vocational education and vocational training, integrates vocational education with general education, coordinates different levels of vocational education, and serves lifelong learning of all people.</p> <p>Article 20 The education administrative department under the State Council shall, in conjunction with relevant departments, organize the formulation and revision of the catalog of specializations under vocational education, improve teaching and other standards for vocational education, and provide macro regulation of and guidance on the compilation of teaching materials for vocational schools, based on the needs of economic and social development and the characteristics of vocational education.</p>
Ministry of Industry and	<p style="text-align: center;">-</p>	<p>Article 9 The state shall encourage the development of multiple levels and forms of vocational education, advance vocational</p>

**Information
Technology**

education carried out by diverse entities, and support extensive and equal participation by various sectors of society in vocational education.

The state shall give play to the role of businesses as important education providers, promote their deeper participation in vocational education, and encourage them to offer high-quality vocational education programs.

Departments in charge of relevant industries, people's organizations such as trade unions and the China Vocational Education Association, industry organizations, enterprises, and public institutions shall, in accordance with the law, fulfill their obligations in vocational education implementation and engage in, support or conduct vocational education.

Article 21 The state adopts measures to push ahead new specializations needed in advanced manufacturing and other industries and supports the development of high-level vocational schools and specializations according to the industrial layout and the developmental needs.

Article 23 Departments in charge of industries shall strengthen guidance on vocational education to meet the industrial and sector's demand for human resources, and release information on such demand on a regular basis.

**Ministry of
Finance**

Article 26 The State encourages raising of funds from various channels according to the law for the development of vocational education.

Article 27 People's governments at various levels and relevant departments of the State Council shall increase step by step the

Article 54 The state improves the structure of educational expenditure to suit vocational education funding to the developmental needs of vocational education, and encourages fundraising for the development of vocational education through various channels in accordance with the law.

Article 56 Local people's governments at all levels shall make coordinated use of the funds available for vocational education from

financial allocations for vocational schools and vocational training institutions.

No organisation or individual may embezzle or pocket any portion of funds designated for vocational education.

revenue collected as local educational surcharge, etc., and make good use of the unemployment insurance funds to support employees in improving their vocational skills.

Article 57 People's governments at all levels shall increase investment in vocational education oriented to rural areas and may set aside an appropriate amount of the funds for rural scientific and technological development as well as technology popularization to support rural vocational training.

Article 58 An enterprise shall, in accordance with the standards prescribed by the State Council, set aside funds according to a certain percentage of the total wages of employees to invest in employees education. The funds for employees education may be used for justifiable purposes such as establishment of a vocational education institution and vocational education for its employees and prospective employees.

Article 59 The state encourages financial institutions to support the development of vocational education by providing financial services.

Article 60 The state encourages enterprises, public institutions, social organizations and individual citizens to make donations to aid vocational education and encourages overseas organizations and individuals to fund or make donations to vocational education. The funds and donations must be used for vocational education.

**Ministry of
Human
Resources and
Social Security**

Article 23 In conducting vocational education, vocational schools and vocational training institutions shall integrate education with production, serve the local economic development, and maintain close ties with enterprises and train practical personnel and skilled workers.

Article 3 Vocational education is a type of education as important as general education. It is a major constituent of the national education system and human resource development, and an important means to train diverse talents, pass on technical skills, and promote employment and entrepreneurship.

Article 12 The state shall adopt measures to improve the social status and treatment of

people with advanced technical skills, in an effort to build a society that respects hard work, skills, and creativity.

Article 39 A vocational school shall have in place a sound employment and entrepreneurship promotion mechanism, and provide students with employment and entrepreneurship services such as career planning, vocational experience, and job-seeking guidance, so as to enhance the employability and entrepreneurial capabilities of students.

**Ministry of
Agriculture and
Rural Affairs**

Article 7 The State shall adopt measures to develop vocational education in rural areas, support the development of vocational education in ethnic minority regions, remote border areas and poverty-stricken areas.

Article 10 The state shall adopt measures to promote education for skilled workers and technicians, and improve the overall qualities of industrial workers.

The state shall adopt measures to support vocational education oriented towards the rural areas, organize training on farming skills, entrepreneurship and labor skills for people returning to the countryside, and vocational training, so as to train high-quality people for rural revitalization.

**State-owned
Assets
Supervision and
Administration
Commission of
the State
Council**

-

Article 50 The state encourages enterprises and public institutions to set up internship positions and offer internships to students from vocational schools and vocational training institutions. The entities that offer internships shall safeguard the rights of students to rest and leisure, work safety and health protection, insurance, vocational guidance, etc., during the internship in accordance with relevant regulations. These entities shall sign an internship agreement with students assigned to specific posts and provide them with appropriate remuneration

**State Taxation
Administration**

-

Article 26 The state shall encourage, guide, and support the establishment of vocational schools and vocational training institutions

by enterprises and other sectors of society in accordance with the law.

Local people's governments at all levels shall take measures such as service outsourcing and provision of student loans and scholarships to support vocational schools and vocational training institutions established by enterprises and other sectors of society in accordance with the law; and may also provide, inter alia, government subsidies, fund rewards and donation incentives to support non-profit vocational schools and vocational training institutions among them. Appropriate subsidies shall be granted with reference to per-student educational funding for public schools of corresponding levels and categories and other relevant funding standards.

**National Rural
Revitalization
Administration** -

Article 10 The state shall adopt measures to promote education for skilled workers and technicians, and improve the overall qualities of industrial workers.

The state shall adopt measures to support vocational education oriented towards the rural areas, organize training on farming skills, entrepreneurship and labor skills for people returning to the countryside, and vocational training, so as to train high-quality people for rural revitalization.
