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A “*Low Quality*” Group: Stigmatization
and Identity Construction of Vocational
School Students in China

By

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Abstract

In the public discussion around education in China, vocational school students have been labelled as losers and “low-quality groups”. In the hierarchical ideology of Chinese society, vocational school students are stigmatised in opposition to the modelling Chinese youth with a bright future. However, stigmatisation is not a static and objective reality, but is constantly interpreted and reconstructed in the interaction between the discriminated group and the social environment. This paper examines the dialectical relationship between group stigma under hierarchical social ideology and identity constructions of vocational school students through an internal lens. The semiotic analysis in this article revolves around short videos uploaded by a vocational school vlogger on a Chinese social media platform. The study shows that vocational school students reconfigured the differential axes of stigmatized identities and invented new identity subcategories in their discursive practices by performing and commenting on stigma. In the identity crisis of vocational school students, the fractal recursion of stigma becomes a strategy for vocational school students to position themselves. Vocational school students’ performance of stigma is neither a culture of group resistance nor a simple reproduction of hierarchical ideology. Rather, it is a negotiation of the destigmatization of personal identity through the reinterpretation of group stereotypes. By distancing themselves from the “criticized image,” vocational school students can create a socially acceptable image for their own benefit. This semiotic process is a social action of vocational students as marginalized groups in the education system trying to find their place in Chinese society.

Introduction

In the public discourse around education in China, vocational school students have been stigmatised as "losers", "low-quality group" or even bad people. According to Woronov (2020), Chinese society shows little interest in who vocational school students are, but rather categorises them based on stereotypes that are remarkably congruent with common senses. Based on Ling (2015), vocational school students are seen as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy due to their perceived lack of success inside the schooling system. Within the hierarchical framework of Chinese society, vocational school students are stigmatised in contrast to the ambitious Chinese youth who are seen as having a promising future. Stigmatisation, as defined by Goffman (1963), is not a fixed and objective concept, but rather a phenomenon that is continuously understood and reshaped by the interaction between the stigmatised group and the surrounding social context. The stigmatised individuals are not only passive victims of the stigma, but actively participate in shaping its meaning. Within the context of vocational school students' identity crises, the fractal recursion of stigma serves as a strategy for these students to establish their positions and construct their identities. This paper is concerned with the dialectical relationship between group stigma within the context of a hierarchical social ideology and the identity constructions of vocational school students.

This research takes the internal perspective of vocational school students as they perform and remark on stigma, rather than seeing the stigmatisation of vocational school students as a socially constructed outcome. The discussion in this paper centers around the study of a video posted by a vocational school vlogger on a Chinese social media site. The trajectory of my analysis is guided by three fundamental inquiries: (1) How do vocational school students display stigma in video content on social media

platforms as self-expression? (2) How does the process of negotiating stigma among vocational school students become a strategy for identity construction? (3) What is the relationship between the identity construction of vocational school students and the semiotic process of hierarchical ideology in Chinese education? This paper not only attempts to focus on the formation and enrollment of vocational students' identities from a linguistic point of view, but also sees it as a social action of marginalized groups inside the education system attempting to locate themselves in official discourse system. Vocational school students are “exceptions” in a neoliberal educational competition (Jeffery, 2010), but cannot withdraw from it in a society awash with development visions, theories and policies. They must negotiate the label of "failure" to assign value and meaning to their identity. Drawing on theories of language ideology, register and performativity, I will demonstrate that the approach used by Chinese vocational school students to redefine their identities in response to stigma is neither a kind of collective resistance culture, as proposed by Willis (1976), nor is it just a replication of a social hierarchical ideology. Rather, it is a negotiated strategy of de-stigmatising individual identities by reinterpreting group stigma.

The rest of this paper will follow the following sections. First, I will describe the theoretical framework of the paper and the complementary perspectives of this study to the previous literature. Following this, I aim to analyze the strategies used by vocational school students to negotiate stigma and construct their identities around the video created by the vocational school students themselves. In this section, I will take a two-step approach, examining both the representation of stigma by the video creator as a speaking subject and also the feedback and self-positioning of vocational school students in the comments forums of the video. In analyzing the video, I focus on how the vlogger ironically presents stigma through voicing the official discourse, as well

as the tension-filled relationship between the vlogger's dual identities as both social media influencer and vocational school student that he constructs in the video in de-stigmatizing himself. In the listening part, I will address two strategies that vocational school students use to distance themselves from stigmatization, both by changing the scale of the official hierarchical-ideological axis of differentiation in order to create new subcategories, and by creating alternative dimension of axis. Through this study, I will show how the hierarchical ideology of the Chinese education system shapes the everyday lives of marginalized groups, and is reinvented in their linguistic practices.

The stigmatization of Vocational Education in China

From a macro perspective, China's educational policies and social context provide structural explanations for the marginalization of vocational school students in society. To understand the disadvantaged position of vocational school students, it is first necessary to comprehend the entry mechanisms of vocational education in China and its role in the education system. Vocational education in China has a short history, stemming from China's wide-ranging education reforms in the 1980s. As Parkhouse & Rong (2016) argued, along with the spread of nine-year compulsory education, more and more Chinese students began to find opportunities to enter higher levels of education. As a result, Chinese families involved in the education system have begun to pressure the state to provide more opportunities for high school education. The simultaneous reform of the socio-economic system also influenced the formulation of educational policies (Hannum & Park, 2007). Premier Deng Xiaoping's institutional reforms have fundamentally changed China's economic system and labor market, leading to a multiplication of demand for new types of labor (Mok & Wu, 2016). In order to meet the demands of the labor market, the country

needs to produce graduates who are trained but not overly qualified. This imperative from social and new economic transformations posed new challenges for education reformers: How can the education system carry the demand from families for more educational opportunities for their children? How to prepare the right workforce for the labor market? The main solution to this is provided by the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE), a system of exams that classify students into different levels for entry into higher education and vocationally oriented pathways. (Durden & Yang, 2006).

Failure on the HSEE is one of the major reasons that vocational school students in China are stigmatized in social discourse. Much of the academic research and daily discussion of China's standardized testing and educational evaluation system focuses on the general examination (GaoKao) at the end of high school (Liu, 2017; Pires & Duarte, 2019; Wang, Li & Luo, 2022). On the contrary, vocational school students are generally driven into vocational education by poor performance in the HSEE, which predates the Gaokao system. The main purpose of the HSEE is to determine which students will be able to continue on to a regular academic high school after Grade 9 (Zhang, 2016). Students who achieve high scores on the HSEE are admitted to regular academic high schools, while those who fail to pass the HSEE proceed to vocational education. As Guo, Huang and Zhang (2019) mentioned, Chinese society has a social imaginary of meritocracy through score-based selection system. In this context, test scores are not merely quantitative indicators of educational achievement; rather, they represent the social value of the individual student. In other words, scores are no longer just a criterion for evaluating students; students themselves have become scores. Hence, entering vocational education with lower scores is a logical symbol of one's educational failure. National authority over HSEE pass rates is hidden in the

accusations against vocational students by public. Based on Woronov (2020), changes in the pass rate need to be combined with complex calculations of changes in national resource allocation and economic development. Due to the recent saturation of the job market for university students and the shortage of basic labor, China's latest *Education Division Policy* (Xue & Li, 2023) has set the proportion of students entering vocational education at a strict 50 percent. That is to say, if a student is positioned outside the state's allocation of high school places, no matter how hard the student prepares or works, he/she will fail the HSEE and enter vocational education. Thus, the labelling of failures in vocational education is part of a wider system of social stratification created and controlled by the national power.

The stigmatised identity of vocational school students, besides being defined by the defeat of the HSEE, is also part of the discourse of desire that the state enacts for young people. As Velde (2009) argued, the loss of access to general academic high schools means that vocational students are largely deprived of the opportunity to sit for the GaoKao (College Entrance Examination). This further means that these students are unable to obtain a university degree. Without this diploma, vocational students will be rejected by white-collar employees and the urban middle class in the future (Jiang, Hong & Qiu, 2019). Vocational students are placed at the bottom of the social ladder, because not only being losers in the educational competition, but also eliminate the possibility of continuing to improve personal value by accumulating educational capital. This hierarchical ideology in education is based on equating competition in education with a contest for human capital. Since the reform and opening-up period, the pursuit of economic benefits has become a common pattern at the national, family and individual levels (Liu, 2020). This trend has been labelled by social scientists as "economism" (Kwak, 2018). Economicism is not only a macro-

state ideology, but also penetrates into the lives of individuals with the concept of human capital. Human Capital refers to the non-physical capital and social value that can be accumulated in laborers through education, including professional knowledge, and work capacity (Brown, 2015).

Education system in China aims to foster "self-enterprising, self-responsible and self-developing" subjects (Ong, 2013). Being a vocational student is cutting off avenues for personal development. According to Wei (2008), the ideological discourse of social hierarchy in China is not only about the individual's social position but also about the individual's desire and possibility to continue accumulating human capital. In *Desiring China*, Rofel (2007) refers to the Chinese subject of the new era as the "subject of desire". The official discourse of the state encourages the individual to develop a desire for development and progress, which at the same time must be consistent with the social and cultural values of the state. In the Chinese education context, this desire is expressed in the pursuit of higher education. Vocational school students are thus the "exceptions" within the education system that are unable to make progress.

In addition, it is worth noting that the stigmatization of vocational education is implicitly a stigma of lower-class in a broader social context, beyond the stigmatization within the education system. Wang & Guo's (2019) study surprisingly showed that essentially all students currently enrolled in vocational schools are from the working class, not the middle or upper class. While the survey sample of this study may not be generalizable, it does illustrate the strong connection between the entry regime of vocational education and the class inequality. The most obvious reason for students from working families to be driven into vocational education is the economic factor. According to Duncan & Murnane (2014), families with higher

incomes can afford to give their children more of the necessary financial input for their studies. In fact, students who fail the HSEE have options other than entering vocational education. Wealthy students can buy their way into private high schools with higher tuition fees (Wang & Jang, 2016). Although the quality of education at these schools is not as high as public high schools, the opportunity to take college entrance exams is still preserved for students. Those who want to stay in school but cannot justify the cost of private high school tuition are left with the option of enrolling in vocational education (Calarco, 2018). Thus, vocational education in China today is at the service of the working class. Instead of entering the system by failing exams, it's more likely that vocational students can't afford to buy their way out of the system. The stigmatization of vocational education is to a large extent borne by students from working-class families. Here, the group stigma serves as an important means of establishing social inequality and reinforcing social hierarchies (Gal & Woolard, 2014).

"Selling stigma" on social media

In the last few years, more and more Chinese vocational school students have been flocking to social media, becoming content creators and gaining a lot of attention. Primarily, vocational school students being a low-value group in the mainstream discourse urgently need a new path to prove their worth and build a socially acceptable identity. At the same time, considering the family background of most vocational school students, the anxiety about money and the fear of the future also prompts them to look for more ways to make financial gains. The popularity of social media in China seems to offer these students a new model for building a personal brand and achieving economic success in a highly competitive environment

(Yu & Huberman, 2011). According to Kong, (2014), social media has done away with the centralization of discourse, providing the public with avenues for self-expression. The power to create, disseminate and profit from original content, once monopolized by national institutions and traditional media companies, has now shifted into the hands of ordinary people. Terri Senft (Usher, 2020) called civilian creators who build eye-catching personas to enhance their online fame "micro-celebrities." As the barriers to creativity are lowered, more and more people are entering the social media creative circuit. The fierce competition poses a new challenge for ordinary video creators, which is to construct a personal image that differentiates them from others on social media, in order to make their content more visible and appealing. However, for creators from socially disadvantaged groups, the resources they have at their disposal to construct appealing online identities are very limited (Lewis, 2020). For vocational school students, the only way to construct a differentiated image on social media is to peddle their stigma.

In fact, stigmatization has always been an important commodity in the production of cultural content. From a historical perspective, Bourdieu (1984) discussed the "self-destructive" strategy of novelists from lower-class origins to create novels through their own group stigma in order to better compete with their privileged bourgeois counterparts. These novelists used hyperbolic stereotypes and parodies to evoke consumer voyeurism. They effectively commodified their stigmas, transforming negative stereotypes into a new form of capital that can be traded for financial success. In the age of social media, this strategy is even more seductive. Stuart (2020) explores how gang youth in the United States attract online attention by displaying violence online. For generations, black youth have struggled to have a place in society by being labeled as a social threat. But the prevalence of social media has allowed

these young people to identify a new method of presenting their voices, even if it's only by distorting stereotypes. These young people are known for their "stigma", but they package and sell that "stigma" and hopefully use it to escape their miserable situation. However, for both Chinese vocational school students and gangster youth in the US, the performing of stigma is a double-edged sword. It helps marginalized groups create a successful social media presence, on the other hand, greatly increases the risk of further stigmatization of collective identities.

Language Ideology, Enregisterment and Performance

As mentioned above, the top-down structural approach shows us the plight and identity crisis of Chinese vocational school students, but the voices from students have received little notice in the previous research. Stigmatization is a two-way interactive process, whereby it is impossible to know how Chinese youth in vocational schools, as a marginalized group, perceive and cope with their dilemma simply from the discussion of national policies and discourses. The language ideologies of these students in their self-expression and identity construction on social media platform provide a new internal perspective that allows for seeing the dynamic process of vocational school students actively engaging with stigma from a position of disadvantage. This study is first grounded in the theory of language ideology. Silverstein (1979, p.193) defined language ideology as "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use". It is important to note that the ideology we are discussing here is not political thought in the service of an oppressive ruling power, but a positional or partial view of the world from a particular perspective (Gal & Irvine, 2019). By moving away from passive interpretations of ideology, we can see

that ideology not only provides interpretations of the world from different standpoints, but also actively provides directions for social actions within a cultural framework (Geertz, 1973).

Thus, language ideology can serve certain goals or positions (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). As ideological differences in linguistic signs are achieved through comparison, vocational school students can affect the meaning of specific linguistic ideologies by creating and changing stigma-centered semiotic comparisons as actions. Gal and Irvine (2019, p. 19-20) described the semiotic process of ideologisation as follows: rhematization, referring to the projection of contrasting qualities in the sign onto the contrasting phenomena indexed by the sign; fractal recursivity, reiterating at a different scale ideology's concern with the contrasting objects created by the axis of difference; erasure, the omission or reinterpretation of elements that cannot be seen as fitting the ideological model. All these ideological processes can influence the denotative meaning of linguistic features and their indexical relationship to social categories.

When language users establish semiotic relations between specific ideologised linguistic forms and social categories, they create " registers ". For vocational school students, the stigmatizing features that can be indexed to the collective identity is their register. The contrasting patterns of register access index different social personae in speech events (Irvine, 1990). Based on Agha (2005), registers are categories of language use rather than language forms, with their recognisability relying on the meta-linguistic competence of language users. Enregisterment is the process by which linguistic features move from indexing individual identities to indexing the attribution of social categories. An essential feature of the everyday use of registers is that their usage effects are not always fixed and consistent with the stereotypical values and

social identities indexed by them (Agha, 2004). The indexicality of linguistic features is constantly "decontextualised" and "recontextualised" (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) in dynamic contexts. When an individual incorporates indexical linguistic features in a new context, he/she is not only claiming to belong to a predefined social category, but also constructing a new identity and role (Eckert, 2008). People can provide creative interpretations of registers and use them as part of social actions. In Alrabaa's (1985) study, the young upper class in Egypt indexed their egalitarian identity by registering their speech style as lower class. Thus, the semiotic register of the self-image is not simply a repetition of stereotyped social categories but can also be a conscious, strategic choice based on different ideological positions.

As discussed above, the application of ideologised linguistic features as registers can be a strategy for individual identity construction. Vocational school students performatively stigmatize themselves in the context of social media in order to demonstrate their social categories while also inventing new roles for themselves. Austin (1975), in *'How to do things with words'* mentioned that saying something can be a social action, not just making a statement. He introduced the concept of 'performativity' to illustrate the power of language to make a change in the world. Judith Butler (2004)'s articulation of gender identity's performativity establishes a link between identity construction and performativity. In accordance with Butler (2020), gender is not a stable identity category or a proxy on which various internal behaviours are based, but rather a fragile identity constructed in external space through the repetition of stylised signs (language or behaviour). Identity building is a performative achievement that requires the actor to perform in a believable way to both the audience and the self (Butler, 2020). When people try to use registers to performatively construct partially independent, even countervalued, social identities,

the scope of the social identity represented by that register is also altered (Agha, 2005). In other words, the manner of identity formation of individuals is a result of the intervention of linguistic ideology, but also in the process redrawing the axes of differentiation for it. Thereby, the process of representing registers with stigma in the self-expression and identity construction of vocational school students is also a process of repositioning themselves and recontextualizing the hierarchical ideology. As Reyes (2017) argued, Filipino middle-class elites conceive of the ideal elite figure by creating and containing an unpopular elite image. Through performative identity construction and negotiation strategies, these elites redefine the axis of differentiation of the elite image and place themselves on the other side of the spectrum from the 'debased' image. Hence, this study of identity construction of vocational school students in China is based on such a theoretical framework. I will focus on how students engaged in the performing of particular traits (stigma) as a strategy for identity construction and changing the ideology behind the stigmatisation.

From Perspective of Vocational School Student: Video as an Ideological Site

The video chosen for this article originates from a social media platform, Kuaishou, that is characterised by its easy-to-use video making tools and its large user base consisting mostly of economically, regionally, and educationally disadvantaged individuals (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). The creators from the lower class on Kuaishou have been designated as the "improbable" creative class (Wang & Liu, 2021). Vocational students are capitalising on the increasing trend of content production on social media by sharing videos on the Kuaishou platform, showcasing their experiences at vocational schools. This paper profiles "Xiaoxing," a 12th grade vocational school student who has amassed a following of over 1 million on the social

media platform Kuaishou. The subject matter of his videos is on the experiences of a vocational school student, and providing insight into their unique viewpoint.

Simultaneously, the abundance of followers and the contentious character of his work guaranteed a fertile ground for discourse in the comments area.

In this article, I conduct a semiotic analysis of Xiaoxing's short video "*High School vs. Vocational School*". Moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between stigmatization and video creation from the internal perspective of vocational school students, I had an interview with Xiaoxing centered on his video. Here, I supplement video analysis with data from the interview, in an attempt to more fully explore the role of Xiaoxing's performances of stigmatization in his videos within his identity construction. In the video, Xiaoxing documented a day at vocational school through the camera. The main line of the video is a comparison between high school and vocational school as educational institutions created by Xiaoxing through visual and auditory information. Meanwhile, in the voiceover, Xiaoxing shared personal feelings about vocational education described how becoming a social media vlogger has changed his life and personal mindset.

The content and expression of this video presents the strategies that vocational school students use to reconstruct axes of difference and construct identities through the performance and reproduction of stigma. The video I have selected for this study serves as an ideological site, bringing together multiple perspectives. These include both the viewer's perspective and Xiaoxing's dual identity as a speaking subject. In the speaking part, Xiaoxing is both the creator of the video and the image of "vocational school student" created in the video. In the section analysing comments, vocational school students as commentators also construct different aspects of vocational school identity through their responses to the video. As Gal and Irvine (2019) argued,

personal perspectives are related to, but not determined by social identity. In this site, the perspectives of vocational school students from the same social category in different positions co-create the axis of stigma differentiation.

Representing Stigma: Vocational Education as "A Receptacle for Losers"

The stigma attached to vocational school students has always been a central term in the creation of Xiaoxing's videos, and has been the main selling point of Xiaoxing's appeal to viewers. In the interview about the success of his videos, Xiaoxing has emphasized that watching his videos gives a strong sense of "superiority" to viewers who look down on vocational school students. In this sense, Xiaoxing's video content, created to appeal to viewers' preferences, is closely tied to the collective stigma of vocational education. In the highly publicized video "*High School vs. Vocational School*" that I selected, it is easy to see from the title that Xiaoxing intends to draw a clear axis of differentiation between academic high school and vocational education. As shown in examples (1) and (2) below, the difference between high school and vocational school is repeatedly mentioned in the video. The high school's rules, student groups and learning environments are seen as representative of standardization, while on the other side of the axis, the vocational school is placed as the opposite.

(1) *High school and vocational high school are completely different.*

(2) *Today I'll show you the difference between high school and vocational school.*

It is interesting to note that although Xiaoxing is comparing academic high school as college preparatory school with vocational school, he does not mention or explain any information directly regarding academic high school in the video. Much of the audio part in the video is devoted to the rules of the vocational school, such as "no

smoking", "no fighting" and "no relationships". However, like examples (3) and (4) demonstrates, Xiaoxing utilizes the word "also" a lot in his description of vocational schools.

(3) *You also can't smoke in vocational high school.*

(4) *You also can't fall in love in vocational high school.*

Academic high school is hidden behind the term “also” in comparison of this expression. Without being specifically mentioned, it becomes a shadow standard that exists in the comparison. When Xiaoxing tries to explain to the audience in the voice-over that vocational schools also have basic rules and regulations as educational institutions, he needs to justify vocational education by establishing similarities between vocational schools and academic high schools in terms of rules. According to Jakobson's theory of markedness (Battistella, 1995), the high school is seen as the dominant unmarked educational institution in its default form, leaving the vocational school as an anomalous secondary form. Xiaoxing creates an axis of differentiation in the video by contrasting academic high schools with vocational schools. The implication that high school is equivalent to a standard further deepens the priority and mainstreaming of academic high school education in the video.

Having established the contrast through the axis of differentiation, Xiaoxing aims to reinforce the inferiority of vocational education in the video by showing the stigma. It is worth noting that Xiaoxing does not use the voice of the "self" as a marginalized group in its presentation of stigmatization, but rather invokes different voices from the others. Bakhtin (1981) uses the term "voice" to describe the way in which utterances indexing can characterize a speaker. The typology of voices presupposes the comparability and perceivability of voices. Voice is not an individual attribute, but involves shared hypotheses about recognizable character sorts and their attributes (Hastings & Manning, 2004). In the video, Xiaoxing first makes some of these voice

distinctions recognizable by using distinct personal pronouns, such as "parents say", "relatives say" (as shown in (5) & (6)).

(5) *My parents say they're ashamed that I went to a vocational high school.*

(6) *Relatives say it's useless to go to a vocational high school, rather than get a job as soon as possible.*

Each of these voices constructs a stigmatized image of vocational education from a different standpoint and connects Xiaoxing's self-expression to the broader public discourse. In example (5), the voices of parents speak explicitly about the stigmatization and the terrible situation that students in vocational schools suffer in the social context. Entering vocational education means stigmatizing oneself and one's family. This stigma stems not only from the failure in the HSEE exam, but also the result of vocational education's qualities as ideologized signs projected onto individuals entering this educational institution through rhematization (Gal & Irvine, 2019). And the voice of relatives in example (6) is evidence of the public consensus in China about the ineffectiveness of vocational education.

This ineffectiveness is brought about by the disconnect between teaching content and teaching objectives is the main quality for which vocational education in China has been criticized. Schulte (2013) argued that most of the current vocational schools in China are still industry-centered, with the training of urban workers as the model of schooling. However, in reality, as China's economy transforms, most vocational school graduates will work in the service sector rather than in skilled industrial positions. Chinese schools have been insisting on a theory-oriented "scientific" education (Huang & He, 2014), and even vocational schools do not offer courses in the service sector. Vocational school students find the theoretical connotations of the teaching content difficult to understand and unhelpful in developing the necessary job skills. Ironically, the pedagogical content of vocational education, which is supposed

to help students transition from school to the labor market (Neckerman, 2008), has nothing to do with students' career development. In other words, entering vocational education does not allow for the pursuit of higher education nor does it prepare students for actual employment. This is why it is better to "get a job as early as possible" than to "enter vocational school". The failures of vocational education make it a failing educational venue in contrast to high school, and this further solidifies the stigma of vocational school students as losers.

In addition to directly quoting the others' voices, Xiaoxing also parodies the school's official voice when speaking about the daily life of a vocational school from an insider perspective. While arguing the regulations of the vocational school, Xiaoxing did not express his own viewpoint as a student from the vocational school. Instead, he directly cited the official stance of the institution. Visual information from Xiaoxing's lens implies direct familiarity with the real conditions of a vocational school, whereas the official voice-over gives an authoritative portrayal of the idealised concept of a vocational school. Goffman (1981) subdivided speakers into the roles of animator, author and principal. Here, Xiaoxing is animating the exact words and intentions of the school as author and principle of the institutional stance. When analysing only the audio component of the video, one hears the school's perspective and highlight the stringent regulations of vocational schools, similar to those of high schools. However, the visual semiotic component utilises video recordings to represent the perspective of the actual learner, while the aural section provides opposing information. These two sections combine to create an ironic complementary meaning (Chan, 2011).

Consider, for example, the situation shown in Figure 1 below, where the narrator asserts that vocational schools diligently scrutinise students' homework completion.

However, the picture focuses on a crumpled assignment paper that seems to have been completely neglected. Figure 2 shows the same logic. While the voice-over explains the severe repercussions of using mobile phones on campus as per the school regulations, the camera zooms in on an unimpeded smartphone placed on a desk.

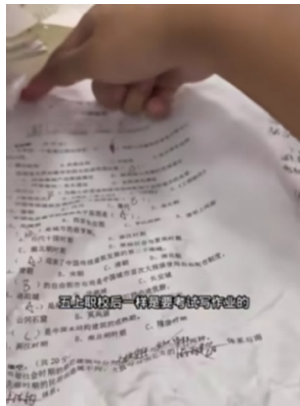


Figure 1 - crumpled homework paper *Figure 2 - smartphone on the desk*

The split between images shown by the camera and the official voice in the video highlights the embarrassing position of the vocational school in China's education system. Although it is an official educational institution recognized by the state, in reality it lacks the qualities and responsibilities associated within such role. Even so, the official voice of the state has a long-standing commitment to the quality of vocational education and to a management system that is consistent with that of academic high schools (Guo & Wang, 2020). Xiaoxing's close intertextualization with the official voice in the audio portion of his description of vocational education regulations does not imply a similar ideological positioning. Instead, he challenges the state's propaganda on vocational education through the ironic contrast between the visual message (as the real situation of vocational high schools) and the official voice. Although the auditory portion of the video appears to be similar to the official voice, the contrast with the visual information in the video contributes to Xiaoxing's ambiguous and even antagonistic stance towards the original voice.

The concentration of different voices in Xiaoxing's video complementarily reproduces the bottom position of vocational education in hierarchical ideology. At the same time, the contradictory nature of the voices in turn reveals the role of the state in the failure of vocational school students. Xiaoxing reframes the rhetoric of individual responsibility for the failures of vocational education by invoking official and the contradictory visual evidence to make visible the influence of the actions of the vocational institutions. Furthermore, Xiaoxing's discursive construction of the stigma of vocational education in the video is informed by the voices from parents, relatives and the state, but not from his own personal voice. The "ideology" from elsewhere allows Xiaoxing to present the stigmatization of vocational education as a social consensus rather than a personal opinion. Xiaoxing's "true self" is missing in the video's expression of stigma. This dilution of the connection between "self" and stigma is also reflected in Xiaoxing's humorous irony of the stigma attached to vocational education in his parody of official voices. As Chun (2004) suggests, Asian American comedians' humorous reproduction and satirical representation of mainstream racialized discourses about Asians in the United States is largely a way for the performers themselves to disassociate themselves from the group's stigmas. In the process of humorously reproducing stigma and self-deprecation, the user of humor achieves an identity disassociation with the "mocked" group. Similarly, Xiaoxing successfully distances himself from the stigma of vocational education by ironically reproducing the stigma of vocational education and the ideological discourse of the state. Xiaoxing maintains a dynamic relationship with stigma in video, showing how stigmatizing vocational education really is. The emphasis on hierarchical ideology is both central to Xiaoxing's strategy of attracting viewers, and are also repositioned and challenged in Xiaoxing's expression.

Registering Dual-identity: Speaking as Vocational School Student and Vlogger

As Xiaoxing displays stigmatization of vocational education, he is also constructing his own identity. Xiaoxing has a dual identity around the video. One identity is as a social media vlogger who creates the video, and the other is as a vocational school student who, because he is a such student, is stereotypically portrayed in the content of the video. In particular, the identity of the video's creator is not hidden in the video as a behind-the-scenes identity, but becomes visible through the repeated references in Xiaoxing's expression. In addition, Xiaoxing's video begins with the identification of "I" as a vocational school student. Xiaoxing's use of "hands" in many of the shots breaks down the barrier between the off-camera creator and the on-camera recording of school life, emphasizing "I" 's presence in the vocational school. This means that the dual identities constructed in the video are not only due to the genre of vlogging with the self as the source material (Liu, Liu & Zhang, 2019), but also the result of Xiaoxing's active choice. He makes the two voices recognizable through the use of camera language and footing (Goffman, 1981) transitions.



Figure 3- Xiaoxing's homepage on social media. Figure 4 – class in vocational school

As shown in Figure 3, Xiaoxing uses the screen of his cell phone to show how he interacts with his social media followers. Meanwhile, Xiaoxing's identity as a vocational school student is reaffirmed when the camera focuses on the interior of the

vocational school in Figure 4, allowing the viewer to follow Xiaoxing's camera as he moves around the school and "peeps", unlocking an unfamiliar view of the interior of the vocational school. Especially when Xiaoxing claims to be sharing "his own" school life in the voice-over, while other vocational school students' activities are shown on the screen, the combination of visual and auditory multimodal information constantly reminds the viewer that the off-camera "I" holding the lens is part of a group of vocational school students who are "they" in front of the camera.

In addition to the difference in visual information, the participants of Xiaoxing's speak to in the two voices is also altered by the difference in footing. Based on Goffman (1981), footing is the speaker's positioning of him/herself and the other in the interaction, as manifested in adjustments to the way expressions are produced and received. When he is voicing as a vlogger, he refers to the audience as "family". While when he is voicing as a vocational school student, he addresses the audience as "everyone". The constant shifting of footings in the video is a reminder of Xiaoxing's two identities. When only focusing on Xiaoxing's expression in the video, he constructs two separate identities as a vlogger and a vocational school student, without voicing for each other. However, if the video is discussed in a wider context of stigmatized ideology, the dynamic relation between Xiaoxing's two identities is full of tension and combines to provide Xiaoxing with a new social position. In the following part, I will examine each of the two identities and the relationship between them.

Xiaoxing's identity as a vocational school student is central to the differentiation of his videos. The successful portrayal of a vocational school student who meets the social expectations is also a prerequisite for Xiaoxing's "insider" perspective to assure the viewers that the content of the video is "authentic". In order to examine Xiaoxing's

process of registering his vocational school student identity in the video, I will examine the role of Xiaoxing's metalinguistic signifiers (gestures and modes of speech) in framing the meaning of the language practice. The social voice referred to by Bakhtin (1981) is a discursive image that can be described through metalanguage for a particular social type of person. Agha (2005) refers to the socially indexed features of speech among them as enregistered voices. According to Agha (2005), register is the indexing process by which different speech forms are recognized as attributes of group speech. I explore how Xiaoxing registered his identity as a vocational student through a performative application of stigma. In this process, Xiaoxing is not expressing his "true self," but rather positioning himself by borrowing or comparing his voice to stereotypical others (Hastings & Manning, 2004).

The process of identity registration involves both referential symbols and denotational performances (Silverstein, 1976) that conform to the socially expected speaking style of vocational school students. Firstly, signs that have a clear indexing meaning to the stigma appear several times in the footage of the video. The inclusion of Xiaoxing's hand in the first-person footage of the video enables the spectator to establish a link between Xiaoxing's perspective and the visual images being shown. In the few occurrences when the hand is shown, it comes into contact with highly indexical items, such as a used tissue on the bed and a mobile device displaying an image of an attractive lady (Figures. 5 & 6).



Figure 5 – pretty girl on Xiaoxing's screen Figure 6 – dirty tissues on the bed

All of these could be seen as representations of the stigmatised characteristics. The appearance of these objects indexes poor hygiene, laziness, and lechery, suggesting the "low quality" of vocational school students in the social context (Schulte, 2013). By performing stigmatized indexical features, Xiaoxing registers his personal identity into a collective identity. When I asked Xiaoxing in the interview about the reason for showing these images in the video, Xiaoxing made it clear that it was an exaggerated performance and deliberate design to portray the viewers "imagined" image of vocational students, and emphasized that *"it's all for the sake of the attention"*. Xiaoxing intentionally mimics the socially stereotyped behavioural habits of vocational school students using close-ups of hands and carefully selected visual material that reflects societal stigmas.

Furthermore, Xiaoxing opted for a fuzzy, computer-generated voice as his dub, instead of using his own voice. The Kuaishou platform offers twelve AI virtual voices for video production (Li, Tan & Yang, 2020), and the one Xiaoxing chose for his video is called "cute child's voice". Xiaoxing said during the interview that this voice was chosen because it is supposedly or stereotypically the most representative of the vocational school students' "temperament". The vocal tone used by Xiaoxing in the video seems juvenile and lacking maturity, matching society's unfavourable

impression of the calibre and proficiency of vocational school communities. This synthetic voice emulates the conventional manner of speech often associated with students attending vocational schools. Meanwhile, Xiaoxing recorded the AI synthesized sound in the video by incorporating a distinctly recognizable dialect of Jiangxi Province that is different from Mandarin. The popularization of standardized Mandarin is one of the key goals of China's education system. However, according to Hansen and Woronov (2013), the proportion of vocational school students using Mandarin in daily school communication is much lower than that of students in academic high schools. The use of dialects, in turn, is a linguistic sign of the vocational school students' group identity who are less educated and "less qualified". Like English in minority accents in the U.S. education system as opposed to standard white English (Flores & Rosa, 2023), dialect using is both a stigmatizing symbol and an important part of identity construction for vocational school students in China. Through these metalinguistic symbols, Xiaoxing succeeds in constructing an image of vocational school students in line with public expectations and thereby reproducing stigmatization.

Xiaoxing's two identities have different voicing yet complement each other. With the attention gained by successfully constructing and performing the identity of a vocational school student, Xiaoxing can have a recognized social media vlogger identity. In turn, Xiaoxing's expression of his vlogger identity becomes a strategy for negotiating with group stigma as a vocational school student. Agha (2005) mentioned that the combination of stereotypical social roles can be used to generate hybrid characters. In this video, Xiaoxing's two identities as a video creator and a vocational school student are blended together to produce a new identity subcategory, that is, a vocational school student who became a successful social media influencer. As

examples (7) and (8) show, Xiaoxing repeatedly emphasizes his "bright future" and "ambition" as a video creator, when describing the impact of being a vlogger on him in the video

(7) When I came across the social media, it turned out that vocational high school students can have a bright future.

(8) Yes, I'm a vocational student, but I'm definitely not unambitious.

Xiaoxing, through his success on the internet, has created an alternative evaluation system for vocational school students in addition to pursuing higher education. In Xiaoxing's words (examples 7 & 8), social media has given him a new path to personal fulfillment outside of the educational system.

It is worth noting, however, that Xiaoxing does not try to break the stigma of vocational education here, but rather places his identity on the other side of the stigma by highlighting the contrast between himself and other vocational students. Gal and Irvine (2019) discussed the broad semiotic process of ideologization, where fractal recursivity refers to project sign contrasts onto a larger or smaller scale. Xiaoxing has reiterated the academic student vs. the vocational student contrast subdividing the vocational student "side" into a successful and a stigmatized. His vlogger status within the vocational school community puts him non-stigmatized side of the axis of differentiation he has constructed. Xiaoxing distances himself from other vocational school students because of his success on the social media. Xiaoxing reproduces the hierarchical ideology and developmental discourses of the state in the stigmatization of vocational education, while changing his own position.

Even, in Xiaoxing's attempts to use criteria from the national discourse to distinguish himself from other vocational students, the grouping stigma is reiterated and deepened. In describing students' daily life at the vocational school, Xiaoxing includes a section on the positive impact that being a video creator has had on his life.

The most obvious identity delineation strategy in the video footage is the comparison between the two shots of Xiaoxing and his classmates operating their cell phones (Figures 7 & 8).

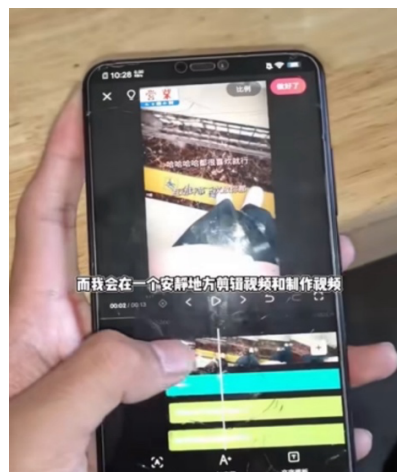


Figure 7 – Xiaoxing's classmate playing a phone game. Figure 8 – Xiaoxing editing a video

(9) *While others were playing games on their cell phones, I was editing and making videos in a quiet place.*

Xiaoxing also uses a contrasting expression (9) in the voice-over synchronized with the images in Figures (7) and (8) to highlight again to the audience the different attitudes of himself and the "other" vocational school students when dealing with electronic devices and the internet. Xiaoxing shows us that he uses them as means of self-improvement through video production, whereas the other vocational students only use it as a tool for entertainment. The use of the word "other" clearly demonstrates Xiaoxing's intention to make a distinction between "me" and "them" in relation to the vocational school students.

Xiaoxing's dynamic interaction with stigma in expression shows the paradoxical position of stigma in the construction process of Xiaoxing's identity. Xiaoxing needs the stigma to construct the image of a vocational school student that the audience anticipates in the video, whilst hoping that his identity can keep a distance from the stigma. In the end, building an identity consistent with stigma is not Xiaoxing's goal,

but a strategy to de-stigmatize his identity in another way. Ironically, this strategy of constructing a de-stigmatized identity never seems to be able to untie itself from stigma. When I asked Xiaoxing during the interview if he was considering making social media vlogger a long-term career, he expressed his concerns to me. Xiaoxing told me that “*I hope I can, but I was aware that viewers followed me only because of my position as a vocational student*”. He was worried that if he lost that identity in the future, his videos would also lose popularity. In an era of widespread digital technology, digital disadvantage does not point to the difficulty of accessing social media for the bottom of the social ladder, but rather to the different ways in which people of different social strata participate in the creation on social media (Stuart, 2020). For a vocational student at the bottom of the education system in social discourse, the stereotypical image of the vocational school student in the video work gives Xiaoxing a new category of identity, while at the same time imprisoning him in stigma permanently.

Changing Axis of Differentiation

Apart from the discussion of Xiaoxing's expression in the video, the comments section is also worth noting as a listening part of the response to the video. As Halpern & Gibbs (2013) mentioned, the construction of meaning in public expression on social media is a joint endeavor between the expresser and the commenter. Since this article focuses on internal perspectives of self-expression among vocational school students, I have discussed here only the voices of commentators from vocational schools. In particular, Xiaoxing's video creation and identity construction is accomplished at the expense of reinforcing the group's stigmatization, which further increased the video's controversial nature within the vocational school student

community. Meanwhile, this also pushed the vocational school commenters who are denigrated by the video content to de-stigmatize their own identities by responding to the video with comments. The vocational students construct their own sense of self and reinterpret the social hierarchy ideology that is implicit in the stigmatisation, by providing metalinguistic comments. The commentators with a vocational school background have used comments to build further subcategories that reinforce the divisions within the vocational community. They do this to challenge the adverse impressions and establish their own distinctive identities.

In the comments section, the two main strategies used by vocational students are fractal recursivity (Gal & Irvine, 2019) and changing the grounds of evaluation. Under the first strategy, just as Xiaoxing delineated the boundaries between himself as a vlogger and other vocational students, the vocational students in the comments section have created new in-group subcategories that reify the axes of differentiation to reposition stigmatization and construct their own identities. A prevalent kind of polarisation is the subdivision of vocational schools into "high-quality vocational schools" and "low-quality vocational schools". In example (10), the critic articulates their discontent with "generalised vocational schools" and stress self-identity as from a vocational school that meets a satisfactory standard.

(10) I don't think you can generalize about vocational schools. Good vocational schools are naturally different. If someone is still arguing that vocational schools are all crap, I can only say that either you don't know about good vocational schools or the vocational schools you attend aren't good enough.

(11) Every time I read what you guys say about vocational school, I feel like we're not in the same world. The vocational high school I'm in is very strict. The school has zero tolerance for fighting, smoking, and romance. So some vocational high schools aren't as bad as you say. At least in mine, the people I come in contact with are all very polite and well mannered.

In this process, the hierarchical ideology of the educational system underlying the axes dividing high schools and vocational schools is projected onto a smaller scale

of comparisons between vocational schools. The standards for classifying 'better' and 'worse' vocational schools continue to reproduce the official discourse. In example (11), the commentator asserts that he/she belongs to a "good vocational school" by describing his/her high school-like strict school rules and the good personal qualities of his/her classmates. These mentioned characteristics are indexical to the institutional identity of high school in the social context, and thus a better vocational high school is a vocational high school that is more similar to a high school. Although the commentators have positioned themselves as distanced from the stigma within vocational education by carving out recursions of the axes. However, the reproduction of hierarchical ideologies and standards in this identity construction strategy also reinforces the inferior position of vocational education as a whole within the education system.

Within the other strategy, vocational school students introduce an alternative evaluation criterion outside of the hierarchical ideology of the educational system. This standard not only distinguishes but also enhances the identity classification of vocational school students. Having changed the scope of comparative scale, commentators also introduced a new moral dimension in the axis of differentiation. Commentators from vocational schools establish a connection between social inequality and students' moral discourse, and recontextualize the official hierarchical ideology. For instance, in example (12), the commentator establishes the identification of a moral person in a different comparison dimension by portraying them as a responsible family member.

(12) It's really unfair for you guys to talk about vocational students like that. Is it possible that I came to vocational school because I didn't want to add to my family's financial burden? It may not mean much to you, but it's a pain that'll keep me down for the rest of my life.

According to Pun & Koo (2019), vocational education is not just a consequence of not passing the high school entrance examine (HSEE), but it is also associated with disparities in socioeconomic class. The exorbitant expense associated with independently financing enrollment in private high schools is a significant barrier for several working-class parents. Given these conditions, enrolling in vocational education emerged as the most cost-effective, if not the only, choice for academically disadvantaged adolescents from working-class families (Woronov, 2020). In enrolling for vocational education, students demonstrate filial piety towards their families, while helping relieve the financial burden. Under this set of standards, vocational students, while failures of the education system, are not failures of their family responsibilities.

Vocational students shift from a monolithic discourse about the desiring subject to a discourse focused on 'moral norms' in order to explore and embrace their own identities. In the new evaluation scheme, the stigma is shifted to a group of "privileged students" who do not perform well on the HSEE, but enter private high schools by paying high tuition fees. Example (13) illustrates directly how the vocational school commenters establish their superior position by comparing themselves to private school students.

(13) I admit I'm not good at studying, but I'm not as bad as you think. I knew I wasn't cut out for it, so I decided not to waste my family's money and went straight to vocational school. It's better than taking my family's money just to be a dawdle at a private school.

The change in evaluation criteria questioned the way in which failure itself was categorized in the official discourse, as opposed to the strategy of fractal recursion. Furthermore, the reference to family background in the comments of vocational students makes visible the structural inequalities in society that are concealed in the stigmatization of vocational education. When evaluations within the education system judged vocational school students as a devalued group due to poor academic

performance and a future without the possibility of upward mobility (Guo & Wang, 2020), vocational school students in the comments section did not resist the official discourse, but neither did they accept it in its entirety. Instead, vocational students chose to negotiate stigma and assign value to their identity in the given social context by establishing an alternative evaluation standard centered on ideology of family responsibilities. The negotiating technique serves as a means for vocational students, who are marginalised in the field of education, to establish their place in society. Vocational school students both replicate and somewhat contest hierarchical ideas while developing their identities.

Conclusion

To summarize, the above analysis explores the strategies used by Chinese vocational school students to construct their identities by negotiating stigma in social media self-expression. These strategies are centered on adjusting the axis of differentiation (Gal and Irvine 2019) that locates stigmatized ideologies. I focus on the different ways in which vocational school students in different positions, attended to the video. As the creator of the video, Xiaoxing differentiates his video content from other social media images through extensive satire and representation of stigma in his self-expression. While emphasizing the group stigma, Xiaoxing attempts to distance himself from it by invoking and parodying other voices. At the same time, Xiaoxing's identity as a social media vlogger and a vocational school student is simultaneously constructed in the video. These two identities are separate voices in the video, and in a hybrid way provide Xiaoxing with a new subidentity category that delineates the axis of difference between himself and the stigmatized vocational school student. Throughout Xiaoxing's performances and attempts to position himself,

the grouped stigma attached to the vocational school student identity plays an important role. Xiaoxing needs to emphasize the stigma in his dual identity, but also wants to realize the de-stigmatization of the individual. However, the limitations of his de-stigmatizing approach foreshadowed his inability to escape the stigma. Xiaoxing's dilemma and self-expression show us the long and dynamic process of negotiating stigmatization for vocational students as a marginalized group.

Unlike Xiaoxing, who claims to be a "better" vocational student by moving his own position, the commentator makes a recursive distinction between vocational schools and students, reiterating the contrast within the "side" of this axis of differentiation. The definition of the dividing boundary of the axis of differentiation depends on the perspectives adopted by each individual in different contexts, which may change with shifting roles. Within the comments section, vocational school students also built their identities by responding to the stigmas constructed on the video. Some commenters further recursively delineate internal subcategories of good/bad vocational schools. Others insert a moral dimension to the evaluation criteria. Commenters from vocational schools placed collective stigmas away from individual identities by changing the comparative scale of the axis of difference and altering the axis. The stigma attached to vocational schools is a key aspect of the subject's identity construction, but is also constantly repositioned and revealed in the process. Hierarchy is built into the axis, since vocational and academic schools are in a hierarchical relationship, as are the students who go to each.

This paper explores the linguistic ideologies of vocational high school students on social media with the aim of looking at how collective stigmatization enters the daily lives and linguistic practices of vocational high school students from the students' own perspectives, and influences their self-orientation and understanding of social

structures. Social media platforms give vocational students, who have been marginalized and neglected, an opportunity to express their voices and give us a new perspective on the situation of vocational students. What I seek to show in this article is that vocational students are not just a passive social product of structural oppression and stigmatization within the education system, but an active participant in the construction of social stigmas and hierarchical ideology. The expression of stigma on social media is ambivalent and even reinforces the disadvantaged of the stigmatized group. However, this approach also allows analysts to see how vocational school students have the possibility of finding their place and coexisting with power as a marginalized group excluded from the dominant discourse in China's unequal social hierarchy.

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