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Stigma, Resilience and Growth: Exploring Narratives from Chinese Vocational Students and Teachers

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Abstract

The low status of vocational education is a global concern, and there is growing international interest in the psychological predicament of vocational students. Secondary vocational education is a significant component of the vocational education system in China, but the students are often stigmatized with negative labels such as ‘educational failures’ or ‘academic slackers’. Drawing on qualitative data from our interviews of secondary vocational students and teachers on the experiences of learning ‘out of normal route’, informed and analyzed with Goffman’s stigma theory, this study examines how these students negotiate the tension between ‘learning skills for livelihood’ and ‘self-identity construction’ under stigmatization. Findings reveal that students consciously employ ambivalence, in-group alignments, and out-group alignments to construct self-identity. They also adopt proactive strategies of engaging in school activities, reconstructing self-worth with support from adults, and enhancing competence through internships to foster personal growth and actively respond to stigmatization.

Introduction

China has established a well-structured vocational education system, encompassing three stages: secondary vocational education, higher vocational education (at the associate degree level), and higher vocational education (at the bachelor’s degree level), which makes it the primary source of skilled talent supply. The newly revised ‘Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China’ clearly states that a modern vocational education system will be established, integrating vocational education with general education, ensuring effective connection among different levels of vocational education, and serving life-long learning for all (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2022).

Sitting at the base of the whole vocational education system, secondary vocational education enrolls half of the junior high graduates, approximating the enrollment of ordinary high schools. It not only coordinates the structure of vocational education, but also bears the mission of cultivating high-quality laborers and skilled talents (Liu 2024).There have been 6,862 secondary vocational schools in China (excluding technical schools managed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security) until the end of 2024, with 4.1833 million students newly enrolled and 12.2933 million students already in the study (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2025). Such a large group of secondary vocational students are at the cross corner of both career orientation and personality shaping. Their mental health would directly affects the quality and effects of Technical and Vocational Education (TVE), thus having increasingly attracted high attention from both society and academia.

Among the secondary vocational students, 61.4% have reported the discrimination and prejudice because of their secondary vocational identity (Lu 2020). They are often stereotyped as ‘stupid and lazy youths’ (Wang 2022), which has an adverse impact on the mental health of them, such as low sense of self-identity, low trust in schools and families, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, employment confusion, poor social adaptability, and hypersensitive in interpersonal communication (Yin 2019). Compared with general high school students, the secondary vocational students aged from 15 to 18 were found to be struggling with at least one of the mental health conditions assessed, including depression, anxiety, stress and eating disorder (Zhang 2012; Abela et al. 2024). The main cause of these psychological problems is the inferiority complex resulting from their poor academic performance. They have to endure the pressure of stigmatization both from parents who keep complaining about their ‘unambitiousness’, and from the society where the vocational education is always looked down upon.(Yu Guoliang 2021; Engel 2012; Blom et al. 2016; Budirahayu T. et al. 2022).

While stigmatization poses psychological challenges to secondary vocational students, many respond with proactive strategies to counteract prejudice and rebuild self-esteem. Existing literatures have documented these students' psychological difficulties and their origins, yet few studies have centered on the agentive strategies they employ in navigating stigma within their developmental context. Grounded in narrative data from students and teachers, this study reveals not only the decision-making process of secondary vocational students after junior high school, but also the challenges they were confronted with while choosing and finally accepting vocational education, namely lacking in understanding from family, friends, teachers, etc., which, according to the theory of stigma, is regarded as a key feature of stigmatization (Scheff 2014) and can deepen the sense of shame. Stigma, widely understood as a mark of disgrace, has been extensively studied by sociologists such as Goffman, who analyze the conditions, mechanisms, and coping practices of stigmatized groups. Originally applied to marginalized populations like racial minorities and people with disabilities (Katz, 1981; Kanuha, 1999), stigma theory offers a compelling lens to understand how secondary vocational students perceive external prejudice, undergo socialization, and actively negotiate their identity in stigmatized environments.

Additionally, Jones et al. (1984) have examined variables that mediate the severity with which people are stigmatized, and they identified six critical dimensions of stigma: concealability, course, disruptiveness, aesthetic qualities, origin, and peril. The stigmatization process may vary depending on whether the 'labeled' individual is viewed in the context of other labeled individuals or in the context of a positive view of the 'normal ones'(Neuberg 1994). As for coping strategies, stigmatized individuals will construct their self-identity through ambivalence, in-group positioning, or out-group positioning (Goffman 1956). Stigmatized individuals will have a specific moral career strategy and gradually accept the self-perception of 'normals' during the socialization process (Pescosolido 2015).

Based on Goffman's stigma framework, this study examines how 14 secondary vocational students (aged 15–18) and four of their teachers narrate the former's educational pathways. It first discusses why students chose vocational education, focusing on their perceptions of the skills for making a living, social networks, costs of education, and residence restrictions. Second, it analyzes how students construct self-identity under stigma—through ambivalence, in-group alignment, and out-group alignment—to maintain dignity by negotiating self-other relations. Finally, it traces the moral career trajectories of the stigmatized secondary vocational students, mapping how they internalize self-perception distortions induced by the gaze of others, and how they, through resistant practices, reconstruct identity, ultimately reclaiming subjective dignity and reframing social positioning.

The stigmatization of vocational students in the Chinese context

Vocational education has long been regarded as occupying a lower societal standing globally, a phenomenon observed across both developed and developing economies (UNESCO 2018). In China, this status has shifted over time. Following WWII and the founding of the People's Republic, secondary vocational schools were established to supply skilled workers for national industrialization, granting the track considerable social recognition (Wang 2022). Since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, however, factors including market transition, higher education expansion, variable educational quality, and the lingering cultural bias of 'emphasizing academic over vocational learning' have repositioned vocational education as an inferior alternative (Yang 2004), situating it at the bottom of China's educational hierarchy (Liu & Wang 2015).

Students within this stigmatized system report significant psychological challenges, including interpersonal difficulties (Zhang & Gao 2018), employment-related stress (Wang 2016), and parental attachment anxiety (Hao

2024). Their psychological resilience is positively correlated with positive emotion and cognitive reappraisal, yet negatively linked to negative emotion and expressive suppression (Mei & Liao 2024). It is further shaped by familial, social, and school evaluative environments (Ren, 2016; Liu 2011). Despite recent policy efforts to elevate vocational education's status, stereotypes remain persistent, increasing students' reluctance to seek psychological help due to shame (Yin, Gao, & Ni 2023). In this context, external support, especially from teachers, proves crucial for students' mental health (Fan & Liu 2022).

Existing research has effectively documented the psychological toll of stigma on vocational students. However, fewer studies examine how students actively cope with stigma, reconstruct their identity, and negotiate what Goffman terms a 'moral career'. While Ryan and Lorinc (2018) note that young apprentices engage in strategic self-presentation to counter stigma, deeper processes of identity negotiation within the Chinese vocational context remain underexplored. Guided by stigma theory, this study investigates how Chinese secondary vocational students navigate the tension between self- and group-identity and resist internalized shame through narrative and practice.

The study

This study, conducted in October 2024, examines the factors influencing students' choice of secondary vocational education and their strategies for coping with associated stigma. We collected qualitative data through interviews with 14 students (9 female, 5 male) aged 15 to 18, and 4 teachers from Chinese secondary vocational schools.

The student participants were distributed across grades: 5 in grade one, 5 in grade two, and 4 in grade three. They specialized in e-commerce (11 students) or accounting (3 students). Most came from low socio-economic backgrounds, with parents typically engaged in unstable or informal work such as self-employed labor, crane operation, auto repair, wage work, or homemaking; only 1 student had a parent working as a kindergarten teacher.

The teacher sample consisted of 1 administrative teacher, 2 subject teachers, and 1 ideological-political teacher who also served as director of admissions. Their perspectives helped contextualize student narratives and institutional dynamics.

Methods

Interviews were conducted in the classrooms and internship sites of secondary vocational schools.

Firstly, employing a narrative approach, we examined participants' personal experiences, from their initial decision to pursue vocational education and their subsequent school life to their future plans. Thus we made no claim to the representativeness of our 14 participants. To broaden the analytical perspective, we also interviewed four vocational school teachers.

Secondly, we used an inductive qualitative approach to organize and interpret the interview data, gradually developing a set of themes from participants' accounts. The themes, combined with the stigma theory, captures the full range of the participants' perspectives of their options, self-identity and moral career .

Choosing vocational education as 'the best option'

Selecting a vocational pathway often contradicts mainstream educational values in China. However, for specific groups, it can represent the most pragmatic and advantageous option. Goffman explores that 'individuals had ideal motives for acquiring the role in which they are performing, that they have ideal qualifications for the role, and that it was not necessary for them to suffer any indignities, insults, and humiliations' (1959, 46). For secondary vocational students in China, what is their 'ideal motives' for choosing vocational education? Do they possess the 'ideal qualifications'? We are very interested in these questions. The narrative analysis revealed four different but inter-related themes: the perception of using skills for livelihood, the impact of social relationships, the consideration of economic costs, and the restrictions of household registration (hukou).

The perception of 'using skills for livelihood'

Goffman argued that in everyday social interactions, individuals present themselves and their behaviors to others, seeking to shape and control the impressions formed of them, while employing specific techniques to sustain such performances—much like an actor embodying a character for an audience (Goffman 1959). Participants in this study consistently justified their choice by linking vocational skills directly to employability, framing it as a rational performance of foresight.

Students like Jiayi, who met the local high school admission score but chose a nearby vocational school, explained:

I mainly wanted to enhance my skills in this field and quickly achieve the goal of finding a job.

Similarly, Junxi viewed vocational education as an efficient shortcut:

After leaving school, I still have to look for a job. So why not go to a vocational school to improve and hone my skills? Besides, there is an old saying that 'Every profession has its own experts'. If I can find a job with the skills learnt in this school, the results would be the same (as those graduate from the universities). So I think I can simply skip that stage.

Despite vigorous policy promotion of vocational education in China, dominant social values and stereotypes remain entrenched. In response, participants adopted distinct narrative strategies to legitimize their choice. Some emphasized immediate 'employment goals', while others framed their path as a means of 'qualification enhancement'.

A vocational school teacher, Mr. Yan, stated:

For a student entering the 'three-two (secondary-higher vocational training mode) program', that means he may think that learning a certain technique or skill is better than following the ordinary academic path, and he personally understands what he wants to do. For example, he would want to study unmanned aircraft at our school for certain skills or qualifications. Besides, some of our students got over 600 points[1] in the senior high school entrance exam and has been doing well ever since. They aim to get further technical training in the vocational colleges.

By choosing vocational education over the conventional academic path to university, students make a strategic pivot toward technical college, reflecting a clear and purposeful career trajectory.

In summary, students' choices are grounded in a perceived linkage between skills, employment, and advanced training. In the following section, how do the social relationships influence the teenagers to choose the secondary vocational education will be discussed.

The impact of social relationships

Given that participants were aged 15 to 18, their educational choices were inevitably shaped by their social worlds—family, school, and broader society. This section details how these relational influences guided them toward vocational pathways.

Parental networks and attitudes were often decisive. Jiandong explained his choice plainly:

My grades were not good at the junior high school and I didn't have any plans for the future. My parents knew someone at this school and the introduction was quite good, so I came here.

For others, family influence was more prescriptive. Keni noted :

Because of the pressure of academic scores, my family planned for me to get a bachelor's degree after vocational college. So, secondary vocational school became the best choice for me. Otherwise, I would have no other educational opportunities.

In such cases, parental interpersonal relationships and their views on diplomas and skills served to rationalize the vocational path as a strategic, rather than a default, option.

Moreover, School promotion and media exposure also played key roles. Xiaotong's decision followed direct outreach from her junior high school:

Before the senior high school entrance examination, the school distributed a booklet about this vocational school. After the exam, my scores did not reach the entrance line of senior high schools. According to my teachers' introduction, I visited and felt it might be a good choice.

Besides, with reports of the vocational education policies and practices, social media also shaped perceptions. Shile stated:

I got to know about the new vocational policies on a social media APP, the Tiktok, where I also learnt the study experience and colorful life of the vocational students. That made me want to learn technical skills here.

For students with limited academic performance, the combined influence of family, school, and media often framed vocational education as the most viable "best option." This path is perceived not only as a way to gain professional skills but also as a bridge to future educational advancement, reframing a constrained choice into a purposeful trajectory.

Economic cost considerations

In China, most public secondary vocational schools provide three years of tuition-free education, typically requiring household registration at the county level or below. For low-income families, this makes vocational schools a financially viable alternative to costly private high schools.

Students frequently cited economic constraints as decisive. Haoting recalled:

My parents initially didn't support me attending a secondary vocational school because they thought I should attend a private high school. But the average tuition fees of private high schools have reached as much as 40,000 yuan per year. That's far beyond my family.

Jinfu expressed similar awareness of family pressure:

The tuition for a semester at a private high school is over 20,000 yuan, and that even doesn't contain the basic life expense, like the accommodation fees, food expense, or clothing, etc. Although my dad didn't say anything, I knew choosing a private school would place a heavy burden on him.

A teacher, Mr. Yan, corroborated this view, noting the dual economic logic for families:

Some parents prefer vocational school precisely because it removes the financial burden. Students study on campus for the first two years, and in the third year they can intern or work in enterprises. The income they earn often helps support their families directly.

These accounts indicate that many vocational students come from economically constrained backgrounds. Unable to meet the score thresholds for public high schools and equally unable to afford private alternatives, they turn to vocational education as a pragmatic solution. This choice not only alleviates immediate family expenses but can also generate income during internships. Consequently, while vocational study may lack the social prestige of the academic track, it represents a rational and often optimal economic decision for these students and their families.

Residence restrictions

In China, admission to most public high schools and secondary vocational schools is tied to local household registration (hukou)[2]. Although a limited number of non-local students may be admitted to public high schools, they have to face significantly higher score thresholds. This policy effectively channels many academically capable students without local hukou toward vocational education, as seen in cities like Guangzhou[3].

Students articulated how these restrictions shaped their choices. Shile explained with resignation:

My senior high school entrance exam score was over 600 points. But as a student without the local household registration, I had to get more 70 points than those local students to enter a regular high school—meaning at least 670! That was beyond my reach!

Yiwen echoed this experience, noting its commonality:

About half of my classmates are non-local. Their entrance scores were over 600, but because of the residence restrictions, they had to come here. If they were local, they could have entered a public high school. It's really a pity.

These accounts help explain why some students with strong exam scores nonetheless choose vocational pathways. For those without local hukou, vocational school often represents a constrained yet pragmatic alternative. While the policy can hinder academic trajectories and engender feelings of disadvantage, it also repositions these students within the vocational system: their relatively higher scores often make them 'top students' in the vocational context, affording them greater access to resources and support. This, in turn, facilitates a reconstructed sense of self-worth and identity within the vocational track.

Dealing with stigma – Self-identity Construction

As Goffman argues, individuals are not merely passive recipients of social meanings; they actively work to sustain definitions of the situation that align with their self-image (1961, 104). They tend to maintain the line that it is what

they claim to be and strive to ‘stay in character’ (Goffman 1959) and may invest deeply in their identification with specific roles, institutions, or groups (1959, 243). Understanding the social and cultural processes that generate stigma in everyday experience is therefore crucial to any effort to counter it (Kleinman & Hall-Clifford, 2009).

Goffman identifies three key strategies through which stigmatized individuals negotiate affiliation and selfhood: ambivalence, in-group positioning, and out-group positioning. In this study, secondary vocational students engage in similar identity work. Some display ambivalence, stratifying their own group while recognizing that they may not fully meet internalized identity standards, yet still applying those standards to themselves (Goffman 1963). This self-reflection helps clarify their sense of identity. Others adopt in-group positioning, locating their group within the wider social structure by referencing both their perceived group traits and the characteristics ascribed to them by outsiders. Alternatively, through out-group positioning, they view themselves from the vantage point of a larger, normative society. Compared with students in general high schools, the vocational students in this study interpret their educational choices and future trajectories in distinctly situated ways—actively redefining their social and moral standing while contending with stigma.

Ambivalence

Goffman describes ambivalence as the tendency among the stigmatized to stratify “their own kind” according to the visibility and salience of their stigma (1963,107). This is reflected in the account of Student Baoxin, who remarked:

I feel like their (secondary vocational students’) character is somewhat poor. If they dislike someone, they’ll gossip behind that person’s back and claim that person has bad character—when in fact, it’s their own character that they lack.

For Baoxin, as Goffman notes, ‘he then take up, in regard to those who are more evidently stigmatized than himself, the attitudes others take to him’ (1963,107).

Within mainstream Chinese society, secondary vocational students are widely perceived as ‘academic failures’. This perception is sustained by an education system that operates as ‘meritocracy in action’, where examination results are taken as direct indicators of intelligence and effort (Jin and Ball 2019). Academic labor is virtually the only fully legitimized form of student activity (Qvortrup 1994; Woronov 2015), and its value is condensed into test scores. Consequently, vocational students are readily labeled ‘failures’. Furthermore, influenced by Confucian cultural norms that privilege theoretical knowledge and moral cultivation over technical practice, those in skill-based occupations are often marginalized and stigmatized as socially ‘inferior’ or even morally deficient. In short, due to their lower academic performance, secondary vocational students are routinely stereotyped as possessing ‘poor character’.

According to Goffman, ‘some signs that convey social information may be frequently and steadily available, and routinely sought and received; these signs may be called ‘symbols’, and ‘the social information conveyed by a symbol can establish a special claim to prestige, honor, or desirable class position’ (1963, 43). Attributes such as ‘poor character’ or perceived envy function as such symbols, transmitting negative social messages about vocational students. Because test scores are widely accepted as representing a young person’s social worth (Woronov, 2015), these stigmatizing symbols are further reinforced by dominant groups.

For Baoxin, the group to which he belongs is a source of shame; his attitude toward his own group mirrors the regard in which others hold them. Goffman captures this psychological tension when explaining, 'the stigmatized individual may exhibit identity ambivalence when he obtained a close sight of his own kind behaving in a stereotyped way. That sight may repel him, since he has internalized the norms of the wider society. Yet his social and psychological identification with these offenders holds him to what repels him. This repulsion turns into shame, and the shame itself becomes a source of further shame. In short, he can neither fully identify with his group, nor can he fully leave it behind (Goffman 1963).'

In-group alignments

The more one desires recognition as a legitimate member of a community, the more intensely shame may be felt when one is unable to participate in ways that are socially recognized (Probyn 2005). In response, stigmatized individuals may resort to what Goffman (1963) terms in-group positioning, aligning themselves with a community of 'their own kind' (those sharing the same stigma), thereby claiming recognition and dignity while drawing a clear boundary against outsiders. For secondary vocational students, this feeling of shame, especially in comparison with peers in general high schools, creates a critical moment for constructing their self-identity.

Goffman suggests that individuals facing stigmatization may adopt strategies of social interaction in which 'one presents oneself as not performing a role' (Rohy 1996), thereby crafting an image an image that diverges from the social cognition on them. When asked how they differed from general high school students, participants emphasized distinct strengths. Junxi stated:

In terms of physical fitness, we're definitely stronger than them. They mostly focus on academic subjects, just memorizing, reciting, and doing homework every day. What we think about is how to master our technical skills and become truly proficient.

Guanghong commented with a tone of slight contempt:

My emotional intelligence is a bit higher than theirs, and my professional skills are also more advanced. They only learn theoretical science knowledge without any practical experience or real-world exposure. So most of them are bookworms. Since we have internships, we can understand societal trends better than they do.

Within China's mainstream cultural value system, outstanding academic performance and admission to general high schools signify a young student's excellence and social worth. By contrast, vocational students are often perceived as 'academic failures' or as having 'poor character', and their actions are frequently interpreted through this stigmatized lens, their strengths overlooked or misread (Cohen 1972, 12). Just as Keni described:

My relatives' biggest criticism of me was to tell their children not to be like me. I would retort by saying, 'Your child is so capable. Hope him/her not to be a bookworm or a nerd,' just to sarcastically throw it back at them.

Carrying the stigmatized identity of 'inferior', secondary vocational students engage in a process of differentiation from their general high school counterparts, sometimes even dismissing certain traits of the latter group. They emphasize their perceived superiority in areas such as physical ability, emotional intelligence, and professional skills, thereby actively participating in the reconstruction of their own identity. As Goffman observed, those who adopt an in-group alignment 'may have to suffer the same deprivations because they share the same stigma; indeed, the group they truly belong to is the very category that discredits themselves. Those who take the

standpoint of an in-group alignment may adopt a militant and chauvinistic route—even to the extent of favoring a secessionist ideology' (Goffman 1963).

Out-group alignments

A key dimension of the stigmatization experienced by secondary vocational students lies in the judgments imposed by external groups. Relatives, peers from general high schools, and teachers often evaluate these students from the standpoint of what they terms the 'normal' (Goffman 1963). They expressed 'the officially accredited values of the society' (Goffman 1959), while these values seems to be violated by the vocational students.

Such judgment manifests in everyday remarks. Jiandong noted how relatives positioned him against more 'successful' peers:

My relatives would compare me to other children who were attending regular high schools, and always think their children would have a better future.

Jinfu recalled a peer's dismissive comment:

A female classmate of mine said, 'Vocational schools aren't as valuable as regular high schools; and because the academic qualification is generally low for the vocational system, it's hard for vocational students to get a good job.'

Even educators can internalize this bias. A substitute teacher, Ms. Xiong, remarked:

Vocational students are always labeled as exam failures, those who didn't make it into high schools. So their learning ability is relatively low.

Such perceptions reflect a deep-seated societal bias in China that elevates general high schools over vocational institutions. Participants frequently encountered comparisons like 'less valuable than high schools' or 'just for those with lower scores' when commenting on secondary vocational education. Even vocational teachers often stratify the vocational students into 'a group of lower learning ability'.

However, confronted with such stigma, the participants engaged in what Goffman refers to as out-group alignment—constructing an identity that transcends the stigmatized category. In his view, the stigmatized individual who adopts this stance 'is advised to see himself as a fully human being, like anyone else, who at worst happens to be excluded from what is, in the last analysis, merely one area of social life. He is not a type or a category, but a person' (1963, 115).

Students actively performed this realignment. Jiandong countered his relatives' criticism by detailing his vocational training and future plans:

I present them with my future plans of work in the foreign trade industry, my real experiences at the vocational school, and the skills of trade and language I learnt there. Even I'll take exams for two English qualification certificates. After that, their view on me changed. Instead, they even showed admiration.

Jinfu replied to his peer by reframing the hierarchy of pathways:

Although you're in a regular high school, it doesn't mean you'll definitely get into a 985 or 211[4] university. And even though I'm in a vocational school, I'm not stuck here—I still can further upgrade to a bachelor's degree.

Some teachers also provided affirming narratives. Ms. Xie offered a more positive perspective:

Vocational students don't focus only on academics. They're flexible in many ways. That's their advantage. Actually, they may have more real-world exposure and social experience than high school students do.

For vocational students, achieving recognition as an individual, distinct from a stigmatized category, remains an ongoing struggle. In response, they engage in active efforts to reframe their educational trajectories and social identities. The participants in this study articulated three interrelated rationales for their paths: heightened self-awareness, the pursuit of higher education as a means to overcome prejudice, and the desire to enhance technical skills as proof of capability. These motivations not only informed their choices but also functioned as legitimizing justifications. Furthermore, many participants maintained that their selected path held a legitimacy equivalent to that of their general high school peers, a viewpoint that was, in several instances, acknowledged and reinforced by their teachers.

Strategies for Confronting Challenges of Stigmatizaion – The Moral Career

Stigma emerges through a process of stereotyping in which individuals are labeled, set apart, and associated with undesirable traits. This linkage provides a rationale for their devaluation, rejection, and exclusion (Link & Phelan, 2006). In the present study, secondary vocational students are stereotyped as having 'poor character', being 'poor learners', attending 'low-prestige schools', and possessing 'weak academic ability'. As Crocker (1998) observed, 'stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context'. As discussed above, the participants had to initially construct self-identity in the existing situation to help themselves adapt to and dealing with stigma. Nonetheless, members of stigmatized groups actually will also actively utilize available resources and strategies to resist and fight back the stigmatizing impositions from more powerful groups (Link & Phelan, 2001). In this regard, Goffman (1959) noted that 'any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way'.

Goffman further elaborated that those who share a particular stigma often undergo a common 'moral career'- a series of similar learning experiences and shifts in self-concept that both shape and result from a shared sequence of personal adaptations (Goffman 1963). This process of socialization may occur through self-acceptance, familial support, or engagement with out-group communities. As Goffman emphasised, 'Through the process of socialization, the stigmatized may learn and incorporate the standpoint of the normal, acquiring thereby the identity beliefs of the wider society and a general idea of what it would be like to possess a particular stigma' (1963, 32). This study illustrates how stigmatized secondary vocational students navigate such a moral career, developing strategies to confront the challenges of stigmatization they faced.

Actively Participating in School Activities and Educational Planning

When asked how they responded to the challenges of stigmatization and worked on self-improvement, the students described proactive approaches. Jiayi described her experience:

I joined the Public Relationship Community of an English club in my first year. Starting as a regular member, I gradually advanced to become the head of the department. I led my team to secure external sponsorships and successfully organized a school-wide event. This experience greatly boosted my confidence working skills.

Besides, the secondary vocational students are also actively envisioning their future development. Jinfu outlined his plan:

I intend to pursue further education through sports after my third year. If obtaining the National Level 2 Athlete certification, I would take the Vocational College Entrance Exam, and even get into a university to study for the Bachelor Degree later. I don't want to remain limited to vocational education, I want to go further. I hope to break through this barrier.

As illustrated above, these two students actively countered stigmatization dilemmas through various means: organizing events successfully, holding leadership positions, developing specialized skills, and mapping out future educational pathways. All of these reflect their consciousness to pierce through, from the inside, the stereotype imposed on the vocational students. In Goffman's words, in contemporary society, this implies that 'the individual will attempt on his/her own to hammer out such a code, but professionals will help them out—sometimes in the guise of telling their life story or of telling how they handled a difficult situation' (1963, 109). They would seek to find more opportunities inside the group to break through the fence of it. Moreover, seeking help from the outside would be another strategy for confronting the challenges of stigmatization.

Reconstructing self-worth with support from professionals and families

Apart from the self-promotion inside the community, supports from outside, mostly professionals and family, also play a significant role in the coping with stigmatization and rebuilding self-worth for the secondary vocational students.

When we asked how teachers help students build confidence to confront stigmatized situations, a department dean, Mr. Qiu, stated:

Every individual living in this world needs respect and a sense of belonging. It is our role to help vocational students find their specialies and that 'place' they may belong to. Besides, most teachers would like to provide help and resources to the vocational students on their career planning.

Encouraged by teachers and parents, Jinfu joined a sports training program with the aim of pursuing higher education through the vocational college entrance exam. He noted:

Many teachers praised my natural talent in sports. When I was young, I was physically weak, thin, and short; I never imagined I had such potentiality. But thanks to my teacher, I found my specialty, and through sports, I physically improved a lot and have a clear development planning.

With a teacher's encouragement, Guanghong took on the role of class monitor and found a renewed sense of self-worth. He stated:

It wasn't until I came to this vocational school that I experienced what it feels like to be recognized and appreciated, which made me really happy. It was the first time I felt so trusted by a teacher and found my merit in leadership. I didn't want to let my head teacher down, so I committed fully to my duties as monitor and strived to improve professional competences.

With the experience suggested above, the guidance and affirmation offered by teachers and other significant adults help stigmatized students reclaim a positive sense of self, turning external support into internal strength.

Enhancing professional competences through internships and practical training

Internships and practical training is an essential component of China's vocational education system, helping to improve the students' practical skills in the genuine situations. It is also a special but crucial approach provided by the schools to support the vocational students to cope with the stigmatization challenges and be different from those in academic high schools. As Goffman illustrated that moral career is a strategy with which an individual deals with the stigmatization according to adjust his/her self-recognition and behavior in the process of social interaction (Goffman 1963). Thus, what really helps to consolidate the reconstruction of self-recognition for the vocational students is the internships, a direct social connection to differ the vocational students from the academic ones, and even affirm their specialties in technical skills. As a consequence, even though some problems and shortcomings are still existing in the internships in some vocational schools, the students still grant most of their trust to those practical training to enhance their professional skills, even to make their own 'self-value'.

Internships and practical training are pivotal in translating vocational education into tangible professional capabilities. Both teachers and students highlight how these experiences bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application.

One teacher, Ms. Xie, emphasized the structured approach to skill development:

Right now, secondary vocational schools collaborate with numerous large and small enterprises to strengthen students' professional practical skills. Although many problems may occur in this process, like the payment of salary and the time distribution of working and studying, most students would still regard the internships as good opportunity to improve their competences.

The teacher, Mr. Qiu, from the Career Services Office elaborated:

We collaborate closely with partner enterprises to design training modules, such as graphic design, e-commerce operations, and short video production, that are directly aligned with current market demands. Industry experts often co-teach these courses, bringing firsthand practical knowledge into the classroom.

Our longitudinal observations reveal that a number of students transition directly from interns at their placement companies into long-term employees, building stable career paths there over periods extending to eight or ten years.

Xiaotong, who transitioned from intern to full-time HR staff, shared:

My internship allowed me to apply recruitment and interviewing techniques in a real business setting. I wasn't just learning theory, but also the industry trends and workplace expectations. I was building a professional skill set that directly helped me secure a stable job.

While systemic challenges such as limited placement resources and outdated equipment persist, they do not diminish the proven value of well-executed internships and practical training. When supported by deep school-enterprise cooperation, these experiences not only enhance professional skills and bridge the gap between theory and practice, but also significantly boost students' employability and provide tangible economic benefits. Ultimately, by fostering vocational mastery, creating clear pathways to employment, and generating measurable

self-worth, these engagements empower students to build confidence in their professional identity and meaningfully counteract the social stigma they often face.

Conclusion

This study has examined how secondary vocational students in China interpret their educational choices and navigate stigmatization in a society where academic meritocracy profoundly shapes opportunity and status. Employing Goffman's concept of stigma and the 'moral career,' we have identified three key approaches the vocational students dealing with stigma: ambivalence, in-group alignment and out-group alignment. Furthermore, to effectively confront the challenges of stigmatization, the vocational students applied the strategies: participating in activities and educational planning with inner activeness, reconstructing self-worth with help from outside, and enhancing professional competences in the internship and practical skills training.

Our findings indicate that, although vocational education offers a meaningful pathway for many young people, it remains shadowed by institutional constraints and cultural prejudice. Students are keenly aware of their marginalized position within an educational hierarchy that privileges exam-based achievement. To effectively destigmatize vocational education, we have to make clear of the foundamental causes of the stigmatization, that is the cultural and structural prejudice and constraints, which are also the essential pivots to solve the problem (Link and Phelan 2001). Culturally, there is a need to broaden narrow definitions of success beyond exam scores and university admission—public narratives should recognize diverse forms of achievement and the social value of skilled craftsmanship. Institutionally, vocational pathways should be strengthened through the development of a more integrated 'secondary–tertiary–undergraduate' system, parallel to general education. Reforms in enrollment mechanisms, such as improving the Spring College Entrance Exam to better assess both cultural knowledge and vocational skills, could enhance fairness and relevance.

While this research highlights the agency and adaptive capacity of stigmatized students, it also has limitations. The samples were drawn from specific schools and internship contexts, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The sample schools are located in Guangzhou, one of the most developed cities in China. Thus the vocational schools there may provide a relatively supportive environment for students. Moreover, the long-term impact of stigmatization on students' post-graduation trajectories, including further education and career performance, remains an important area for future research. In line with Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009), understanding the social and cultural mechanisms that produce and sustain stigma in the lived experience of the stigmatized remains a vital challenge, one that demands continued scholarly and public attention.

Notes

1. According to the 2024 Guangzhou Senior High School Entrance Examination statistics, the minimum admission score for general high schools was 502. A score of 600 or higher placed a student in the top 45.82% of all examinees, ensuring eligibility for any high school in the city (Guangzhou Admissions and Examinations Authority, 2024).
2. The Chinese household registration system (hukou) is a state-mandated system that registers and manages demographic information on a household basis. It serves as a primary form of legal identification for citizens and functions as the administrative basis for allocating access to public services, including education, healthcare, and housing.
3. According to the 2023 Guangzhou policy, migrant children—requiring three years of local junior high schooling and a parent's residence permit—face higher admission thresholds than local students due to competitive

quotas (8%–18%) allocated to them (Guangzhou Admissions and Examinations Office, 2023).
4. The ‘211 Project’, launched in 1993, selected 100 universities for prioritized development. It was followed in May 1998 by the ‘985 Project’, which provided substantial additional funding to 43 elite institutions with the explicit aim of building world-class universities.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of South China Normal University. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. For participants under 18 years of age, additional parental consent was secured. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and its later amendments, as well as relevant institutional ethical guidelines.

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Author Contribution

L. and Y. conducted interviews, collected and organized data. L. and F. wrote the main manuscript text, while Y. and Z. polished the manuscript and revised the grammar.

Data Availability

Data Availability statementThe qualitative interview data collected and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy concerns and ethical restrictions specified in the informed consent and ethics approval. De-identified interview materials are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, for academic research purposes only and subject to a signed data confidentiality and data use agreement.

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