

Double Contradiction of Schooling: Class Reproduction and Working-Class Agency at Vocational Schools in China

PUN, Ngai (Department of Sociology, HKU)

KOO, Anita (Department of Applied Social Sciences, HK PolyU) *

* corresponding author: ssakoo@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract

Situating in the different social, political and cultural context of schooling in China, which is more embedded in mixed neoliberal value, authoritarian state control and collective morality, we use a somewhat different theoretical angle to understand the process of ‘learning to labour’ and the reproduction of working class at school and at work. Our study extends the horizon of Willis’ analysis of cultural reproduction at school by seriously analysing students’ work experiences through their internship at the site of production. Taking a sociological rather than cultural analysis approach, we re-conceptualize working-class agency embedded in a double contradiction of schooling as a site of contestation. This double contradiction is generated by conflictual experiences caused by inevitable conflicts among the three spheres of material production, social reproduction and cultural reproduction in educating ideal labour subjects to serve the state, market and family, providing fertile soil for re-negotiating working-class solidarity.

Keywords

vocational school; working-class culture; China; cultural reproduction; production; social reproduction

Introduction

Sociological studies have paid little attention to education and the cultural reproduction of class despite there being a rich literature on the production and social reproduction of class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984; Giddens and Held 1982). Fewer still discuss production, social reproduction and cultural reproduction and their interrelated relationships in education and in shaping working-class experiences and their potential for accommodation, escape and resistance. The situation has been improved when Silva's *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013), Woronov's *Class Work* (2015) and Reay's *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* (2017) come out. Yet Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977) is still a classic and has significantly informed the literature on education and cultural reproduction of class for the past few decades. This article seeks to enrich Willis's findings on the cultural reproduction of class and working-class experiences in a more contemporary context. Based on ethnographic research in two vocational schools in China, we find that the process of class reproduction shares certain similarities with but is also somewhat different from what Willis observed in working-class schools in Britain in the 1970s. This diversion from Willis is not simply because of change over time (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004) but also due to the different social, political and cultural context that is more embedded in mixed neoliberal ideology, authoritarian state control and collective morality in China (Kipnis 2011a; Hansen 2013). And, we use a somewhat different theoretical angle to understand the process of 'learning to labour' and the reproduction of the working class at school and at work, respectively the site of cultural reproduction and the site of production. Our study extends the horizon of Willis' analysis of cultural reproduction at school by seriously analysing students' work experiences through their internship at the site of production (Smith and Chan 2015).

We first learnt from Willis's classic exploration of the agency of working-class kids in the terrains of education and work, in which he took school and work as fields of contestation which embody the cultural forms of working-class accommodation and resistance. Yet when we explore the rich lived experiences of today's Chinese working-class kids in vocational schools, while we find some echoes of Willis' findings, the working-class cultures differ significantly. Studies of Kipnis (2011a, 2011b) and Hansen (2013, 2015) rightly state that schooling in China embodies contradictory educational culture and the education system stands as a paradoxical phenomenon. Conflictual messages such as 'the spirit of craftsman' advocated by the state, 'entrepreneurial subject' by the market and 'responsible and moral self' by the community all intertwined to pass to the students at school. This article aims to disentangle the contradictory learning experiences of the vocational students in China regarding their active forming of working-class culture and identity. Instead of re-affirming their working-class culture and identity at school, most students denounce their class identity and culture in various ways. For example, many students actively 'imagine' their aspiration to be *out* of their present class situation by working very hard to 'escape' their 'fate' through continuous investment in education and training. As suggested by numerous studies, the middle-class idea of the 'enterprising self' that results in the denouncing of working-class culture is embodied in the state apparatus, the education and employment systems and the formulation of individual and family aspiration (Anagnost 2013; Hansen 2013; Kipnis 2011a; Woronov 2015). If working-class culture is too abstract a term for us to understand the concrete lived experiences of working-class students, then the value and dignity of being a manual worker – a phrase more commonly used – is completely denounced in the dominant ideology (Li 2015), despite the fact that China has been a 'world factory' for the past two decades.

Although the youths we studied could hardly escape their subject positioning in a structured culture of dominance in asserting their migrant status (Ling 2015) and their marginality in Chinese society (Woronov 2015), we do not deny agency and claim that working-class culture is an illusion and the kids can only be dupes of the dominant system. Based on ethnographic data and in-depth interviews with vocational school students, this article looks into the lived experiences of students during their vocational schooling, with especial focus on the training and internship at work as the major site of interaction. In Chinese vocational high schools, a standardized three-year vocational education programme is made up of two years in career-oriented learning and training followed by one year in practice with a period of compulsory internship. During these years, school classrooms and dorms and the fields of internship form a unique space of shared learning for students from diverse working-class backgrounds, resulting in the facilitation of shared work experiences and potential development of their conflictual class culture. The interrelationships of the spheres of cultural reproduction, social reproduction and production in the making of working-class culture are discussed without highlighting or singling out the significance or autonomy of any one sphere. We further locate the intersection of these three spheres and the embodiment of working-class agency in a specific contemporary Chinese context.

Reflecting Paul Willis on the Logics of Cultural Reproduction

We have benefited from theories and models of class reproduction in exploring the impact of class background on students' schooling and occupational attainments (class destination). Cultural reproduction is frequently used to describe how cultural forms (e.g. social privilege, elite status) and cultures themselves are transmitted intact from one generation to another. This idea emanates strongly from Paul Willis' ethnographic classic *Learning to Labour* (1977) on

the role of education in reproducing class inequality, which showed how inequality could be reproduced culturally despite the best efforts of a benevolent education system. The work of Pierre Bourdieu since the 1970s also draws attention to cultural capital and its significant impact on children's educational outcomes. According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital can exist in three forms: embodied (dispositions of mind and body), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (educational qualifications). Embodied cultural capital is the sum of the learned skills, knowledge, values, preferences and standards that must be acquired and which manifest in the particular habitus of a person, that is, the embodied cultural practices and meanings shared by members of a particular social group, such as families, neighbourhoods, and schools. The production and reproduction of educational inequalities can be read as the result of an uneven distribution and deployment of cultural capital among different social groups, as well as unequal encounters between working-class and middle-class habituses.

Cultural reproduction as a process must therefore be tracked and watched over time in methodological terms, and Willis's ethnographic work on the working-class 'lads' in a Midlands school remains the archetype. Could Willis offer a knowledge of cultural reproduction of class that provides a vision for future social change? We examine closely Willis's classic study (1977) and his subsequent papers on the same topics (1981; Willis and Corrigan 1983). Willis' major contribution, as often highlighted (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004; Griffin 2005), is his analysis of cultural forms and lived experience of working-class kids (Willis 1977, 1981) and his break from a mechanistic understanding of the cultural reproduction of class in education and work in order to release the effects of ideology upon class subjects as passive and powerless (Gordon 1984). In so doing, Willis strives to activate the counter-culture of the dominant, the agency and subjectivity of class subjects in their own rich and often contradictory lived experiences, while confronting the dominant value and

authority (Aronowitz 2004). In rescuing the ‘persistent myth of working class passivity, subordination, incorporation, and ignorance’ in the existing literature (Willis and Corrigan 1983, 85), he figures a vivid vignette of working-class kids’ cultural forms, that is, penetrations, forms of reversal and combination that were often manipulated to work against the dominant mode of culture at school.

Willis argues that at school, working-class kids articulate and generate various cultural forms such as dossing, blagging, wagging and ‘having a laff’, etc. to create an oppositional culture to confront the school authority and the conformists. By actively manipulating sexist, racist and violent languages, male kids reproduce a masculine working-class culture transmitted from their parents and neighbourhoods. To them, manual work is an expression of masculine power and superiority. Hence, the ruthless celebration of their masculinity, violence, sexism and racism are at the very heart of the counter-school culture (Gordon 1984: 106). In their romanticizing of culture, resistance to conformity eventually nurtures the lads to a shop-floor existence, reproducing their own class dominance (Walker 1986).

In responding to critics, Willis (1981; Willis and Corrigan 1983) argued that neither ‘discourse’ nor ‘relationship’ is thinkable alone, and he emphasized that we must see how *relations*, and particularly class relations are *lived* (1983: 87). However, no matter how hard Willis attempted to articulate a relational concept of cultural reproduction, he retained the inner logics of cultural forms, under which everyday practices, discourses and relationships shall be thought within cultural structuration, but not really in relation to the ‘outside world’, specifically the spheres of production and social reproduction. In retaining a cultural analysis, Willis ends up arguing a working-class culture that actively embodies its own experience in reproducing its class position and status.

In contrast to Willis's conceptualization of an 'autonomy' within the logics of cultural reproduction and his argument for a potential openness of working-class culture to generating an alternative, our study argues that the openness lies not within a closed cultural reproduction circuit but *at the interfaces among production, social reproduction and cultural reproduction*, at the *direct contradictions* among these spheres in making working-class subjects. Rather than concluding that working-class kids actively create a sub-culture of their own, our study shows a complication of working-class cultural forms that may be more liberating and reflexive. While Willis highlights a somewhat smooth transmission and transformation of working-class culture from family (social reproduction) to school (cultural reproduction) and then the workplace (production), our study demonstrates conflictual processes and contradictions among these three spheres that eventually open cracks and fissures for the school kids to generate a working-class solidarity and culture of resistance, calling for a rethinking of the school-work-class nexus (Atkinson 2009).

The Context of the Study

What we have learnt from Willis is not only his theory but also his methodology. Engaging in an ethnographic inquiry, we had close interactions and in-depth interviews with teachers, students, interns and graduates at two vocational schools in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan province, between May 2013 and April 2015. 'Service School' is located in a key urban district inside Chengdu, offering mainly service-oriented programmes such as hotel management, tourism, business and finance, media, and computing. Another school is located on the outskirts of Chengdu city where the district is newly transformed into a new economic development area. As most of its programmes are manufacturing-oriented, including

mechanics, logistics, car repair, lathe operation, city design and construction, and railway systems, we called it ‘Industrial School’. These two schools provided an ideal case for observing the preparation for students to enter the manufacturing and service sectors.

We visited Chengdu four times during the two-year fieldwork, with each visit lasting one week to three weeks, and became acquainted with a group of thirty students who provided in-depth accounts of their family background, learning experience and internship at work. We also kept in touch with them via social media sites QQ and WeChat from time to time off the field. We had observed carefully and in depth the process of school recruitment, choice of subject studies, formal and hidden curriculum in the school, and internship at the workplace, and we had numerous conversations with boys and girls at their dorms. Located in a booming city of West China, we examine the two schools and internship sites with specific concern on migration backgrounds of the students, Chinese family aspiration, Confucian education culture, national ideology, and workplace demand — the fertile soil of embodiment of tensions and conflicts for the working-class kids to make sense their class-based worldview.

Similar to the findings of previous vocational school studies (Hansen and Woronov 2013; Koo 2016; Ling 2015; Woronov 2015), students of these two vocational schools were mainly from families of working-class background or rural in origin. Situated in a larger political economy context, since the 1980s, in line with the reform and industrial development, the Chinese government has promoted vocational education as making a direct contribution to the quality and productivity of the labour force. The state discourse actively claims that vocational education will open doors to better occupations and higher incomes, and government reduction of tuition fees has led to an increasing demand for post-compulsory education among those who have few chances and resources to enter colleges and universities (Woronov 2015). To

meet the state's goals of upgrading the status of China's 'world workshop', a series of expansions of vocational education have absorbed an increasing number of rural young people into the urban vocational schools (Koo 2016), allowing them to receive education and training with their urban counterparts before seeking employment in the manufacturing and service sectors (Ling 2015).

In 2012, vocational high school enrolment reached 21.13 million, and over six million young people had taken up jobs in factories after graduating (CSVTE 2013). In a new trend, another large proportion of graduates were employed in the developing service sectors including retail and informational industries in urban areas (Ling 2015; Woronov 2015). Under the auspices of the Chinese state, vocational schools have prepared a large number of working-class labourers, especially in time of scarcity of skilled labour, and become important sites of class reproduction in China. Previous studies have also tried to study the process of class formation among students, but attention is put on how urban working-class kids and rural poor students have been socialized across cleavages within schools (Ling 2015) based on an embedded 'failure' status under the current public examination system, which determines a student's place within the hierarchical division between academic and vocational education in China (Woronov 2015). When most students in vocational schools fail to obtain the passing marks that would allow them to enrol in academic high schools, they learn that they have to enter the working class after graduation and no active resistance culture is developed inside schools (Woronov 2015). Rather than focusing only on students' experience in schools, we also treat students' training and internship outside school as significant sites for studying working-class culture in relation to the spheres of production and social reproduction.

'I Don't Want Inhuman Jobs': The Role of Social Reproduction in Schooling

Taking schooling broader than vocational education, Andrew Kipnis points out that a strong educational desire in China is complicated by Confucian culture which highly respects education, and a governing technique of patriotic, collective, moral agents that mixed with neoliberal entrepreneurial and creative self (2011a: 4-6). According to Mette H. Hansen, while the neo-socialist process of educating individuals echoes a similar process of individualisation in the West, a kind of elitist strategy of modernization and education through a moral discourse of pursuing national strength and wealth is emerged in China, resulting in ‘authoritarian individualisation’ embodied conflicting values for individuals (2013: 14-16). Political education is still prevalent in China despite the actual production of nationalistic subjectivities in everyday schooling remains relatively ambiguous and varies in different regions (Kipnis 2011b: 291). On top of the influences of elite culture and national discourse, our study contributes to the understanding of conflictual everyday practices in schooling by observing how students’ schooling experiences are also shaped by their families.

Upon our first entry into the schools, we were interested in knowing the family background of the students, their places of origin, and how these sociological factors in the sphere of social reproduction shape cultural reproduction at school. The majority of the students have a rural *hukou* (household registration) and are regarded as members of the rural population. Some of them have newly migrated to Chengdu after their compulsory education at home villages. Others are children of migrant families who have stayed and studied in Chengdu for a substantial period, since their parents migrated to the city for employment. The parents’ occupations are similar to those of local students’ parents, such as taxi drivers, factory workers, and cashiers in supermarkets and petroleum stations. The parents of those who settled in the city more recently usually have to take up low-status jobs such as garbage collection,

construction, cleaning, etc. In contrast to the national discourse calling these vocational students to sacrifice themselves to serve the industrial development of the country, many of them mentioned that their parents scrimped and saved to send them to vocational school, hoping they would not follow in their footsteps and take up tiring, dead-end, unskilled jobs or enter the factories.

Ying is a child of a rural family who grew up in a typical way, like other ‘left-behind’ children in her home village – staying with their grandparents who laboured in the field while parents took up unskilled jobs in nearby towns or cities. In order to get away from ‘inhuman jobs’, she migrated alone to Chengdu and enrolled in the electronic business programme after graduating from the rural middle school. Although she had no idea about the programme when she registered, supported by her parents, she insisted on getting a high school degree in a business programme to increase her chances of proper employment in the future (See also Hansen and Woronov 2013).

Many of the students, especially those we met at *Service School*, where most of the programmes led to service sector jobs, declared that to ‘avoid becoming a manual labourer’ was their major reason for their choice of school and major. Lan, a girl from a local working-class family, majoring in website design, explained:

You can’t get a job with only a junior secondary education degree, except the inhuman jobs. The factory work, cleaning work, catering work, you know, too harsh and the pay is too low. I won’t take these types of inhuman jobs. I want a proper job with better working conditions and to have higher pay. I want to work in an office with my degree.

In vocational schools, the working-class students come from diverse urban or rural backgrounds, but they share a common resistance to working-class jobs, or more specifically, manual labour, calling them ‘inhuman jobs’ (Ling 2015). Yet we found that students at *Industrial School*, where most specialities lead towards jobs in the manufacturing sector, had more struggles in their choice of school and major during their transitions than students at *Service School*. For example, Sun, an 11th-grader, has had a great interest in automobiles since he was young and therefore ‘excitedly chose the car repairing programme’ he found advertised in the school pamphlet. However, his father, who works in an automobile factory in Chengdu, was upset by his choice of major:

I still remember his disappointed face when I told him about my major. He’s really upset and refused to talk to me for a whole month. Well, I know, he does not want me to follow in his footsteps, labouring on the shop floor for my whole life. ... I tried hard to persuade him, and to myself (smile), that the market of car repairing is growing fast. The whole industry is expanding as every family in Chengdu has a car now, right?

We observed mixed feelings among these working-class kids who would like to behave as filial son or daughter living up to their parents’ aspiration on the one hand, and struggle to develop their own interest fitting to the market demand on the other. In contrast to the lads in Willis’s study, working-class students in vocational schools hesitate to enter the working class’s working conditions. None of them aspired to become a manual labourer but rather were eager to enter the middle class as the neoliberal value induces them. Their working-class parents, having a strong desire to get rid of poverty, share similar hope. Over the decades of economic reform, once China was incorporated into the market economy, the overriding emphasis on efficiency and accumulation not only generated huge economic growth but also transformed

labour relations and class structure. Students and their parents have negative images of working-class jobs, regardless of their own social origin. In this sense, the family is constituted to the negation of its own class origins, steering to send their children to vocational school or higher education in order to escape its working-class background. There is no pride in ‘being a worker’ or superior masculinity of the working class that we can observe in our field studies.

Sites of Cultural Reproduction of Class

Patriotic education is prevalent at the vocational schools in today’s China. Morning school rally, homeroom classroom learning and student associations’ activities all contribute to patriotic education calling students to sacrifice themselves for national wealth and development. Under the current slogan of ‘Innovation in China’ (replacing ‘Made in China’), educating morally sound and entrepreneurial subjects is the imperative of schooling to fulfil the national project. On the one hand, students are educated to be patriotic subjects to serve the goal of ‘Innovation in China’ in specific and ‘China Dream’ in general. On the other hand, students are heavily influenced by the belief in being ‘self-enterprising’ – that only through investment in education will they be able to seek high-income and high-status jobs in the growing economy (Koo 2016).

At the two schools, no matter where we go – the classroom, the assembly field and the auditorium – the predominant discourse of vocational education is to provide an advanced platform of learning for the students to acquire professional skills and high quality of labour to serve the nation and the community. As a hegemonic discourse, it is supported by state goals, promoted by the education system and private sector, and shared by students and families. In Chinese conceptualisation of education, there are mainly two kinds of subjects: men of learning and men of practice. Academic high school education produces men of learning who will serve

as elites in the social hierarchy. Vocational education is specifically geared towards entrance into the labour market by producing men of practical skills, and yet ‘learning to labour’ to serve the ‘world factory’ is not the goal that schools upheld, despite the fact of it. Instead, ‘climbing up to be white-collar staff or skilled technicians’ is the dominant message prevailing in the education system. Inside the schools, there is an ‘imagineering project’ of upward social mobility for children from the urban poor and migrant families. This structured culture of dominance in effect matches the aspirations of the students’ parents and their own to transform their class position.

Students from different programmes claimed that they place priority on the relevance of the skills imparted at school for the labour market. However, from our observation in the two schools, not many of the students are attentive in class, irrespective of their sex. In each classroom, regardless of the major and grade of the class, about half of the students fall asleep or are concentrating on games or social media on their smartphones. When students are asked why they do not pay attention, their common answer is that the things taught in class are meaningless. Many students complained about the out-dated training devices used in vocational schools. For them, the world outside school changes so quickly and the skills known by teachers are so out of date that no useful job-related skill would be learnt during classes. Red and Blue, two 11th-graders, one female in an accounting programme in *Service School* and the other male in an electronic programme in *Industrial School*, explained why they slept during classes:

Red (*girl*): The things the teacher teaches are out-dated for at least 10 years. And the computers in classroom are old. So slow that it hangs every five minutes. ... No new software can be installed or updated. Can you imagine?

Blue (*boy*): We learn by ourselves. ... We learn new software, new stuff through the Internet.

(Sigh ...) The teachers understand that well, so, they don't push us much actually. They let us sleep or play. We play our mobiles; teachers play their lecture notes. A kind of mutual respect, you know.

Chinese kids are often taught to respect their teachers, but not all classes could maintain this 'mutual respect'. During fieldwork, we did notice a number of classes with some disruptive students who repeatedly caused trouble during lessons – yelling at teachers, banging their desks or even fighting with classmates. Teachers commented that these 'bad' students had no motivation to study and were affecting the harmonious atmosphere in the classroom. Sending the bad students to the sports field is the only means of preventing them causing trouble in class. Sky, a 10th-grader in the logistics programme at *Industrial School*, is one of the typical cases. He was jogging on the sports field during class time when we first met him.

They don't let me get in [the classroom]. And I don't want to be there too. It's a waste of time. ... The teacher repeats [what I] was taught when I was in middle school, OK? I did not understand at that time, I do not understand it now, and I won't know it in the future. They are meaningless to me. It's so annoying. So, I want to stop her lecturing.

Responding to the resistance of learning, Youth League teachers in vocational schools actively organize student club activities to enhance students' civic participation and moral education. Students are encouraged to join at least one student club according to their own interest. Some clubs are culturally oriented, such as school radio station or sport club. Other activities focus more on skill specialities such as technology information or fashion design. While Youth League teachers attempt to indoctrinate patriotic and collective spirit into these activities,

students are prone to take them as entertainment and moments of freedom that they could enjoy talking and playing.

Compared to the lads in Willis's study, who reject in total the cultural and political implications of the school curriculum and school authority, students in Chinese vocational schools put some hope on the curriculum, expecting it to transmit useful job-related skills and lead them to proper employment. However, when the students gradually found that they gained no skills or job-related knowledge, a kind of 'non-cooperation' resistance among a few 'trouble-makers' in both schools was generated. As with the majority's 'indifferent' attitude during class, their reactions are mainly caused by their disappointment when they fail to find the linkages between what is taught in school and any marketable skill. Woronov (2015) regards students' disengagement with their studies as a kind of passive resistance against the devotionalization syllabus in vocational schools and the incongruence between curriculum and job prospects. We further interpret this as the first layer of the broken promise of the dominant ideology, despite the fact that there is a high coincidence of aspiration shared between school (site of culture reproduction) and family (site of social reproduction) in shaping working-class subjects. Agency of 'non-cooperation' is found. Yet unlike Willis' lads, who transmitted the subculture from their working-class parents and their neighbourhoods, the students in Chinese vocational schools developed it themselves from the condensed broken promises of both their teachers and parents.

Contradictory Experiences: The Role of Internship at the Production Site

In post-reform China, the emergence of the labour market has eroded the system of state assignment of jobs and signifies the increasing importance of education in determining

individuals' occupational attainment and income rewards. When academic credentials are traditionally valued higher than vocational ones in China, the market-based transition from school to work puts high structural pressure on young people on the vocational track, which, in turn, creates a second layer of contradictory experiences for students at school and work.

In vocational schools, students are expected to develop an active individualised strategy focused on personal responsibility for their employability. 'Be master of our own life' is the slogan used in the career planning course in both vocational schools. In principle, all vocational school students have to join a one-year full-time internship in their final year of study, which is set as compulsory for getting a vocational degree. Other than that, students at both vocational schools are encouraged to enhance their employability through additional training and 'voluntary internships' lasting from three days to two months at partner enterprises. Students are taught to be thankful for every chance provided for training and skills enhancement, to seize every opportunity to know everything relevant to the related specialities, and to be willing to take up any challenge in the work field. The major message of the career planning course is that in a market economy, an individual's future depends mainly on their choices, ambitions and skills. As teacher Xie, who coordinates compulsory internship for 12th-graders at *Service School*, said:

It is important to show that you're hard working, you're willing to learn, and you're keen to upgrade yourself. Even if you find the pay is not as high as you expect, or the job is not your dream job, you still earn some experience in each position. ... There are so many young people in the market, some are physically stronger than you, others have higher qualification than you, so, you have to make yourself outstanding. Being tough, willing to sacrifice could be the selling point of our students in vocational schools.

A ‘moral self’ willing to sacrifice for meagre income is repeatedly stated in the vocational schools. During fieldwork, we found that students spend about one-third of their school days on training outside school in their first two years of study. Some students, especially those in junior years, found the training more useful than the boring syllabus for classroom learning in technical subjects. For example, Fire and Stone, two 10th-graders in a tourism programme in *Service School*, excitedly shared their internship experience when we first met in their dormitory in June 2014:

Fire: All students from classes in hotel and tourism programmes have been sent out for training during the Fortune Global Forum. ... We’re so lucky to have a chance to join such a big event in Chengdu.

Q: What is the training about?

Fire: We were sent to the new conference centre near the new international airport and five-star hotels to help things out.

Q: What did you do?

Stone: Students from our class worked in a five-star hotel, it’s so grand there. I haven’t been to such a grand hotel before. Full of foreigners ...

Q: What did you do at the hotel?

Stone: I do room cleaning, or actually assisting the normal staff, as there was too much work during these days. We follow what they did: keep cleaning the toilets and bathroom for the whole day, non-stop. It’s tiring.

Q: Oh. ... Same as you?

Fire: No, students in our class had training at the conference centre. It was equally tiring: work started at 9 a.m., finished at 10 p.m. But, I think I learnt a lot. I saw a lot of

foreigners there. Though there was not much chance for me to communicate with them ... my duty was to collect used plates and glasses from the hall to kitchen, then transfer cleaned ones there. Still, [it's] a very international experience, haha ...

Q: So, you mentioned that the internship last for a week. Did you get paid?

Fire: No.

Stone: Not yet, or ... umm ... I'm not sure because it's a training.

Although the students could not tell us exactly how the training/internship had upgraded their subject knowledge and skills, they were grateful to have had this experience. They believed this type of 'eye-opening and international experience' would 'bring them closer to the employment' in related fields. Among these vocational school students, the participation in unpaid or underpaid work is tied to the fantasy of investing in one's human capital development for upward social mobility.

However, after several rounds of these internships, many senior-year students, including Fire and Stone, are frustrated about the arrangement. When we met them before they were sent out for their compulsory internship in April 2015, they admitted that 'no real training is received during series of internships'. According to the students, most interns are randomly assigned to different positions, depending on the needs of the company. For example, students in the railway programme would be stewards on trains during peak seasons, then shift to help at the catering carbine or the ticket office and security unit at different train stations. Students in the logistics programme would also be assigned to various types of duties, from loading and unloading stock in warehouses to cleaning the cargos. Some students complained that the companies mainly treated the interns as cheap labour (Smith and Chan 2015).

Liu, a student in the car repair programme, was sent to a car company for a four-month training in his third year of study. He declared that his work was the same as regular staff, but he, as a student intern, received less than half the income:

We worked at the workshop from 8:30 in the morning until at least 6 in the evening. We worked with other normal workers, being scolded together by managers for working too slow. ... There's nothing say who teaches whom, we just work together, as a team. However, interns receive only the basic salary of 1,200 *yuan* per month while the normal workers would get around 3,000 *yuan*. The job is done by the team, but all commission goes to normal workers and the managers. It's unfair.

Liu was very concerned about the unfair arrangement, and he had complained to schoolteacher with his classmates after a month's internship. However, to his disappointment, the teacher just asked him to accept it. He was told: 'Being a young intern, you can't be calculative as you are learning there'.

When vocational school students are mainly used as a stable supply of flexible, cheap and compliant young workers for private enterprises, the internship programmes expose them to not only the practical side of a discipline but also their future working environment (Pun and Koo 2015; Smith and Chan 2015). When students have conflicts with the company during an internship, their schoolteachers offer only limited help. In contrast, their 'brothers' and 'sisters' in the sites of internships give them notice of the busiest days of production and services, and many have learnt to apply for sick leave or simply not show up. These little stories of 'causing some troubles to the penny-pinching boss' and 'making the feeble-minded teacher embarrassed' were widely shared in the dorms after the students returned from internships. Also, when they

complain about the poor working conditions, strict management styles and meagre return for their hard work, many declared that they would not join the compulsory internship assigned by schools, but use their own social network to find a better job with higher income. In their words, they refused to ‘be treated as a fool: just follow the order of the school and the boss’.

At production sites, we found that student interns have gradually derived a different world view and class-based culture through real-life daily working experiences, which ally them more closely with their working-class colleagues. Working-class solidarity is not an abstract concept but practiced due to the students’ common experience, organized through their own social networks at the dorm space. Although students were in different programmes and were sent to different sites for their internship, they found their ‘exploitative’ experiences were common. After training/internship outside schools, they have already learnt that their working-class ‘fate’ can hardly be changed even though finding a job was not a problem. They continued to share and consolidate their working experiences with classmates when more of them came back from their internship. Throughout the process, students have developed a kind of class-based world view, and some started to engage in different kinds of resistance: challenging the management at school and in the workplace and refusing to take up compulsory internships assigned by the schools. In this sense, internship in the production sphere shaped students’ class experience, which was brought back into the schools, the site of cultural reproduction.

However, it is important to note that most students in both schools continue to have a strong resistance to manual work, actively searching for ways to climb up the social ladder. In *Service School*, we met a group of eight 11th-graders in the hotel management programme who stayed in the same dorm and were all refusing to take up the compulsory internship arranged by the school. They had been assigned to various positions at different hotels for internships during

the two years of study and had concluded that ‘working in hotels is no better than working in factories’ as ‘the work is physically demanding and the pay is too low’. One of them, Lily, told us that her initial motivation for moving to Chengdu was to get a well-paid job which would allow her to ‘leave the poor rural life’. So, she decided not to go to hotels for internship but to look for a sales job on her own:

I love sales jobs. The more you work, the more clients you have, the more money you earn. I want this type of job [because] it is fair, not that tiring, you know, and things are controlled by me.

However, in reality, building their middle-class hopes through self-employment or sales jobs, in which a large proportion of income is based on commission, actually pushes them into an unstable, insecure and precarious situation in the labour market. When we met Lily a year later, she worked as a sales assistant at a cosmetic counter in a shopping mall during the weekend and took up a ‘part-time job’ in a teahouse four days per week. In her words, the future of her ‘sales career’ is promising, but she has to keep a part-time job to generate ‘reliable income for basic necessities’ before she can successfully keep a pool of rich and loyal clients. Dream is kept by multiple efforts she strived to achieve it.

Conclusion

Individual dream in China is largely hooked up with national dream, which unlike the case in America (Silva 2013) or in Britain (Reay 2017), is still a source of educational aspirations for upward social mobility. Chinese culture, patriotic education system, and the family and workplace morality no doubt contribute to the process of producing labour subjectivities by

upholding China's dream. Yet the real world of work shatters the education dream. The calling to produce a moral self to serve the country and the industry is unable to operate as an effective governing technique given the fact that the labour market is increasingly incorporated into the fluctuating global economy. We conclude that the rich work experiences in the sphere of production stand mostly in contrast to the goals and aspirations of school and family in the spheres of cultural and social reproduction. These contradictory experiences open up the space for negotiating a somewhat different working-class solidarity than that proposed by Willis and others. As we followed the same group of students for two years, we found that they were eventually able to negotiate a shared working-class experience when they took up their workplace internship, and upon their return to their school with broken promises of a middle-class future, they actively generated and articulated a nuanced working-class agency among themselves. This study discloses the richness of working-class kids' aspirations at school, their various forms of misrecognition of middle-class life and finally their different reactions and resistances to the broken promises. This is a real detour in which the school kids navigate their class reproduction at the intersection of production, social production and cultural production.

Our study, enriching Willis's findings (1977), finds that contemporary working-class kids do not simply actively create their own sub-culture through cultural mediation at school sites. Neither their parents or family members (social reproduction sphere) nor their own sense of working-class identity at school (cultural reproduction sphere) provides the students with pride in getting working-class jobs (production sphere). However, this does not mean that they cannot develop their own class experiences with their agency. Our study points out that this working-class agency is not to be found in the sphere of cultural reproduction alone. Instead, it is clear that cultural forms of resistance are not produced by cultural production internally or

independently but are constituted by and constitutive of the contradictions among the spheres of cultural reproduction, social reproduction and material production.

In particular, we observe the double contradiction of schooling as sites of contestation in making ideal labour subjects serving the state, market and family while also providing fertile ground for the generation of working-class experience and solidarity. The vocational school becomes a site of struggle because the state-supported expansion of the education system allows migrant and working-class children to continue their schooling beyond the compulsory level, which generates tremendous hope for both school and family to ‘imagineer’ children’s upward social mobility. This is the first layer of contradiction: a somewhat egalitarian system working for the reproduction of social inequality in the society at large. It is structurally constrained, even though some space of upward mobility is found, as students will end up in the service sector or informational economy.

When it looks as if upward mobility is a possibility, we immediately meet the second layer of contradiction, which lies in the gap between the school’s imagineering project, the project of self-enterprising, and the real world of work offering them little chance of upward mobility. While most vocational students could escape factory manual labour, they found themselves trapped in low-paid and low-end service work. The middle-class job fantasy was broken upon their return from workplace internship, despite their initial excitement about working at the five-star hotel or elsewhere. Working with their colleagues in the workplace and sharing their experiences with classmates in school, the kids develop a different class-based world view, and some even engage in various forms of resistance such as requesting equal pay for equal work as regular workers or challenging the school management by refusing to take up compulsory internship. These resistances, however, could not be taken for granted as amounting to a kind

of working-class consciousness that lead to radical challenges to the education and employment system. Some students in our study continue to build up their middle-class hopes through self-employment or sales jobs, which may push them into a more precarious situation in the labour market. Nevertheless, this study on the development of working-class solidarity at the sites of school and intern workplace does enhance our understanding of the working-class formation among students in their everyday practices.

Moving beyond Willis's inner logic of cultural forms for working-class resistance, the liberating effect we observe at schools for working-class kids lies at the grid of these contradictions between the school's hegemonic project and the workplace reality, as well as between parental aspirations for upward mobility and the limited chances of job advancement at the sphere of production. Our study shows that it is exactly the broken promises – the contradictions between the structural conditioning of globalized production and the neoliberal hegemony promising a middle-class working life – that ultimately shatter the subordination and the misrecognition of class, opening up a cultural space for working-class awareness and a social base for resistance and confrontation. Confronting the double contradiction at the school site, the working-class kids gradually learnt to share their conflictual class disposition and experience. Contradictions among the three spheres create the space for negotiation and re-negotiation of working-class solidarity.

References

- Anagnost, A. 2013. "Introduction: Life-Making in Neoliberal Times." In *Global Futures in East Asia*, edited by A. Anagnost, A. Arai and H. Ren, 1–28. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Aronowitz, S. 2004. "Against Schooling: Education and Social Class." *Social Text* 22 (2): 13–35.
- Atkinson, W. 2009. "Rethinking the Work-Class Nexus: Theoretical Foundations for Recent Trends." *Sociology* 43 (5): 896–912.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- CSVTE (Chinese Society of Vocational and Technical Education). 2013. *Report on the Development and Employment Situation of Vocational High School Students 2012*. Accessed 1 March 2017. http://edu.gmw.cn/2013-02/28/content_6845317.htm
- Dolby, N. and Dimitriadis, G. 2004. *Learning to Labour in New Times*, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Giddens, A. and Held, D. 1982. *Classes, Power, and Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gordon, L. 1984. "Paul Willis: Education, Cultural Production and Social Reproduction."

- British Journal of Sociology of Education* 5 (2): 105–15.
- Griffin, C. 2005. “Whatever Happened to the (Likely) Lads? ‘Learning to Labour’ 25 Years On.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26 (2): 291–97.
- Hansen, M. H. 2013. “Learning Individualism: Hesse, Confucius, and Pep-Rallies in a Chinese Rural High School.” *The China Quarterly* 213: 60–77.
- Hansen, M. H. and Woronov, T. E. 2013. “Demanding and resisting vocational education: a comparative study of schools in rural and urban China.” *Comparative Education* 49 (2): 242–259.
- Hansen, M. H. 2015. *Educating the Chinese Individual: Life in a Rural Boarding School*. London: University of Washington Press.
- Kipnis, A. B. 2011a. *Governing Educational Desire*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Kipnis, A. B. 2011b. “Subjectification and Education for Quality in China.” *Economy and Society* 40 (2): 289–306.
- Koo, A. 2016. “Expansion of Vocational Education in Neoliberal China: Hope and Despair among Rural Youth.” *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (1): 46–59.
- Li, J. 2015. “From ‘Master’ to ‘Loser’: Changing Working-Class Cultural Identity in Contemporary China.” *International Labour and Working-Class History* 88 (Oct): 190–208.
- Ling, M. 2015. “‘Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!’ Vocational Education for Migrant

- Youth in Urban China.” *The China Journal* 73: 108–31.
- Pun, N. and Koo, A. 2015. “A ‘World-Class’ (Labor) Camp/us: Foxconn and China’s New Generation of Labor Migrants.” *positions: asia critique* 23 (3): 411–35.
- Reay, D. 2017. *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Silva, J. M. 2013. *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C. and Chan, J. 2015. “Working for Two Bosses: Student Interns As Constrained Labour in China.” *Human Relations* 68 (2): 305–26.
- Walker, J. C. 1986. “Romanticising Resistance, Romanticising Culture: Problems in Willis’s Theory of Cultural Production.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 7 (1): 59–80.
- Willis, P. 1977. *Learning to Labour*. Westmead: Saxon House Press.
- Willis, P. 1981. “Cultural Production Is Different from Cultural Reproduction Is Different from Social Reproduction Is Different from Reproduction.” *Interchange* 12 (2–3): 48–67.
- Willis, P. 1983. “Cultural Production and Theories of Reproduction.” In *Race, Class and Education*, edited by L. Barton and S. Walker, 107–38. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- Willis, P. and Corrigan, P. 1983. “Orders of Experience: The Differences of Working Class Cultural Forms.” *Social Text* 7: 85–103.
- Woronov, T. E. 2015. *Class Work*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.