

Attempting to transgress neoliberal value: constructing a micro-foundation of social values of working-class youth in vocational schools

Benny Lu, Anita Koo and Pun Ngai (Sociological Review, accepted)

Abstract

In contrast to the existing argument that the logic of capital has monetised almost every aspect of human relationships to the realm of exchange value, this article explores the existence of social values that are practised by the Chinese working-class youth as an alternative form of agency and every-day practices. Instead of understanding social values as a realm of value operating entirely outside the logic of exchange value, this article takes social values as the constitutive other of exchange value embodied in the neoliberalised form of capitalism but attempts to transgress it. It attempts to develop a micro-foundation of social values or social mechanism of values for understanding social protection and class solidarity. Employing in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in vocational schools in China, at sites for the nurturing of working-class youth, we ask concretely what social values are, how they are perceived and exercised, and by whom. From students' practices of care in schools, cooperation in the workplace, and solidarity in the community, we attempt to build a micro-foundation of social values that challenges and transgresses the logic of exchange value.

Introduction

It felt quite nice to do some charity thing. I can lift myself up a bit as well as ‘warm people’s hearts’ and [benefit] society, so I started to do charity. You know there is a term called ‘positive energy,’ (*zheng neng liang*) which I was not touched by until then. I suddenly know what it means, and I want to do something helpful for others.

The above interview quotation is from one of our respondents, Xiao-yu, a working-class boy who comes from a rural family and is now in his last year of an engineering degree at a vocational school in Shanxi, China. Xiao-yu was trying his best to obtain and succeed in internship interviews when companies came to the school to recruit students. Living in a student dormitory, Xiao-yu and his roommates were preparing for interviews together for an internship in a factory when we met him. He told us that he wished he could go to the same factory as his dorm mates so that they could take care of one another. He spoke about the values of taking care of each other and strangers, narrating about how his altruistic behaviours stem from ‘positive energy’, a buzzword that has spread widely in Chinese media recently. Indeed, many of the students we met at vocational schools told us repeatedly about the social value of helping one another or strangers. Whether through voluntary activities, charity donations via social media, or helping one another to ask for fair pay from employers, our young respondents notified us of their altruistic contributions during our fieldwork. Often socially stigmatised as ‘losers’ in China’s educational system and treated unfairly (Woronov 2011; XXXXX 2016), these young people are still givers to both in-group and out-group individuals.

How does this happen, and why? How can the practices of these altruistic values inform us? Instead of recognising the new individualist values spawned by the new market mentality in post-socialist China, how can we recapture working-class politics from social values that young workers make, interpret, and use for solidarity?

Recent British critical studies on the theory of value have re-examined the process of ‘labour-value-capital’ from Marx’s *Capital* and attempted to explore the possibility of resistance in neoliberal times (Graeber, 2011, 2013; Sayer, 2011; Skeggs, 2004, 2014; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). Specifically, instead of arguing that social values are colonised in the realm of exchange for profit and appear as the exchange-value of a commodity, these studies call for the defence of social values such as care and mutual support that can be found in everyday practices (Skeggs, 2014). In other words, social values cannot be easily exchanged, even though they are always under the threat of market tyranny. Social activities, always embodied in the form of use-value as the antithesis of exchange-value and acting as a constitutive other of value, cannot be entirely monetised and their social values can be acted out for the sake of solidarity.

Our research responds to this debate by discovering a variety of social values – care, cooperation, and solidarity – which are now perceived and practised by the Chinese working-class students of vocational schools. While we are not able to provide a comparison of how these social values are practised in middle-class high schools, we focus on the everyday practices of vocational school students, and explore a possible micro-foundation for working-class solidarity, thereby challenging the theory that legitimates the individualism and fragmentation adopted by the Chinese working-class youth as guiding values. By the micro-foundation of social values, we mean sociological studies of the micro behaviour of individual agents in schools, the workplace, and in the community at the everyday level. Rather than exposing micro behaviour in times of crisis, we analyse these everyday practices in the ordinary life-world, digging out the social values to highlight the dignity and solidarity of working-class youth. In contrast to the increasing temptation of individualisation and desires of consumption (Yan, 2010), the micro-foundation of social values helps us to construe a basis of working-class solidarity with everyday practices of a collective nature.

We focus on vocational education because it is a key field that produces about 20 million worker subjects today, the biggest working class in the world for the local and global markets (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; XXXXX & XXXXX, 2015; Smith & Chan, 2015). In other words, through the working-class youth's experiences, that is, through the lens of class, we can concretely capture the latest and most intense labour politics and the possibility of social values attached to them in contemporary China. Indeed, it is well-recognised that one of the most salient social transformations from China's marketisation for decades was the aggressive reconfiguration of the working class (XXXXX, 2016). Facilitated by the late communist leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China's speedy path to participate in global capitalism is deeply based on the unleashing of rural workers moving to urban areas. Millions of rural-to-urban migrants have become the chief labour force who does not only shoulder the Chinese economy reform, that is, marketisation and privatisation, but also serve China as the 'world factory', thereby remaking the world's biggest working class (XXXXX, 2016). More importantly, the core issue is that ironically, migrant workers cannot yet become a 'real' working class – given that their labour rights and citizenship are strictly restricted under state policy. This includes the infamous Chinese housing registration system (*hukou*) that largely excludes migrant workers from securing basic citizenship and rights in the city (XXXXX, 2016). Therefore, the new Chinese working class after Mao has experienced a long-term process of 'unfinished proletarianisation' (XXXXX & XXXXX, 2010), resulting in a spatial separation of production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside, and a deepening sense of becoming incomplete, that is, of becoming a peasant-worker, or a 'quasi' or 'half' worker in the industrial world.

Considering the world history of labor, the formation and maturity of the working class usually took root in the second and third generation of rural workers who came to work in industrial cities (Thompson, 1966). We witnessed that for the first generation of migrant

workers who went to cities in the 1980s through the 1990s, most of them still had hopes of bringing the money they earned in factories back to their rural hometowns for establishing families (XXXXXX, 2016). Yet, for the new generation of the migrant working class who was born in the 1990s or after, they found themselves caught in-between, as they hardly see hopes of staying in cities due to meager income, nor do they view themselves retreating to rural hometowns, as the rural life is increasingly commodified and the means of self-subsistence are absent. For most rural families, vocational schools are where they can send their children for learning practical knowledge before they become new subjects of the working class in the cities (XXXXXX, 2016). Overall, we argue that ‘class’ is not a self-given group designation, but is made through contesting socio-economic relationships, and we also suggest that the new Chinese labour subjects today are found in vocational schools.

Vocational schools are often encouraged and funded by government to work with companies, helping them train workers through internship programmes to serve new economies such as modern logistics, digital technology, and platform economy. Yet, the social stigma of ‘losers’ and the vocational school as a place of no hope is deeply rooted in public perspectives (Hansen & Woronov, 2013; XXXXX 2016; Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2016). We thus will discuss how vocational education has become an important site where different dominant social values are negotiated; we first unpack the debate about values, suggesting a need to reframe how Chinese vocational school students can make and exercise social values. We then present a micro-foundation of social values, which we argue can help us better understand value production by working class agents who have fewer resources but can share more with others – which goes against neoliberal capitalist logic.

Research methods

This article is developed from a large-scale research project that examines the process of ‘learning-to-labour’ among the Chinese young people and their usage of social media, in which we attempt to study the ‘becoming process’ of the working-class youth in China’s vocational schools. To capture macro-micro interrelationships among state, education, and working-class formation, we conduct surveys and field research in schools and the sites of internship (workplaces) to examine the role of state and market in shaping the macro structure of vocational schooling and the social reproduction of class.

On top of documentary studies and news reporting, semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory research are employed in eight vocational schools in the four regions of China: Guangzhou and Zhuhai in Southern China, Xian and Lanzhou in Western China, Zhengzhou and Wuhan in Central China, and Hangzhou in Eastern China. Through a national training workshop provided to vocational school principals and teachers, we were able to get access to the schools with their approval. The research inquiries related to this article include a critical review of the new direction of vocational education reform in the context of commercialisation of education and its effects on the social reproduction of the new working class; principals, teachers, and students are interviewed to make sense of their schooling experiences, the social status of students, internship experiences, vocation and career paths, and the future prospects of students.

The unexpected findings of this project led us to reframe as well as refocus our research; otherwise, it was purely a neoliberal critique of class inequality produced through fast expansion in vocational education in China. Immersing ourselves in their lifeworld, we are increasingly impressed by the students’ ‘positive energy’, by which they are prompted to realise and actualise a variety of social values to heighten their sense of the value of their lives as working-class youth.

Nearly all of the previous research in Chinese vocational schools were held in eastern China (Ling, 2015; Koo, 2016; Woronov, 2016). While many of the students' experiences were shared around the nation, we intend to explore more of the stories from western China (a less accessible sites for researchers) to diversify the existing available data. This study mainly derived from interviews of eighty students, five teachers, and two principals from four vocational schools western China. Supplemented by ethnographic observations of their school life from 2016 to 2017. While the four schools are located in urban areas, more than eighty percentage of the students come from rural areas, and their parents are either farmers or migrants working in the cities, having a monthly earning around 2500 to 3000 RMB each. The majority of vocational school students are defined as working-class due to their family incomes being below average for the region in which they live. Our respondents are aged between 16 to 20 years old, and around 45% are female. We employed semi-structured interview methods to focus on students' practices of values regarding their schooling and internships. We also visited eight student societies in schools and observed their students' performance in class. At times we dined with some of the students to find out more details of their school life and visited their dormitories to make sense of their lived experiences of practising social values.

Theories of capitalistic logic of value

Critiques of neoliberal capitalism piercingly point to the total colonisation of every aspect of human life in a capitalised life-world. Topics include kinship, intimacy, religion, education and employment, to name just a few, which are all evaluated and incorporated by the capitalist value logic (Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 2007; McRobbie, 2015; Skeggs, 2004; Wilson, 2016). Through prioritising exchange value, capitalism cultivates the middle-class's 'self of value', that is, the maximisation of self-value, to create competition and exclusion of those who have less human and social capital. Lury (1998) calls this new late-capitalist 'self of value' as a

‘possessive individual’ through property and commodity ‘he’ can earn and own. Or, this self is termed the ‘subject of value’ (Skeggs, 2004) who succeeds as the chief player in the contemporary game of capital through values they make and exchange. Research reveals that given the aggressive nature of ‘value-extraction’ from labour in capitalist society, various social values are often shattered or colonised under the market logic. In Skeggs’s numerous studies, the working-class subjects in the UK are devalued as they can own or contribute little material or symbolic value. They are devalued as unworthy subjects, represented by government and mainstream discourse who refers to the working-class individual as one who ‘lacks’ values (Skeggs, 2004). The lives of the British working class are presented and represented as negative ‘self of value’ – not able to contribute to the profit machine for the media industry (Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Skeggs, 2011).

The middle class’s success was based on the exclusion of those who have little or do not play the neoliberal game of self-optimisation or self-enterprise by marketing, exchanging, and adding more value to themselves (Skeggs, 2014). This critique captures an intense politics between value and values, the mechanism that turns social values into exchange values, and how the modern neoliberal ‘self’ is formulated from the capitalist competition. In this vein, Skeggs (2014) also warns that this critique of neoliberalism may risk generalising capitalism by admitting ‘capitalist realism or market populism’, ignoring its internal contradictions and instabilities that may open space for possibilities and comradeship (2014, p. 16).

To challenge the capitalist logic, particularly by questioning the neoliberal value in shaping culture and seeking radical imaginations of social change (Haiven, 2011; Kipnis, 2011), the recent critique has initiated a re-examination of the theory of value. Graeber (2001, 2011) launched a critical review of Marxist value theory, claiming its use value to defy neoliberal violence. Graeber argues that theories of value ‘have (at least since the ‘60s) been swinging

back between two equally unsatisfactory poles: on the one hand, a warmed-over economism that makes “value” simply the measure of individual desire; on the other, some variant of Saussurean “meaningful difference”—the autonomy and detachment of value from reified material base (2001, p. 46). Graeber claims that both approaches are essentially static; one is too deterministic and the other is too autonomous. Calling for an action approach of values, Graeber argues that ‘to turn something into a thing is, normally, to stop it in motion; not surprising, then, that such approaches usually have little place for creativity or even, unless forced, production’ (2001, p. 46). As a process of ‘becoming’ of subject making, Graeber redefines the politics of value by stating:

Value becomes, as I’ve said, the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves: normally, as reflected in one or another socially recognised form. But it is not the forms themselves that are the source of value (2001, p. 47).

Graeber (2001, 2011) disagrees that human labour as productive action is all about making material capital (material value), and he demonstrates that it is about labouring for something one regards as essential and worthy for the living (social values). For Graeber (2001, 2011), it is in this pursuit of values that labour and social activities are motivated and put into action. In other words, the task here is to re-articulate use-value or social values as a way of invigorating human desires by calling to a new politics of class and value as a constant struggle (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). To fathom this question of moving beyond the capitalistic value of self, we have to re-state a far more open dialectic between use-value and exchange-value, so as to help construct a micro-foundation of social values for working-class lives.

Rethinking use-value

At the beginning of *Capital Volume 1* (1954 [1867]), Karl Marx defines use value as follows:

The utility of a thing makes it a use value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity.... Use values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth. In the form of society we are about to consider, they are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange value (1954, p. 44).

In Marx's critique of political economy, any good or product has a labour-value and a use-value, and if traded as a commodity in markets, it acquires an exchange-value and is expressed as a money-price by subsuming the surplus value of labour (1954, p. 45–6). Hence, use-value can generally be understood as the utility of consuming a good to serve a human need or want. By critically reviewing the concept of value, Skeggs (2004) states that some use-values cannot always be exchanged (as we will present later), so we can find the rupture to break the symbolic dominance of capitalist exchange-value: 'This is why I suggest that we turn our perspective to use-value, to that which is praiseworthy for its own sake, to that which is not exchangeable and cannot be put to use to enhance the middle-class self' (2004, p. 186). Skeggs concludes her defence of use-value:

Moreover, use-values can only be known when they are put to use, so they force a focus on the uses of culture, relations and practice. This means we can explore how something has different values in different contexts, enabling us to break through the dominant symbolic understandings premised on exchange. (2004, p. 186)

We understand that use-value is the ontology of human activities in Marx's worldview, while exchange value is the *constitutive other* of use-value and vice versa. Yet, the first moment of an exchange-value was formed as a departure from use-value; while attached to use-value, its velocity is to alienate use-value for profit logic and dismiss it. As discussed above, theorists do

attempt to claim back the use-value and reboot social values that could provide a political ethics for solidarity and social protection. Empirical studies have started to provide grounded evidence. For example, Angela McRobbie (2015) views ‘organic creative labour’ as initiated by young female designers in Berlin, Germany whereas creativity is made to connect the local community and cooperation. This creativity staunchly refuses for its use-value to be transformed into exchange-value through its labour, becoming an open access benefit for the community and collective good.

Our research, therefore, will attempt to rescue the use-value of human activities and propose a micro-foundation of social mechanisms to further construct the text and context of social values. We view how the less privileged group, that is, the working-class youth in our study, is not simply attending the game of exchange; instead, we find altruistic values are practised and respected by our informants at the vocational school in China. This study aims not at comparing the middle-class youth with working-class youth to assess their praxis of social values but focuses exclusively on the vocational school students, the majority of whom are from working-class families.

Becoming a student-worker: students in vocational schools

It was late autumn when we visited a mid-level vocational school in western China. The students we met, who were 16 years old, were gathered by teacher Tai, listening to her comments about the education system in China:

We are the people as ‘poor quality of seed’ (*pin zhong bu hao*). So now you can have some basic education that can make you look better, which is good enough. If some of you can keep climbing even to the university, learning something from there, it will be brilliant. Yet if you can’t, at least you complete your obligation then. Well ... students

you should know this is Chinese education, it has its problems, but this is the era we live in, you understand?

This glimpse of vocational education in today's China unveils the intricate contradictions of the vocational education. When teacher Tai's students were considered the 'left-behind' students of harsh exam competitions in China's higher education, she commented on it as an 'unfair game' – as many researchers claim (Kipnis 2011; Ling, 2015; Loveday, 2015; Reay, 2017; Silva, 2013). However, teacher Tai saw her students like 'low quality of seeds' – who are not good enough for attending university. Also, she said to her students that she is the only one who works hard to explore any potential skills that her students might have (value of the self) – given they are not from an elite background. We argue this is a process of 'value-extraction' from students when teacher Tai asked some tall or extroverted male students to be 'broad-minded' and attend a 'modelling competition'. Obviously, working-class students' bodies and personalities here are evaluated with a market price. Teacher Tai's contradictory teaching recalls a historical irony in the development of vocational education in China.

Founded by Mao Zedong in the 1950s, modern Chinese vocational education was employed as an essential institution during the socialist years (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). At that time, students were respected, as they were the subjects of the communist revolution. But now, in the post-reform era, although vocational education was claimed to be the principal actor for the state labour market, according to China's Vocational Education Law re-legitimated in 1996, students are experiencing devaluation and discrimination (Ling, 2015; Woronov, 2011). In contrast to the socialist period, today, Chinese vocational education is committed to working with enterprises, whether local or transnational, and schools are training workers for the service sectors and new manufactory industries which make up the new 'global workshop' in China (Smith and Chan, 2015). Students are targeted as future workers to serve

the labour market, and digital software curriculum and internships have become the core course in schools for training students in requisite skills. In other words, the internship has become the core programme to bridge school and the labour market – a mechanism to connect identities of ‘student’ and ‘worker.’

Hence, compared to the academically focused high schools, which demand that students go to university after graduation, students of vocational schools are often devalued as those who lack ‘ability’ for intellectual tests or the ‘ambition’ to go to college (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). Responding to Paul Willis’s (1977) noted ethnography of English male working-class students and their schooling experiences, we find that the Chinese vocational school students do not take pride in their working-class identity, nor in the culture of masculinity as the source of power (XXXXXX & XXXXX, 2018). Woronov also argues that Chinese students in vocational schools are also creating alternative forms of ‘resistance’ by not following the rules of schools or teachers, and through their rejection of class learning has turned them into the ‘privileged’ marginal, who would build their own culture (Woronov, 2011, p. 97).

Our research highlights that, in addition to the privileged marginal’s resistance, working-class solidarity can be formed from the social values students practise inside and outside of schools and workplaces. Rather than limiting their solidarities to the margins of mainstream social and cultural forces and understanding them as a subculture, we bring resistance and solidarity back to students’ everyday lives as the centre of economic and cultural struggle (Willis, 1977). We claim that they are not making their own subculture outside of hegemony, but rather are actively learning to create their social values to form a circuit of solidarity. Students’ altruistic behaviours, their claims of care and helping one another or society, would foster the substrate of their solidarity in the future. What they learn about the virtue of

cooperation, the value of compassion and the ethos of selflessness from the working-class community can inform and challenge the logic of exchange-value.

The social mechanism of values

This paper works to reclaim the social values that are exercised by student-workers in vocational schools in today's China. Instead of claiming that our respondents could be exempted from the call of the neoliberal ethos, having no intention to self-invest or play at individualism, what concerns us most is to capture the social mechanism of values practised by the young Chinese working class that are not colonised by the logic of profit-making only. To iterate, if we understand that social values can be made within the existing neoliberal capitalist system, but respond to and even challenge the capitalist logic, then the question is how? Could we help build a micro-foundation of social values for future solidarity? To support this quest, we propose a multi-sited social mechanism of values, that is, care in schools, cooperation at workplaces, and solidarity in the community practised by our respondents, which illuminates the terrain of values made by the working class in China. We will also highlight that from this mechanism we might be able to explore the substrate of working-class subjectivity based on solidarity attempting to challenge marketised value and a resistance that goes against making values for sale and exchanging values for profit only.

Care in school

We do care. When someone is ill or in a bad mood, we will care for each other and give a hand, said Jun from a vocational school in Xian.

We have found that for students of vocational schools, caring for each other is a prevalent practice in daily life, particularly in those schools that demand that all students live in the dormitory, many of which do not even allow students to leave the campus except for weekends.

The school has become a small community. In this ‘territorialised’ space, the dormitory is a crucial space where students socialise with one another. They share emotions and values, exchange information, and learn from and care for each other. Besides taking care of each other in times of sickness, many female students told us that they learnt how to do makeup from the Internet together in the dormitory. More common is for students to team up in an online game (such as King of Glory) to fight digital teams from other schools. To support each other seems to become a daily life practice for our interviewees, even if they are not from privileged backgrounds.

We encountered a charity campaign to raise funds to support the family of a student whose father had recently suffered a traffic accident. Living in a rural village, the parents of this family engaged in farming and in slack times—the father found work on a construction site in an urban area. The family was unable to afford the expensive medical expenses, which were increasingly subject to market price, and both teacher and students were quite proud of raising one hundred thousand *yuan* within one week to pay for the medical costs. If students are ill or injured from traffic accidents and can’t afford medical expenses, their schoolmates will donate towards the cost of helping or offering mental support to them. One student, Liu, from Xian, told us he sacrificed his breakfast to save his money to donate to his schoolmate whose family were suffering from an accident and were in crisis. Why was he doing this? He explained:

Because we might all have some unexpected difficulties in life, so when he had a hard time, I helped him, and in return, I believe he will give me a hand when I suffer.

Other students, like Qing and Wen, who study in the nursing profession, expressed some similar reasons for helping others:

Interviewer: What reasons cause you to help others?

Wen: At that time, I was wondering, if I were him, would I have felt so appreciated to know people help me. And I would have felt hurt if people were callous – I think it is necessary to ‘put myself in someone’s shoes!’

Qing: Whenever our neighbours are in trouble, my parents will see how to offer help, to release their suffering. We are from rural, poor family. We learnt the importance of helping one another since young. That’s how we walk through the difficulties. I learnt from them [her parents].

For instance, in China, there were indeed heated debates about traffic accidents at schools. Traffic accidents frequently happened, often to labouring people or left-behind children, leaving the poor families unable to take care of themselves. Given the contested nature of care, one understands that care is also about social value. Care is a valuable practice that is performed differently by different (gendered or classed) labour subjects (Lan, 2006). Care is also monetised and exchanged for profit under neoliberalism and populism – consider the massive privatisation of public care service around the world. Nevertheless, care can be a value protected or exercised for kindness or goodness in everyday practice. As our informants showed us, most of them are not from privileged families, but they do give. The claim of being empathetic to comrades in school is often heard in our fieldwork. They contribute care to those who need support, and they ask for no immediate reward but future reciprocity. Sharing similarly poor background, they ‘know better’ about one another’s difficulties, more willing to ‘help those who are in need’, and they have confidence that people will also care about and help them in similar situations. In other words, care, generates a sense of collectiveness and reciprocity, can be radicalised to glue people together for solidarity.

The care values of Chinese working-class students suggest a new culture of social values and solidarity that can be cultivated. Even if it is only about some small material or emotional

support to others, it gives students alternative visions of social life beyond mere competition or individualisation that the dominant ideologies would captivate them. Obviously, we do not intend to romanticise students' care values; students told us that they from time to time have quarrels and disputes at school. However, as one of our interviewees in Lanzhou told us, they 'do not let this feud live till the next day's sunrise' (Xiao-ying, 18 years old). Care has gradually become an alternative value to help formulate working-class solidarity in today's China – at least in our case studies. Then, as discussed below, care will glue people together from school to cooperate in the workplace.

Cooperation in the workplace

Cooperation is not like a hermetic object, once damaged beyond recovery...Repair work suggests other ways to relate the physical and the social (Sennett, 2012, p. 219).

Attempting to rescue the craftsmanship of cooperation, Sennett (2012) condemns the neoliberal ethos which perverts the value of togetherness in the Western context. Sennett views contemporary capitalism as having made cooperation a shallow, money-driven, and often temporarily unstable performance. For Sennett, today's work of cooperation is to repair the broken social relationships, and the technology that he underlines is a kind of social praxis of 'reconfiguration', a technology to work together, step by step, to repair and reformulate the broken structure of sociality. This relates to our research in that students' practices of cooperation can also be re-assessed when they question the broken social bonds of today's China.

It was common in our interviews to learn that students are working together – even outside the school. For instance, many students do part-time jobs on weekends to support their family or earn some money, in the short term or long term. Most of them will distribute flyers on the

street or work together as waiters in restaurants and hotels. As many students would emphasise when going to an internship or a part-time job, togetherness is not only necessary but vital, because they can help and take care of each other in a dire market situation. They share information about job opportunities, and when exploited by employers who do not pay them for their internship or part-time work, they will go together to ask for the wages. For example, Xiao-ma, a 17-year-old male student who studies web design in Lanzhou, told us that he had a quarrel with his intern boss in a printing studio. Accompanied by his classmate, he was bold enough to fight for his labour rights:

Xiao-ma: I went to ask for my salary with my classmate, and I told my boss that he was awful. I had a big quarrel with him until he paid my first-month salary.

Interviewer: You thought the boss was outrageous?

Xiao-ma: Yes, he was! He thought interns are just students, so he did not treat us as human beings.

Having less and thus needing to cooperate more, it is vital for students to cooperate with each other in school and the workplace to survive in the severe market competition. Lili (18 years old, female), for example, who majors in garment design at a vocational school, proudly told us how she and her classmates worked together, presenting their work in front of teachers, schoolmates, and companies that come to recruit interns. Lili told us how she valued their presentation:

Everybody was so helpful and selfless. We helped each other. What I felt after our ‘catwalk’ presentation was to learn that the most beautiful thing is actually people. I knew that without my classmates’ help, I could have done nothing. I was so touched. You know they did not have the chance to present their work. Neither could they be the

audience because they had to stay backstage to help me. Helping iron clothes and dressing our models... a lot of things!

Lili stressed that everybody needed to cooperate closely to make the show a success. In another regional skills competition organised for the digital technology intern students in Xian, Lam (19 years old, male) told us that their group won first runner-up because they had strong cooperative spirit. Even though each of them was not regarded as 'promising' as those in top schools, through selfless cooperation, they won the prize collectively. Lam, whose teacher views him as a talented student, told us:

We are not students from Tsinghua University [a top university in China]. We are not the elite students. So, we are able to share our knowledge and skills. But if I were a Tsinghua student, that would be another story. I might keep the skills secret and not be willing to share with others. Haha, here we are all students who have a poor background; we share, we cooperate, and we win!

During a meal together to celebrate with their teacher and classmates, these students were very excited about the award, which redeemed their sense of worth and recognition. Having a laugh, they strove to overcome their hardships during their workplace internship. Many intern students reported that they really must be very supportive as they are inexperienced working at the workshop. Most of them were working in a company for the first time. Cooperation is the basis for their survival in an adult's world which looks stern to them. The value of comradeship has repeatedly been exercised and practised by the Chinese working-class youth.

Solidarity for community

We met Yang at his school in Shanxi. Yang majors in Business English, but he is not only interested in business. In fact, he is deeply involved in charity and community work. In his

second year of vocational study, Yang and a classmate formed a community organisation specifically for volunteer work. They co-launched a volunteering project collecting second-hand clothes in the city to donate to the poor families living in the mountain villages. They also run environmental campaigns to raise consciousness about pollution and collect garbage in the rivers of the town where they live. More importantly, Yang tried to connect all volunteering groups from his community to nearby cities in order to expand the coverage of their service. Through their constant endeavours, they recruited 200 student members who were involved in a variety of community work until they graduated. When asked why he was so involved in charity work, coming from a humble farmer's family, Yang told us:

I think this makes you feel happy, particularly when offering help gives me a personal, little 'sense of value'. Because for me, it also shows the obligation and value of being a student in vocational education. In our country, many places cannot be cared for, though. So, we do need charities.

Concerning this 'meaningful value' that prompts him to engage in community work, Yang also agreed that it might be his peasant family background which nurtures him to be more sensitive and empathetic to the poor:

As a village student, I feel more blessed than those from cities... I think they cannot understand the suffering of peasants, nor have a sort of feeling or affect for those living in the bottom of our society.

In contrast to the middle-class 'subject of value', Yang's emblematic behaviour echoes Skeggs and Loveday's concept of person-value calling for a different political ontology to include the excluded and their social values, actions, and affect (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012, p. 476). Yang's contributions to Chinese society resound many vocational school students we met across the

country. We learned how students are involved in charities or team up to spend their time visiting nursing homes for the elderly, orphanages, and so on. Sometimes they spend a day or a weekend assisting the disabled or the elderly to walk across the road. Sometimes they help promote animal welfare. We also met Jun, a male student of 17 years, majoring in modern logistics, who shared us his extraordinary grown-up story about transgressing the binary logic between exchange value and social values. Jun was born in a poor village in western China, and after he was born, his mother ran away from his family. He grew up with his father who then brought him a stepmother. He had an independent and yet caring character, and he adopted wild animals and insects from the community and took care of them:

I spend a lot of time with animals and insects instead of human beings. I have sympathy with poor creatures. We shared the same fate, and so we take care of each other. Every day I talked to my frogs, cats, dogs and make them happy. Sometimes, when I need money to feed myself and my animals, I sell some of them in the market. I can get a good price because these animals are in good shape after my care. I bring food home and I share with my small creatures.

We are enlightened by Jun's story, which does not entail ambivalence regarding the relationship between value and values. Exchanging value is not for extracting somebody else's labour value but for feeding oneself in hunger, and the value itself is due to the social values of the working-class youth who contributes care to the living creatures he loves. Overall, the value practices of students' solidarity and relatedness inform us that value exercises are not limited to the personal level (Sanghera, 2016). They can be a grounded practice, gradually developed from one's inner circle to a larger community. In our study, we purposively declare the necessity of discovering this 'micro-foundation of social values' formulated by the working class. We note that people who have little (capital) can make and give more value (social

values). Particularly in a severely competitive society, their practices flag a refusal to exchange value. They show that social values are not necessarily generated for profit, thus proposing a more inclusive ethos of solidarity. However, we are not implying that our informants can escape neoliberal values when many of them told us that they are planning to have a better life in such a competitive society. We yet see that ruptures in this dominant practice of value could occur from time to time. Young working-class people can question the legitimacy of exchange by fostering a mechanism of social values to ‘repair’ (Sennett, 2012) the injustice caused by the capitalistic logic to safeguard the social goodness and equality (Sanghera, 2016) from which we argue that we might redevelop working-class solidarity in the future.

Conclusion

In response to the critique of neoliberal values, this paper attempts to develop a micro-foundation of social values or a social mechanism of values explicitly demonstrated by students of vocational schools in China. The micro-foundation of social values is built on three terrains of value praxis – from working-class students’ schools to workplaces and then to the wider community. It highlights that the agency of the marginal is not only about sentimentalism but an ability to repair their damaged self and identity and to reunite and flourish in their solidarity in the context of an increasingly capitalised society. Recalling our Chinese students, we propose that there is an urgency to recognise and invest in this ability by crafting social values in detail.

Today China is producing the newest – and perhaps the biggest – working class in the world, in which young people have become the new labour subjects to serve the state and global capitalism’s ‘digital turn’. Significant digital software curriculums and internship programs are quickly propagating in vocational schools around China. Thus, how we could defend the rights of the working class and explore the social values they make shall become a pressing query. In

contrast to studies of the times of crisis that may potentially open up spaces of resistance when the working class engages in struggle, this paper contributes to the exploration of a social mechanism of values embedded in the Chinese working-class youth's everyday practices: care in the school, cooperation in the workplace, and solidarity for the community.

In this uncertain and perilous time for the struggle of young Chinese workers, we develop this micro-foundation of social values to initiate an exploration of social solidarity. Out of a necessity to support each other, the working-class youth is not a 'romanticising subject'; instead, they embrace and practise social values to combat their hardship collectively. On the one hand, this micro-foundation challenges the exchange logic and the legitimacy of individualism adopted by today's Chinese citizens. On the other, it illuminates that the values created by the working-class youth benefit not only one's peer group but also the wider society. Rethinking the account of 'use-value', we can employ value in relation to more radical 'imaginings' of economy (Haiven, 2011) to question the value of 'exchange', rejecting a knee-jerk idea that considers all human activities as merely for profit. In other words, the new 'imagination' of economy, as Haiven (2011) reiterates, is necessary and should be radicalised to counter the money logic that blocks our imaginings of economies or the actualisation of social life through re-asserting a social mechanism of values through care, cooperation, and solidarity as we claim here. In this pilot study, we demonstrate how working-class students – having less but contributing more – come together to help themselves and their community (Piff et. al, 2010) and seed working-class solidarity for future society.

References

De Angelis, M. (2007). *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital*. London: Pluto.

Fine, M. (2005). Individualization, Risk and the Body Sociology and Care. *Journal of Sociology*, 41, 247–266.

Graeber, D. (2001). *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.

Graeber, D. (2011). Value, Politics and Democracy in the United States. *Current Sociology*, 59, 186–199.

Haiven, M. (2011). Finance as Capital's Imagination? Reimagining Value in an Age of Fictitious Capital Crisis. *Social Text*, 29, 93–124.

Hansen, M., and Woronov, T.E. (2013). Demanding and Resisting Vocational Education: A Comparative Study of Schools in Rural and Urban China. *Comparative Education*, 49, 242–259.

Hochschild, A. (2003). *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. San Francisco and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. London: Polity Press.

XXXXX. (2016). Expansion of Vocational Education in Neoliberal China: Hope and Despair among Rural Youth. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31, 46–59.

Kipnis, A. (2011) *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics and Schooling in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Kulz, C. (2017). *Factories for Learning: Making Race, Class and Inequality in the Neoliberal Academy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lan, P.C. (2006). *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestic Workers and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ling, M. (2015). 'Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!': Vocational Education for Migrant Youth in Urban China. *The China Journal*, 73, 108–131.

Loveday, V. (2015). Working-Class Participation, Middle-Class Aspiration? Value, Upward Mobility and Symbolic Indebtedness in Higher Education. *The Sociological Review*, 63, 570–588.

Loveday, V. (2017). Luck, Chance, and Happenstance? Perceptions of Success and Failure Amongst Fixed-term Academic Staff in UK Higher Education. *British Journal of Sociology*, 69, 758–775.

Lury, C. (1998). *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Marx, K. [1867] (1954). *Capital, Volume I*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

McRobbie, A. (2015). *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. London: Polity Press.

Piff, P., Kraus, M., Côté, S., Cheng, B., and Keltner, D. (2010). Having Less, Giving More: The Influence of Social Class on Prosocial Behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99, 771–84.

XXXXXX (2016). *Migrant Labor in Post-Socialist China*. London: Polity Press.

XXXXXX, and XXXXXX. (2010). Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China. *Modern China*, 36, 493–519.

XXXXX, and XXXXX (2015). A “World-Class” (Labor) Camp/us: Foxconn and China’s New Generation of Labour Migrants. *Positions*, 23, 411–436.

XXXXX and XXXXX (2018). Double Contradiction of Schooling: Class Reproduction and Working-Class Agency at Vocational Schools in China. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, DOI:10.1080/01425692.2018.1507818.

Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. London: Policy Press.

Sayer, A. (2011). *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sanghera, B. (2016). Charitable Giving and Lay Morality: Understanding Sympathy, Moral Evaluations and Social Positions. *The Sociological Review*, 64, 294-311.

Sennett, R. (2012). *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. Cambridge: Yale University Press.

Silva, J. (2013). *Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skeggs, B. (2004). *Class, Self, Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Skeggs, B. (2011). Imagining Personhood Differently: Person Value and Autonomist Working Class Value Practices. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 579–594.

Skeggs, B. (2014). Values beyond value? Is Anything beyond the Logic of Capital? *British Journal of Sociology*, 65 1–20.

Skeggs, B., and Loveday, V. (2012). Struggles for Value: Value Practices, Injustice, Judgment, Affect and the Idea of Class. *British Journal of Sociology*, 63, 472–490.

Skeggs, B., and Wood, H. (2012) *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience, Value*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Smith, C., and Chan, J. (2015). Working For Two Bosses: Student Interns as Constrained Labour in China. *Human Relations*, 68, 305–326.

Thompson, E.P. (1966). *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon.

Wilson, A. (2016). The Infrastructure of Intimacy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41, 247–280.

Woronov, T.E. (2011). Learning to Serve: Urban Youth, Vocational Schools and New Class Formations in China. *The China Journal*, 66, 77–99.

Woronov, T.E. (2016). *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yan, Y. (2010). The Chinese Path to Individualization. *British Journal of Sociology*, 61, 489–512.