

# A Brief Introduction to the Evolution of Chinese Vocational Education

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**ABSTRACT.** *Three-year vocational colleges are the main servers in the tertiary vocational education of China. During the short history of development, they have been borrowing and reforming the philosophies they introduced from German, America and some other countries to serve the local industry. By introducing the evolution history, this paper explicitly shows the layout of the vocational education in China.*

**Keywords:** *vocational colleges, philosophy, student, industry*

## 1. Introduction

In the last 30 years, Chinese society experienced an important reformation in many aspects, great changes occurred to the economy as well as in education. Dramatic increase appeared both in the number of higher educational institutions and in the number of students enrolled in higher education. According to the data released by Ministry of Education (MOE) of People's Republic of China, the percentage of students who promoted to Higher Education from Senior High School has rapidly increased, from 27.3% in 1990 to 87.0% in 2012, and in 2017 the percentage jumped to 88.3%. The student percentage were enrolled in the secondary vocational senior high school was 32.1% in 1985 and increased to 49.9% in 1990, during 1991 to 2017 the percentage was flucturing from 39.7% to 40.1%. According to the data released recently by Chinese Ministry of Education, up to 2017, there are 1,388 three year tertiary vocational education institutions and 8,181 three year secondary vocational high schools enrolls 8,022,574 vocational students[1].

This paper traces the evolution of vocational education from the second

vocational education to the tertiary three year vocational colleges established as a major part in Chinese higher education. It also aims to answer two questions. 1. What institutions are included in three-year vocational colleges? 2. How did they evolve in education history and establish as a main branch in Chinese higher education?

## **2. The Evolution of Chinese Vocational Institutions**

Chinese Three-year Vocational Colleges play an important role in Chinese vocational education, in training the qualified professional technicians for the market economy. As Wanbin Ren claimed in *Thoughts on the Solutions to Problems in Vocational Education of the New Age* in 2009, vocational education is an indispensable part in China's educational system as well as an important basis of its national economy and social development. He stated that it is an urgent need of improving Chinese comprehensive competitiveness by relying on science and technology to develop vocational education. It is also an important channel to coordinate the development of urban and rural areas and construct new socialist countryside to develop vocational education. He also insisted on that the fundamental way out for agriculture lies in the improvement of laborers' quality[1]. It is a significant measure to develop vocational education in order to fulfill the scientific outlook on development as well as to construct a harmonious socialist society. He concluded economic development and social stability can be achieved with such development.

### ***2.1 Three-year vocational colleges in the early period***

Compare to that of some western and Europe countries, Chinese vocational education enjoys a short development history. The earliest vocational education in China may be traced back to the industrial education in the 1860's more than 130 years ago. The main content of vocational education at that period (late Qing Dynasty) was to study western technology and train manpower with practical skills.

The modern vocational education appeared in 1980s. The 1980s and 1990s was a period of experimentation that included vocational education reforms and improvements, a period that tried various combinations of traditional and Western philosophies[2]. In 1980 the State Educational Committee, the former of Chinese

Ministry of Education (MOE), approved the establishment of the first 13 vocational colleges. This symbolize a new beginning of vocational education in Chinese higher education[3]. Up to 1985, there were 118 vocational colleges established. But these colleges developed into the “shrunk universities” in the long run. Though the name of these colleges are ended with “professional college”, they didn’t focus on vocational education. They were given the name of “shrunk universities” because these colleges follow the way of 4 year university but the required academic year was shortened to three years. In the dataset of MOE, these colleges were depicted as “Short-cycled Higher Educational Institutions”. Complicated reasons lead these vocational colleges developed into “short-cycled universities”. These reasons including the short history of vocational education in China, the lack of experience and emphasis on educational policy, unbalanced development, the limited condition in professional resources and educational recourses. “

## ***2.2 The era that Five-year Vocational Colleges dominate the main stream in vocational education***

In 1985, Chinese educational institutions begin the new try on five-year vocational colleges. The student resources are those junior school graduates, their learning process spanned for 5 years and will graduate with a diploma equal to those graduate from the traditional three year colleges. These colleges combined secondary and tertiary vocational education. Students who are less intelligent in academic study and those are interested in receiving vocational education could be enrolled in these colleges when they finished the 9 years compulsory education. When they finished their secondary vocational education, they could choose to continue their tertiary study in the same school without taking the Entrance Examination (Gaokao) special to vocational student. This model proved to be successful, because students were enrolled at their young age, they could set up a clear professional goals at younger age and acquire technical skills in the longer period of learning. The most important was that it certified a smooth connection between secondary vocational and tertiary vocational education. Five-year College graduates were recognized and welcomed by the labor market, they were a good sources of labors for low and middle levels.

### ***2.3 New Tertiary Vocational Colleges***

In November of 1990, a meeting of professionals who worked in three-year colleges was held in Guangzhou, some professionals proposed the different development models for three-year colleges. In the same year, the policy of co-existence of the comprehensive academic three-year colleges and vocational three-year Colleges was made, colleges could decide its own development model according to the requirement of local economy. It also clarified the purpose of vocational colleges is to train highly professional technicians. Because the procedure to get proved to be a vocational college by State Educational Committee is difficult, some vocational colleges adjusted their way of development to meet the requirement of being a comprehensive three-year colleges. This frustrated the development of vocational education in higher education. Because people can hardly tell the difference between vocational colleges and comprehensive three-year colleges.

But the requirement of rapid developing economy required a great amount of highly skilled technicians, this endowed the responsibilities of educational institutions to explore new ways to meet the requirement for new economy. With the rapid development of economy in the 1990s, more highly skilled professionals are needed. It was urgent to develop an educational model based on student resources from high school graduates. In January of 1991, Xingtai Higher Vocational and Technical School, the former of Xingtai Polytechnic College was established in Hebei Province of China with the approval of the State Educational Committee and the General Logistics Department of Military. It was established on the campus of the former Military Supplies Industrial School, a secondary vocational school which administered by the Military of People's Republic of China. It was one of the two independently established three-year college vocational colleges with the student resources of both the high school graduates and secondary vocational graduates. The students study in this college for three years and will graduate with one diploma that granted to all three year college students and at least one professional certificate in the relevant field.

### **3. The reformation since 1994**

In 1994, a new policy was proposed in the meeting for educational

professionals in order to make good use of the available resources and have a more clear direction for vocational education[3]. To follow this policy, all “shrunk universities”, vocational institutions and short-term adult educational institutions should be reformed and reorganized to form the new vocational colleges to follow the model of Xingtai Polytechnic College, some existing secondary vocational schools can be reformed and update to new colleges if they meet the standards of a vocational college. This reformation is also accompanied by the tide of university merging. In this period, higher educational system experienced reconstruction in order to enhance educational quality, improve institutional efficiency, and share educational resources[3]. Under these reforming tide, a lot of universities were merged to form bigger universities, some “shrunk universities” were merged with other colleges of the same level to form new four year colleges, or merged with four year colleges and universities to become part of it. Many of the “shrunk universities” reformed to be a vocational college, there were also great many new three year vocational colleges was born by reforming the secondary vocational schools. No exact numbers were found for these newly formed colleges, but the vocational characteristic of these newly established vocational institutions were all indicated in their names. Because in 1997, the State Educational Committee worked out a regulation that all newly established vocational colleges should be named “Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan” (Vocational and Technical Colleges) or “Zhiye Daxue”( Vocational College). Some of them had performed reformation to focus on the vocational and technical education, but kept its name as “shrank universities”, the name of the college usually ended with “Gaodeng Zhuanke Xuexiao”. Up to now, there are still very few number of “shrank universities” stand well, , they didn’t merge with other institutions and keep their name as those “shrank universities” (Zhuanke) nor did they change their function model to vocational colleges. But because the number is quite small and the role of them is not clear cut, they are now counted in the group of vocational colleges. Therefore, we can conclude that the co-existence of “shrank universities” and Vocational Colleges lasted for a long time in the reforming period, but the trend is clear that those”shrank universities” will either transfer to vocational educational institutions or update to 4-year comprehensive colleges.

#### **4. The period of rapid development of three-year colleges**

Since January 1999, Chinese government granted the provincial education department to make plans for their own enrollment, design their entrance examination (Gaokao) and grant their degrees. The Ministry of Education made a new regulation that higher education no longer solely supported by central government and graduates from universities and colleges will no longer be assigned to do a certain job, all educational institutions will mainly support themselves by student tuition. These regulations symbolized the higher education of China entered into an era of rapid development as well as the booming period of vocational colleges. Because by doing this, all local government and private institutions are encouraged to promoting vocational education. In the fourth meeting of professionals in vocational education, a proposal was passed that local government, all social entities including all kinds of enterprises and companies are all encouraged to participate in running vocational educational institutions. In 2004, the administrator of Chinese Ministry of Education proposed that the purpose of vocational colleges should follow the guiding philosophy of combining production, education and research (Chan Xue Yan Xiang Jiehe), to train students to serve the country, meet the requirement of labor market. According to the data of Chinese Ministry of Education, there were 981 vocational colleges serving 2,682,776 students in 2004, the number of vocational colleges increase to 981 in 2006, but the number of students studying in such colleges increased 4,384,068. The number of all vocational institutions was up to 1147 and the number of newly admitted student was 2,930,000 in the end of 2006, when for the first time the vocational students enrolled was more than students enrolled in four year institutions. The total number of students in three year colleges was 7,960,000, which was close to that of students in four year universities and colleges. According to the data of MOE for 2012, there are 7,597,464 students attending vocational colleges, only 3503 of them whose study in these colleges will run for 4 years. Up to 2012, there are 1297 vocational colleges, 316 of them run by non-government institutions, 4 of them run directly under Central Ministries & Agencies, 977 run by HEIs under Local Authority including sub-institutions under the government of MOE, institutions of non-educational government department and institutions run by local Enterprises[4].

Up to now, Chinese government has established a comparatively mature assessing system for vocational colleges in China. The cooperation between Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance was achieved to perform the

assessment and provide financial support to these vocational colleges. In 2006, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China accessed and elected the first 28 colleges as exemplary models for other vocational colleges. They receive great amount of grants from the Ministry of Finance to promote tertiary vocational education in China. Up to 2010, the Ministry of Education has elected 100 successful colleges as national exemplaries.

### **5. New era of vational education**

It is quite likely that 2019 will be the year that Chinese vocational education take great changes in its developing history. Chinese government put great emphasis to improve the quality of vocational education. In January of 2019, the Chinese State Council published a paper to guide the vocational education improvement implementation. It put the "dual system" or cooperation of enterprises with vocational schools and colleges in a new higher position. Two month later, in the Report on the Work of the Government, the news that the student enrollment into vocational education will be increased by 1 million in 2019 was released, which is a great increase on the original number. Only two month later, the Chinese Ministry of Education released a paper to rename the first 15"vocational colleges"to "vocational university", which symlize that these vocational colleges were upgrated to four year vocational universities to enjoy the same important position as other comprehensive universities. This will be the one of the most significant changes in the history of vocational education.

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