

The Spiritual Dilemma and Breakthrough of the Development of Higher Vocational Education in China: An Analysis Based on the Symbolic Frame

Sai Cheng^{1,2}

¹College of Education, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

²Zibo Polytechnic University, Zibo, Shandong, China

Abstract: High-quality vocational education is a key objective of SDG 4. China's higher vocational education faces a dual spiritual dilemma: the widespread spiritual void caused by technological progress, and the erosion of university ideals under utilitarianism. To address this, higher vocational education should establish a unique value narrative system, cultivating an educational ecosystem that harmonizes technical skills with "Dao". By achieving sustainable human development through cultural inheritance and innovation, it can provide spiritual impetus and cultural support for the high-quality advancement of vocational education in the new era.

Key words: Higher Vocational Education; Spiritual Dilemma; Sustainable Development

1. Theoretical Basis

The renowned American scholars Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal introduced the concept of "frames" when analyzing organizational restructuring, proposing four frames for understanding organizations: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. [1] The structural frame examines organizational architecture, emphasizing clear objectives, professional roles, and formal relationships. It asserts that well-defined responsibilities and effective coordination are essential for organizational efficacy. The human resources frame focuses on the "human" dimension, viewing organizations as extended families that prioritize understanding members' needs and characteristics, with efforts to enhance job satisfaction through organizational adjustments. The political frame regards organizations as arenas of interest competition, analyzing the dynamic processes of power struggles and

resource allocation amid scarcity and conflicts. The symbolic frame explores organizational culture and spiritual dimensions, recognizing that organizations are driven by symbolic systems of values, beliefs, and cultural rituals, and advocates rebuilding their spiritual core through cultural elements.

Every single frame inherently possesses inherent limitations. The narrow theoretical foundations and oversimplified models often result in partial understanding of organizations, as the "Blind Men and the Elephant" metaphor illustrates—only partial characteristics can be captured, making it difficult to fully grasp the essence of organizational operations and the intrinsic logic of management. Bolman and Deal advocate a multidimensional framework-based analytical approach, emphasizing the deepening of organizational understanding through dynamic switching and complementarity of four frames. This multidimensional framework is equally applicable to the comprehension and reconstruction of higher vocational education as a specific university organization.

However, current understanding and restructuring of higher vocational education disproportionately emphasize structural frame while neglecting the symbolic frame in organizational culture and spiritual dimensions. This imbalance results in excessive reliance on rationalized technical approaches in its management, lacking artistic reflection on the essence of education and failing to adequately address students' spiritual needs. The limitations of this singular frame constitute a key root cause of insufficient cultural recognition of higher vocational education in society.

2. The Spiritual Dilemma of Higher Vocational Education Development

The development of higher vocational education in China is facing the double spiritual dilemma

of the spiritual loss brought by the technological progress and the dissolution of the university ideal in the utilitarianism.

2.1 Technological Progress Brings about Widespread Spiritual Deficiency

DeepSeek's viral success has democratized generative AI. This was followed by Elon Musk's unveiling of Grok3 and the emergence of Manus. The rapid advancement of AI has left many feeling powerless, fearing they've become obsolete—a phenomenon that has sparked widespread anxiety about the displacement of traditional professions and future careers. Gert Anders coined the term 'Promethean Shame' to describe humanity's sense of shame and helplessness when confronting technology they themselves created. [2]

Furthermore, the rapid advancement of technology has led to a pervasive spiritual void. German philosopher Karl Jaspers, when analyzing modern technology, observed: "All that humanity has accumulated over millennia in terms of working methods, lifestyles, modes of thinking, and symbolic systems appears to have been thoroughly erased by the technological era and its consequences." [3] Technological innovation has fundamentally reshaped human-environment interactions, pushing labor practices and social structures toward a paradigm of large-scale mechanized production. In industrialized systems, traditional craftsmen no longer retain autonomy over their tools or the freedom to customize products according to individual needs. Workers increasingly become dependent on highly organized production frameworks and their structural positions, being retrained as interchangeable components in mechanical systems. This disconnects labor processes from workers' self-actualization. The resulting alienation from labor leaves most practitioners unable to derive subjective fulfillment from their work, while their understanding of labor's value and ultimate purpose remains unclear. Humanity has lost its traditional continuity, with existential horizons severely compressed into a "presentness" survival predicament. The holistic meaning of human existence has been deconstructed into fragmented behavioral patterns.

In the wave of technological revolution, the high-quality technical and skilled talents cultivated by higher vocational education directly face the profound spiritual dilemma

brought about by technological changes. However, the current construction and implementation of vocational education concepts have not yet fully reflected effective responses and systematic solutions to technological alienation and spiritual dilemmas, which exacerbates the value loss and identity crisis of technical and skilled talents when facing modernity and technological alienation. This critical perspective reveals the shortcomings of vocational education in cultural inheritance and spiritual shaping.

2.2 The Dissolution of University Ideals in Utilitarianism

Modern universities, despite their rapid expansion and improved conditions, seem to lack a spiritual essence—their idealism. [4] As the highest symbol of social humanistic spirit, universities are hailed as "sanctuaries of the soul." University idealism represents the cultural core and soul embedded in their mission and value pursuits. As social organizations with distinct cultural attributes, universities' cultural genes profoundly influence every dimension of educational activities. The cultural environment they create plays a decisive role in achieving educational goals and enhancing quality. The caliber of this environment significantly shapes the character of the people they cultivate.

Since its inception, vocational education has been driven by strong utilitarian motives. In China's early stages, vocational education was closely linked with military training and productive labor, and was inseparable from revolutionary wars, national independence, and the liberation of the people. Following the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the rapid development of the market economy has increasingly highlighted the contradiction between talent supply and the demands of economic and social development. Higher vocational education emerged as a crucial supplement to China's higher education system, with its development primarily focused on cultivating applied technical and skilled talents for regional economic growth. In 1980, Jiangsu Province pioneered the establishment of China's first vocational university—Jinling Vocational University—marking the official launch of higher vocational education.

The higher vocational education that emerged under this context exhibits pronounced instrumental rationality, with its educational

philosophy primarily emphasizing a pragmatic orientation focused on serving national and regional economic development. This singular value orientation has resulted in neglecting the systematic construction of university cultural environments during its development, thereby weakening the inheritance and promotion of the university's idealistic spirit. Such an orientation has left higher vocational education in a relatively marginalized position within the higher education system, overshadowed by its lack of the essential university spirit and cultural essence, making it difficult to become a "sanctuary of the soul."

While universities are grounded in material resources, they must above all cultivate spiritual inspiration and transcendence. The university spirit serves as the cornerstone of its philosophy, fueling a distinctive identity, academic excellence, and dynamic vitality. It embodies the cohesion, creativity, and enduring vitality of a modern institution, acting as its very soul and foundation.

3. Tracing the Causes of Spiritual Dilemma

From the macro perspective of the history of Chinese philosophy, "unity of heaven and humanity" constitutes the core proposition of traditional Chinese philosophy. Among them, Laozi and Zhuangzi philosophy established "Dao" as the fundamental principle of all things in the universe, and humans also take "Dao" as their foundation. Taking the classic discourse "Pao Ding's Ox-Cutting" as an example, "what one loves is Dao" not only profoundly interprets the philosophical connotation of "unity of heaven and humanity," but also demonstrates a deep concern for the spiritual realm of humans. However, with the solidification of the "official-centric" system, the alienation of the concept of "A good scholar will make an official," and the introduction of Western learning to the East, especially the Western dichotomy of subject and object into China, the unity of "skill" and "Dao" in traditional Chinese culture gradually dissipated. This spiritual concern deeply rooted in traditional philosophy also waned, reflecting the profound transformation of traditional Chinese values during the process of modernization.

3.1 The Spiritual Concern of China's Traditional Philosophy

China's renowned contemporary philosopher

Feng Youlan once said: "The status of philosophy in Chinese culture has always been comparable to that of religion in other cultures." In the Chinese philosophical tradition, there is a distinction between learning for knowledge and learning for the Dao. The purpose of learning for knowledge is to acquire active knowledge, while the purpose of learning for the Dao is to elevate the realm of the mind, and philosophy belongs to the category of learning for the Dao. [5] "Dao" is the core concept of traditional Chinese philosophy. The opening three sentences of the Doctrine of the Mean in the Four Books, "What Heaven has appointed is called nature; to follow this nature is called the Dao; to cultivate the Dao is called teaching," reveal Confucianism's systematic thinking on the essence of life and the function of education.

In the view of Zhuangzi, "Dao" is not only in accordance with natural principles and the laws of nature, but also a spiritual experience that transcends "skill." The saying of Pao Ding, "What I love is Dao, which surpasses skill," reveals the craftsman's spiritual pursuit beyond technical mastery. After nineteen years of practice, he ultimately achieved the state of encountering the mind rather than the eyes, reaching a realm of effortless ease. The story of Pao Ding dissecting the ox was also used by the renowned psychologist and founder of positive psychology, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, to interpret the concept of "flow experience." The so-called "flow" refers to the natural and effortless feeling many describe when they perform at their best. [6] "Standing with the knife in hand, looking around, and feeling full of confidence." At this moment, Pao Ding reached the pinnacle of his career, fully experiencing the spiritual transcendence and psychological satisfaction brought by "flow." As recorded in "Zhuangzi: the Master of Health Preservation," this scene not only showcases Pao Ding's exquisite craftsmanship but also embodies the sublimation from skill to Dao. In the philosophical tradition of China, "skill" and "Dao" are two sides of the same coin, not opposing but complementary. True craftsmen not only possess mastery of the tangible "tools" but also transcend specific techniques to reach the metaphysical realm of "Dao." This process of advancing from technical proficiency to spiritual sublimation is the most important value core of traditional Chinese artisan culture.

3.2 Loss of Emotional Support

In the contemporary field of China's vocational education, the spiritual realm and value pursuit of "what one loves is Dao" are generally absent. The current vocational education system exhibits a distinct feature of "separation of skill and Dao," with its talent cultivation model often remaining at the level of instrumental rationality in technical instruction, neglecting the metaphysical spiritual dimension. Vocational education has long been constructed as a reluctant choice that can only learn "a specialized skill." The value of vocational education has diminished, losing its inherent cultural connotations and spiritual character. Secondly, the Western dualistic epistemological tradition has profoundly influenced China's educational philosophy, reducing "skill" to purely operational knowledge and severing the organic unity of technical practice and humanistic spirit.

3.2.1 The shackles of the "official-centric" ideology

China's ancient "official-centric" ideology, as a deeply rooted social ideology, has continued to ferment in the modern cultural field despite millennia of historical changes. From an ontological perspective, the formation of the "official-centric" ideology is closely related to the characteristics of agrarian civilization. In traditional agrarian civilization, the production mode of "establishing the state through agriculture" required stable social order and a strong authority system to maintain, which provided fertile soil for the emergence of the "official-centric" ideology. Ancient agricultural production relied on accumulated production experience, and elders familiar with agricultural laws naturally became authorities, with respect for the elderly and reverence for superiors becoming a voluntary ethical choice for the whole society. Agriculture, "composed of thousands of identical, extremely scattered villages and towns with few commodity exchange relationships, required the emergence of a centralized political system and ruling ideology that was high and mighty, which is what is called 'Oriental despotism.'" [7] the kinship patriarchal system and the isomorphic social structure of family and state further solidified the legitimacy of the hierarchical order. In traditional social structures, the governance logic of "those who work with their minds rule others; those who work with their strength are

ruled by others" had its social rationality in specific historical periods.

Notably, despite significant institutional reforms in modernization, the "official-centric" mindset persists in new forms within social psychology and cultural structures, shaping people's behaviors and value judgments. Vocational education is often perceived as merely training "those who work with their strength." The traditional mindset of "those who work with their minds rule others; those who work with their strength are ruled by others" reveals a latent pitfall in modern thinking: a disconnect between contemporary perspectives and problem contexts, where only modern viewpoints are present while specific contexts are absent. [8]

Under the ancient traditional ideological system of "official-centric," the notion of "A good scholar will make an official" naturally became the sole path for literati and patriots to realize their political aspirations and personal values. As the saying goes, "cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world" —the ideal of reading is to serve the country and its people, dedicating oneself wholeheartedly until death. Therefore, in the ancient traditional agrarian society dominated by self-sufficient natural economy, intellectuals were endowed with unique historical missions and social responsibilities, and their sense of family and national devotion was institutionalized as a cultural gene. This institutional arrangement primarily projected the expectations of political aspirations and historical missions onto the intellectual class, while excluding the majority of skilled laborers from this value system. The later imperial examination system shifted this value orientation toward pursuing fame and fortune, gradually distorting the original meaning of "A good scholar will make an official" into a one-sided value orientation of "all professions are inferior, only reading is noble." The "official-centric" ideology gradually became distorted in historical evolution. This transformation of values profoundly influenced the traditional social structure and cultural psychology of China, and its impact still, to some extent, constrains the shaping of modern professional concepts to this day.

In modern times, with the invasion of the West, the monarchy and autocracy came to an end. As China's technological backwardness was exposed to the world, the impractical "single-

minded pursuit of reading" had long been criticized for being outdated. Yun Daiying also proposed in "On the Unity of Learning and Profession": "The Chinese people's bias of valuing literature over practical skills has persisted for thousands of years, and the books they read and the education they receive are often unrelated to their professions. " [9] More importantly, "A good scholar will make an official" is no longer the only choice for serving the country, contributing to society, and realizing personal value.

On the other hand, China's education evaluation and employment selection mechanisms have long overrelied on examinations, where academic performance is interpreted as capability and diplomas as status symbols. A person's entire life can be determined by his or her college entrance examination results. Vocational college students are often labeled as "underqualified" or "low-achieving" due to poor performance. The social recognition of vocational education remains persistently low: Firstly, vocational diplomas are perceived as lacking "value, " failing to establish effective cultural capital in the job market. Secondly, the educational ceiling of vocational training restricts students' upward mobility, reducing vocational education to a "terminal education" rather than a vital component of lifelong learning systems. While technical skills are undervalued, the philosophical dimension of "Dao" is naturally sidelined.

3.2.2 Influence of Western Traditional Philosophy

After the first Industrial Revolution occurred in the 1760s, Western European countries such as Britain took the lead in initiating the process of "modernization. " Toffler pointed out that "the industrial system is a flood in history—within just three hundred years, it has overshadowed the previous ten thousand years. " [10] Modernization created so-called "advanced" and "backward" states, implying the synchronicity of different times or histories. This cultural hegemonic discourse, relying on the material hegemony of developed countries, gained ontological legitimacy and gave rise to modernization theory. The core argument of modernization theory is that all nations, ethnic groups, and regions share a common path to modernization, though they may be at different stages of this path. [11] Due to the rapid development of various affairs, many groups of

people have become "backward" in their lives, with individuals belonging to different ideologies and life stages coexisting, various lifestyles and social forms persisting simultaneously, and the spirits and values of many generations coexisting. Thus, we can experience facts from different times at the same time, that is, "all present at once. " [12] While China was involved in the modernization process, it was also impacted by Western ideologies, particularly the opposition between the Western traditional philosophy of subject-object duality and the Chinese traditional philosophy of "unity of heaven and humanity. " In this ideological confrontation, to adapt to the developmental demands of modern scientific thinking, the Western-dominated international discourse system gradually took the lead.

4. Conclusion

To break through this dilemma, it is necessary to re-examine the ancient Chinese philosophical wisdom of "entering the Dao through skill, " reconstruct the dialectical unity between "skill" and "Dao" in vocational education, and combine skill cultivation with spiritual pursuit. Construct and disseminate its unique value narrative system, telling its own story well. This system should be rooted in the profound soil of China's traditional culture while responding to the contemporary demands of green development in modern society.

4.1 Constructing and Disseminating the Unique Value Narrative System of Higher Vocational Education

From the symbolic frame of organizational restructuring, organizations are fundamentally cultural constructs. This theoretical paradigm focuses on deep cultural factors such as spiritual identity and value loyalty, emphasizing that cultural innovation serves as the core driving force for organizational transformation. Based on this, the cultural construction of higher vocational education should start from the symbolic dimension, prioritizing the cultivation of idealistic culture where "what one loves is Dao. " As French poet Miguel Lopez stated, "People tell stories as a way to care for themselves, " vocational institutions should excel at narrating educational stories with cultural depth and value recognition. High-quality technical professionals, through mastering their craft, can achieve not only the

"freedom of artistic mastery" but also experience the "peak experience" described by humanist philosopher Abraham Maslow. The "peak experience" is a crucial concept in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, representing a transcendent state achieved when an individual realizes their potential. This state emerges after basic needs are fully satisfied, offering a fleeting yet profound, transcendent joy during self-actualization. During peak experience, individuals experience a cosmic fusion of existence, a moment of self-affirmation where they transcend, forget, and lose themselves. This perfectly illustrates the ancient Chinese chef Pao Ding's description: "Standing with his knife raised, he looks around and feels full of ambition."

4.2 Cultivate the Concept of Sustainable Development in the Traditional Culture

Against the backdrop of escalating global ecological crises, green and sustainable development has become an essential path for the international community to pursue shared prosperity. To fully harness the potential of vocational education and training in driving green transformation and shaping a sustainable future, UNESCO launched the global initiative "Greening TVET" to mainstream green skills development in vocational education. This initiative emphasizes that countries should deeply integrate the strategic goals of promoting green economic transition and building green societies into the curriculum and training programs of vocational education. [13]

In the process of constructing a green skills education system, China's traditional cultural resources demonstrate unique advantages. The concept of "unity of heaven and humanity" in China's traditional philosophy provides a profound local foundation for the cultivation of sustainable development. As the saying goes, "Heaven and earth coexist with me, and all things are one with me." China's traditional philosophy not only reflects the symbiotic and prosperous relationship between humans and nature but also offers metaphysical philosophical

guidance for the construction of modern environmental ethics.

References

- [1] Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. *Organizational Restructuring: Artistry, Choice and Leadership* (3rd ed.). Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2005.
- [2] Anders. *Outdated People*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2010.
- [3] Jaspers. *The Origin and Goal of History*. Guilin: Li River Publishing House, 2019.
- [4] Sui Yifan. *the Mission and Responsibilities of Universities*. Beijing: Educational Science Press, 2007:17.
- [5] Feng Youlan. *A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2023.
- [6] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *The Discovery of Flow: Optimal Experiences in Daily Life*. Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2018.
- [7] Feng Tianyu. *The Secrets of Ancient Chinese Culture*. Wuhan: Hubei People's Publishing House, 1986.
- [8] Li Peifeng. *Placing Absence in the Context of Modern Perspectives* [J]. *Reading*, 2002, (01):70-74.
- [9] Lu Baoli, Yang Fei, Wang Yanan. *Reconstruction and Inheritance: A Study on the Chronological Project of China's "Craftsman Spirit" -Based on "Made in China 2025"* [J]. *Vocational Education Forum*, 2016, (34):5-14.
- [10] Alvin Toffler. *The Third Wave* [M]. Translated by Huang Mingjian. Beijing: CITIC Press, 2006:74.
- [11] Wallerstein. *Open Social Science: Report on the Reconstruction of Social Science*. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 1997:43.
- [12] Zhao Tingyang. *Modernity and China* [M]. Guangdong: Guangdong Education Press, 2000:2.
- [13] UNESCO. *Shanghai Consensus: building skills for work and life* [M]. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2012:78.