Development Challenges and Experience Enlightenment of Vocational Education in China and India under the Influence of Traditional Culture

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Abstract: Traditional culture, as a distinctive spiritual manifestation and value system within a nation or society, exerts notable inertia and permeability in influencing perceptions of vocational education, constituting a regulatory and constraining force in the development of vocational education. China and India, both renowned ancient civilizations, presently occupy pivotal roles as the largest developing countries and fastest-growing economies worldwide. From the vantage point of traditional culture and its influence, this paper endeavors to analyze and compare the developmental challenges and reformative experiences of vocational education in China and India. It is observed that in China, the impact of Confucian culture and the imperial examination system, which was influenced by the concept of "valuing morality over skills", has engendered a dearth in societal acceptance of vocational education, a misalignment of educational objectives and content, and unsuitable instructional and evaluative approaches, among other difficulties. Meanwhile, in India, the influence of the religious belief of "the unity of Brahman and Atman" and various cultural traits has cultivated large, disparate gaps in vocational education levels, a detachment from social demands, and low sociocultural acceptance, among other obstacles. To transcend the restraints imposed by traditional culture, China and India have both dedicated considerable efforts to exploring vocational education reforms, obtaining tangible accomplishments along the way. Reciprocal engagement in experiential exchange, together with a joint quest to navigate a common path towards breakthroughs, bears significant implications for the development of these two nations.

1. Introduction

Cultural research forms an important aspect within the comparative education domain. Gu Mingyuan explored the historical development of cultural research within comparative education, elucidating cultural research manifestations and explaining the relationship between cultural research, overcoming Western cultural centrism, and the interaction between culture and education [1]. Vocational education originated within the context of industrialized societies, the evolution of which correlates closely with widespread socio-economic activities. Consequently, scholars primarily study vocational education from an economic perspective. With the deepening of research, some scholars

began exploring vocational education issues from a cultural perspective, expanding research efforts to an international level while comparing the varied vocational education characteristics arising from different cultural backgrounds within different nations. Zhu Xiaobin explicated how German ethnic thinking, value orientation, as well as cultural heritage, deeply impacted the "dual system" vocational education model adopted within Germany. Zhu further compared traditional Chinese national culture's influence upon vocational education, revealing the fundamental underlying reasons for the disparities between China and Germany's vocational education systems [2]. This comparative research approach still exhibits characteristics rooted in Western cultural centrism, focused on the differences and similarities between developed nations and China and developed countries.

Both China and India are ancient civilizations with long-standing histories, cultural legacies, as well as a shared history of invasion and colonization by the West in modern times. In the present, both nations rank among the largest developing countries and fastest-growing economies worldwide. In light of these similarities, this paper aims to explore and compare the developmental challenges of vocational education in both countries and the traditional cultural factors behind them. Briefly analyzing the reformative experiences of both nations, mutual exchange and learning to search for solutions will bear significant implications for both the vocational education and economic development of China and India.

2. Traditional Culture and Its Relationship with Vocational Education

2.1 The Connotation of Traditional Culture

Traditional culture refers to the sum of unique value systems, ways of thinking, customs, lifestyles, aesthetic preferences, and religious beliefs developed by a nation or ethnic group during their long history of social development. As a form of social spirituality, traditional culture embodies the essence of national spirit, and features fundamental and stable characteristics. In turn, it exerts significant influence on social and historical development owing to its strong vitality and power of influence. Samuel P. Huntington, an American political theorist and philosopher defined culture as the commonly held values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and perceptions of a society[3]. This paper defines traditional culture from its spiritual core as the spirit, character, and values of a nation or ethnic group.

2.2 The Relationship between Traditional Culture and Vocational Education

Culture and education are deeply interlinked, having grown and evolved together over the course of human history. Traditional culture changes and develops over time as it is passed down from generation to generation, reflecting distinctiveness and embodying a process of accumulation and inheritance, forming a corresponding system of values, and regulating and adjusting education's developmental trajectory and methods in various ways. Vocational education, as an educational type, aims to cultivate students' vocational abilities through systematic education, enabling them to master the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for a particular profession. Compared to general education, vocational education has a more explicit career orientation, closely linked to political, economic, cultural, and other issues in social development. On the one hand, it cannot break through the barriers of cultural tradition. On the other hand, it can also inject new vitality into cultural tradition. Traditional culture, as a unique set of values and beliefs of a nation, possesses strong historical inertia and permeability, influencing people's cognition of vocational education, determining vocational education's social status, guiding the establishment of cultivation objectives and talent standards that meet the public's psychological expectations, and subsequently forming different teaching contents and teaching methods in vocational education.

2.3 The Restriction of Traditional Culture on Vocational Education in Different Countries

Culture is a set of shared psychological programs among people in a particular environment that can distinguish them from others. Due to differences in historical process, geographical location, and life experience, each ethnic group and nation has accumulated and formed unique traditional cultures during their respective development. Different forms of traditional culture, like soil, nurture vocational education thoughts, systems, behaviors, and material forms that are closely related to them. For example, Germany has always emphasized a practical orientation to craftsmanship and skills, prioritizing training and practical learning, which has led to the development of vocational education in Germany with broad popular cultural foundations and a strong sense of social identity. Meanwhile, influenced by the "gentleman culture", the UK values traditions, prioritizes humanity over technology, and focuses on training elite individuals with "gentlemanly manners", which, to some extent, limits the development of vocational education in the United Kingdom [4].

3. The Challenges of Vocational Education under the Influence of Chinese Traditional Culture

In China, traditional culture can be generally viewed as a system consisting of Confucianism as the main body and the complementary doctrines of Taoism and Confucianism [5]. It has always placed emphasis on individual moral cultivation while undervaluing production and technological knowledge, known as "valuing morality over skills". The concept of "Dao" is the original principle of all things and human nature, and the governing principle of state affairs. The concept of "Qi" is the material end of things, which is useful for practical life and material invention. This cultural tradition has produced a value system that looks down upon technical skills. Although ancient China had skilled artisans and the traditional master-disciple system, these craftsmen were unable to transcend feudal-level hierarchies. Technological practice was often demeaned as "crude works" or "insignificant skills" contrary to high levels of moral distinction, such as "self-cultivation", "family harmony", "governing the country", and "bringing peace to the world". In addition, the imperial examination system and the promotion of Confucian officials, under a national political level of measurement, reinforced and consolidated these value systems, creating the belief that "valuing learned officials above everything else". As a product of industrial production and technological revolution, vocational education is responsible for carrying forward skills and cultivating professional talents, and this contradicts the traditional Chinese culture's emphasis on learning over technology. Within such a cultural context, China's vocational and technical education face problems of low social recognition, misplaced education goals, content bias, and inappropriate teaching and evaluation methods.

3.1 Low Social Recognition

The cultural tradition of "valuing morality over skills" has not only constrained the development of science and technology in China but also impacts the value and recognition of people working in different professions. The saying "those who work with their minds govern people, while those who work with their physical labor are governed by others" not only reflects a distinction between physical labor and mental labor but also affirms the existence of strict social hierarchies within feudal Chinese society. The imperial examination system further reinforced the traditional value orientation of "learning for the purpose of officialdom" and "valuing learned officials above everything else", as well as the "officials-first" talent concept. These traditional views have deeply rooted in China's cultural veins, leading to a heavy dependence on the "examination-oriented education" system and resistance to change. Even today, many companies still have a bias towards an individual's academic background as the primary criterion for selecting and hiring talent. Under this bias towards valuing academic qualifications over practical skills, especially after the expansion of higher education, vocational education is often viewed as a second-rate "last resort" option for parents and students.

3.2 Misplaced Education Goals and Contents

The goal of vocational education is to cultivate practical talents, scientific and technological talents, and workers who are skilled in production. However, the implementation of this goal is challenging. The Confucian culture and imperial examination system that have influenced China's education for thousands of years have traditionally focused on educating gentlemen who can govern the country rather than developing people with specific skills and knowledge for production. For individuals, education has been seen as a means to gain official positions and social status rather than a way to obtain practical and individual development skills [6]. These traditional educational concepts and talent beliefs have long been embedded, limiting the selection of teaching content and methods mainly to historical culture, moral ethics, and downplaying the importance of natural sciences and production skills. In ancient times, vocational education was limited in scope, and vocational skills were only taught through informal apprenticeships. Modern vocational and technical education, taught in a typical school format, has only been around in China for a little more than 100 years, drawing on Western education models. However, due to the inertia of traditional educational concepts, China's vocational education goals and teaching content have deviated from their essential characteristics of "occupational" and "practical", emphasizing theoretical knowledge over practical skills.

3.3 Inappropriate Teaching and Evaluation Methods

The traditional collective teaching system of being "deaf to what's happening outside while focusing only on studying saintly books" has led to a narrow and closed "classroom-centric" view, which has affected teaching quality and the development of students' personalities. The imperial examination system, which lasted for more than 1,300 years, forced school education to emphasize literature rather than practical studies. The study atmosphere emphasized dogmatism and formalism, which valued authority over innovation, inheritance over development, and failed to adequately nurture scientific spirit, independent thinking, innovation, and critical thinking skills. Vocational education, as specialized technical education, should focus on practical skills training, adapting to the needs of industrial development [7]. However, China's vocational education has been stamped with the imprint of traditional education in terms of teaching organization, teaching methods, and personal development. It focuses on teaching theory in the classroom and relying on experience in practice, without giving sufficient attention to practical skills development or adjusting the content according to the changes of the real situation in practice. Moreover, the "imperial examination system" has severely constrained the evaluation and assessment of education. Even today, exams remain the most "effective" method for evaluating educational achievement in most vocational colleges. By merely allowing students to pass exams and earn certificates, vocational education has blurred its characteristic features and become a "subsidiary" and "supplement" of general education, and students trained in this way inevitably lack differentiation and competitiveness.

4. The Challenges of Vocational Education Under the Influence of Indian Traditional Culture

India is known as a "religious museum", and religiosity is an important characteristic of Indian traditional culture. Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions, with 83% of the Indian population being its followers, and its dominant idea is "the unity of Brahman and Atman". "Brahman" is a supernatural force that can be regarded as the creator and master of the universe and the overall universe; "Atman" is the subjective world, a manifestation of "Brahman" in the human world [8]. This concept requires people to overcome their material desires and maintain the original harmonious state of nature. This reflects the emphasis on the hierarchical order in social life, prominently manifested in the caste system. The caste system is the most important social system and norm in Indian tradition. Due to the need for political power, it has undergone multiple adjustments and was solidified during British India, becoming a strictly class-based hierarchical system. Additionally,

prolonged division and conflict have led to the complexity and diversity of Indian culture, and with the harmony and inclusiveness of Hinduism, it has resolved, absorbed, and fused reasonable elements of many foreign cultures, forming the characteristics of India's cultural diversity and unity. However, vocational education in India faces challenges such as a large development gap, disconnection from social needs, and low identity.

4.1 A Big Gap in the Level of Educational Development

India is a country with complex cultural diversity that presents a bipolar characteristic in its social structure. There is a huge gap in regional development, varying degrees of modernization, and significant income inequality, with severe disparities between the rich and the poor. Due to the elitist education system introduced during colonial rule, India's cultural education has long fallen behind. When India became independent in 1947, the national illiteracy rate was over 80%, and vocational education was almost nonexistent. After independence, the Indian government actively explored mass education and gradually promoted vocational education in regular schools. However, since India operates on a decentralized power structure, the implementation of vocational education is the responsibility of each state, and the lack of clarity in responsibility between the central and state governments leads to inefficient management. As a result, it is difficult to implement nationwide reforms effectively. At the same time, the level of mandatory education varies between regions. High dropout rates in primary education impede the progress of vocational education, resulting in low registration for vocational education and difficulty achieving set goals. Furthermore, vocational education in India displays hierarchical differentiation and lacks a nationally standardized system. Among the three components of vocational education, including vocational education, vocational training, and technical education, technical education, especially software technology training, is the most outstanding. Technical education institutions are more flexible in their approach, providing updated curricula and stronger vocational training, and establishing national vocational qualifications that meet both industrial development and personal needs. However, these institutions still fail to resolve the employment problem and execute a nationally standardized system.

4.2 Disconnection from Social Needs

Unlike the tendency in Western modern civilization to emphasize individual needs and values, and different from the pursuit of "learning for the purpose of officialdom" in China, traditional Indian culture has a religious feature of valuing spirituality over materialism. It does not emphasize material or political success but focuses on spiritual liberation as the highest goal of life, emphasizing personal spiritual enlightenment. When projected into education, this forms the internal logic of the development of Indian education from divine to inspiration and then to self-knowledge. It pays less attention to the application of knowledge and serving society, and does not focus on the social value of individuals themselves. This results in a disconnect between vocational education and market demands, leading to the inability to target skills that are in sync with economic and industrial development, and an inability to adjust the curriculum according to changes in market needs. As a result, graduates have poor employment prospects and low wages. Furthermore, Indian vocational education is designed to exist in parallel with academic education, with vocational education departments being almost entirely isolated from general higher education. As a result, vocational education is viewed as a tool for academic diversion rather than as high-quality options for nurturing students' talents, employment prospects or achieving their life goals. However, from another perspective, the highly spiritualized tendency of traditional Indian culture is characterized by "subjective introspection", which is more in line with the thought process of modern Indian technological development. This allows Indian intellectuals to be more patient and methodical in scientific research, leading to more creative research results.

4.3 Low Social Identity

In ancient India, the emphasis on social hierarchy was reflected prominently in the maintenance of the caste system. This system made the majority of the people unconditionally follow the behavioral norms of their caste in terms of emotions, thoughts, and actions, effectively maintaining social hierarchy, stability, and harmony. However, this also increased social inequality and created barriers between different groups, leading people to be passive, conservative, and resistant to change. Even though the caste system was abolished after independence, its influence remains widespread and persistent in actual life, becoming a fundamental obstacle to India's modernization. This, in turn, has substantially affected individuals' and society's values on vocational education. The societal concept of occupational status also limits the attractiveness of vocational education in certain fields such as mechanics, electronics, installations, and cosmetics. These occupations and educations are often regarded as a means of making a living for the lower social class, which also contributes to the lower social status of vocational education. Furthermore, the academic elitist policy in the education system views vocational education as secondary, making it a reluctant option for students who perform relatively poorly academically. However, vocational education graduates also face lower employment prospects and lower wages, contributing to the poor social perception of vocational education. Lastly, Indian women also have lower rates of participation in vocational education as traditional views of gender roles favor women staying at home for domestic work.

5. Experience of Vocational Education Reform in China and India

China and India are both countries with long-standing, deeply rooted, and rich cultural traditions, yet they have both experienced the intrusion of Western colonialism in recent history. Modern vocational education in these countries has been established based on experiences borrowed from developed nations. Although such practices were initially effective, with the advancement of vocational education, "obstacles related to cultural adaptation" have gradually emerged. Despite the differences in specific cultural expressions, national conditions, and economic situations, both countries are confronted with similar challenges in vocational education. To overcome the shackles of traditional culture, China and India have undergone significant reforms and explorations in the field of vocational education.

Following its independence, India overturned the cultural and education-centric model, vigorously investing in engineering and technological education, which has cultivated a large pool of skilled professionals. In the past decade, it has established new institutions, including vocational colleges, undergraduate vocational degree programs, and community colleges. It has also formulated and implemented a national vocational qualification framework, which collectively constructs a modern vocational education system with vertical connections within and horizontal connections between vocational and general education at the tertiary level [9]. With development goals such as "Skill India", "Made in India", and "Digital India", India places greater emphasis on the role of vocational skills in promoting economic construction. Through measures such as promoting vocational education in secondary and tertiary institutions, increasing investment, improving standards, and effectively integrating resources, India is taking effective measures to ensure the availability of skilled workforce.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the long-term positioning of vocational education was focused on elementary and secondary vocational education. It was only after the advent of reforms and opening-up policies that China had vocational education at the tertiary level. Previously, the education system had prioritized humanistic values and pursued political and ethical values. However, it has now shifted its focus towards utilitarianism as the theoretical basis for social and economic values, pursuing market and contractual benefits and highlighting the applicability, vocationalism, and effectiveness of education [10]. In 1996, the *Vocational Education Law* established the legal status of higher vocational education. In the last twenty years, the scale of

vocational education has rapidly expanded, and new concepts and institutional mechanisms are continuously being innovated. Today, vocational education is moving towards combining vocational and academic education, integrating theory and practice, and building a modern vocational education system that emphasizes the development of vocational undergraduate education.

6. Conclusions

It is evident that blindly borrowing and dogmatic learning without considering cultural backgrounds have minimal effects. Reform tailored to suit local conditions can weaken the negative impact of traditional culture and promote vocational education development. Traditional culture can be a double-edged sword for any country. Therefore, we must guide development according to the situation, exploring the unique vocational and technical genes with distinctive Chinese characteristics. By combining the reasonable elements of imported theories with the actual conditions in our country, we can find effective models that conform to the universal laws of vocational education and the cultural traditions of our country. This way, we can foster a large number of high-quality technical and skilled personnel who meet the demands of the nation's development and the needs of the times.

Today, both China and India are in a period of high-speed economic development, have vast labor forces and market potentials, and are committed to transforming their manufacturing industry and promoting technological innovation. They both face an urgent need for skillful personnel and for converting their demographic dividends. Thus, improving vocational education is a key element. Based on similar historical and cultural backgrounds and educational development challenges, exchange and mutual learning between China and India's vocational education are crucial. Balancing the relationship between traditional culture and economic development, transforming the negative factors of traditional culture into positive ones, exploring vocational education paths that suit traditional culture, and addressing these issues can bring infinite prospects for vocational education and national development in China and India.

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