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Working for two bosses: exploring the paradox of interned student labour in  
China

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## **Working for two bosses: exploring the paradox of interned student labour in China**

**Chris Smith and Jenny Chan**

### **Abstract**

In China there has been a trend for employers to recruit student interns for regular employment. In research reported here teachers follow their “student-workers” into the factory and become a teacher-supervisor, co-managing the utilisation of their labour services. Teachers receive a second salary for their work. This means within such factories interns are subject to dual or double controls from supervisors and teachers to ensure that the students complete each day of labour, and the contract between school and factory is completed and repeated. Students enrolled within vocational schools are interned to suit the needs of employers, and not the needs of the student. They are moved without consent into internships on a mass scale. Moreover, internships are not related to their area of study, invalidating the basic principle of vocational education, which is to combine theory and practice within an occupationally-focused education programme. The paper draws from research on students and teachers’ experience of one employer, and explores the contradictions within this internship system for economic development in China and the bargain between student and society represented by this new pattern. Theoretically it argues that student-interns need to be seen as new category of forced labour in China.

**Key Words:** student-workers; internships; China; labour control

### **Introduction**

Chinese student-workers do not choose a placement for their internships from vocational schools – it is a collective decision made between schools, corporations and local states. Student-workers are ‘dispatched’ for a fixed period (1 or 2 semesters) and their internship is increasingly disconnected with what the individual wishes to do – it is not part of pre-employment experience necessary for CV building for the job the individual desires to pursue. In the factory the student-worker performs like a regular worker – is ‘part of the team’. Employment is not based on consent – something central to free waged labour; but has characteristics of forced or involuntary labour. The practice is on a mass scale, with local states, schools and corporations involved in creating mass internships relations. The primary identity of the student-worker is as student, and not worker – which has these implications : a) work relations and employment relations, which are separated as the student performing in the labour process as a worker but without legal status as worker, with important implications for employment and labour rights; b) the student has a temporary stay and

short-term view of the placement – if they wanted to work as regular workers in the particular workplace they could have done this *without* the need for an internship, and hence the internships contradicts or undermines educational training, confidence and capability of the student (Sayer, 2007: 31), using up precious time, energy and resources, without being directly preparatory for future employment. Moreover, as teachers follow the student-workers and becomes a teacher-supervisor in the factory to bring dual controls, ensuring that the student completes each day of labour, and the contract between school and factory is completed and repeated. In this sense it is not like doing part-time work which many students do to support themselves or their families, because it is chosen by others to fulfil the attainment of educational credentials and the threat of blocking graduation is a sanction to discipline the student-worker if they refuse an internship. In this sense capitalist social relations reach inside the classroom, transforming students into workers, and teachers into supervisors.

### **Mobility Power and internships**

Situating internships in labour process theory, we argue following Smith (2006) that workers possess two powers: mobility and effort power. Characteristic of waged labour within a capitalist economy, workers have control over *where* to sell their labour power, and how much effort to apply when working. Around these dual freedoms, both employers and workers strategise to maximise their interests. Employers try to control the utilisation of labour power once hired, and manage the mobility of labour through both retention and dismissal policies. Similarly workers try to maximise training and development opportunities to ensure their labour power remains ‘marketable’ (maintaining their mobility power) and that their work effort is within reasonable norms or standards. A “constant flow of different individuals through a labour process creates problems when individual differences have a material effect on productivity or profitability for the employer” (Smith, 2006: 408). Hence, the incentives to regularise labour capture and retention for employers and employment security and ‘fixity’ for workers exists because of the costs of movement for both parties. But the costs of flow have been declining, as the availability of a global labour pool expands, competition between workers increases, capital movement and trade grows, education and training levels standardise and shared technologies reduce barriers to movement (Smith, C., 2010). The idea of labour power as a ‘resource’ is a misreading of the appearance of such fixity or stability as human capital, because the individual ownership of mobility power by the worker ensures any stay with a particular employer or occupation or skill is always dependent on an exchange bargain – over work effort and mobility opportunities (that is opportunities to increase the value of labour power, through training, development, career progression etc) that the exchange facilitates. It is also subject to the human life cycle, which means workers behaving in different ways at different times of their working life – more job changes when young, fewer when middle aged for example. These are qualities that are inherently human, and hence do not apply to fixed capital (Smith, C., 2010).

The internship system developing in China aims to transfer the mobility power from the possession of the student-worker, to other agents, especially schools and large employers. This creates what can be called coerced or 'institutionalised forced-labour' – highlighting the *lack of consent* central to free waged labour, as collective agencies, such as local states, schools and corporations, are mobilised at the level of society to direct the supply of student-workers to the labour process. We use the phrase 'student-workers' alongside 'interns' to signal the fact that there is no special pre-employment training associated with working as a student-worker in the research reported here. With regard to effort power control has been enhanced in the factory with teachers being transformed into quasi-supervisors, responsible, as we discuss below, for ensuring student-interns turn up on time for work, and apply themselves competitively across the working day. The student workers are treated as 'regular workers', receiving limited or no training during their internship period which is formally planned as a continuation of their vocational training. Hence within these mass-industrial internships, the dispatched student-workers are working to fulfil the needs of the student identity (to graduate from school) and not their worker-identity (to sell their labour power through mutual and free exchange with an employer). We argue that the Chinese internship system as reported here creates contradictions for the motivations of sellers of labour power and buyers, and this has implications for the way student-workers view work, resist and struggle within the labour process.

Traditional internships are linked to difficult to enter occupations in professions and creative industries where they are used as pre-employment preparation (Fasang, 2006; Banks, 2007; Caldwell, 2008; Ashley, 2010). Recent work on creative industries has highlighted the open-ended nature of these internships, which do not necessarily lead to a job after a fixed period, but rather an 'extended entry tournament' that lacks a definite finish (Stoyanova and Grugulis, 2012). While there is often a disconnect between the types of work performed during internships and the desired job or occupation of the internee (especially in professions and creative industries), at a minimum the sector worked in is the one that the internee wishes to enter and action in choosing the internship remains voluntary. Internships are also linked to transition from school to work, and apprenticeship programmes, where there is considerable international diversity in the effectiveness of internships in delivering successful outcomes for internees (Lehmann, 2005). Internships can increase "personal and social efficacy", increasing "self confidence" and decreasing negative attitudes (Beinstein, 1976). Comparative research on students with and without internship experience strongly endorse the positive of internships for reducing time to enter the labour market, increasing remuneration for first jobs and enhancing overall job satisfaction (Gault et al., 2000). Vickie Smith (2010: 292) noted that even working in unpaid internships have indirect benefits as they "allow people to develop human, cultural, and social capital – technical, organizational, and interactional skills, and connections – and an opportunity to 'prove' that they are high-quality workers." But this is only the case where internships are

voluntary, pre-employment training that have a connection between the occupation or industry of the placement and the employment field desired by the young worker.

Theoretically internship is voluntary pre-employment training, where the young worker makes sacrifices (often working for no or low pay) in exchange for additions to their labour power in the form of training, experience and know-how to enhance the market value of labour power for the young worker or to gain potential access to work opportunities within the internal market of the organisation. There are clearly deferred financial gains flowing to internees from this arrangement. Motivation of interned labour is high because there is a willingness to exchange long hours, low or no pay for the gains of pre-employment experience with the end gain of employment with a chosen occupation, employer or sector. The motivation for the employer of taking on interned labour is that it is useful screening or selection, it can add to flexibility of the workforce and it keeps existing employees aware of the labour market. In order to maintain the supply of labour, promises of future employment need to be real.

When this exchange promise is broken or absent, then there is problem with this model. Recently the transitional feature of internship in acting as a stepping stone into work for the young has been broken, (Perlin, 2010; Smith, V., 2010), as the supply of student interns outweighs places available, and interns are not engaged in a “pre-employment exchange” but locked into long-term or rotating internships (Stoyanova and Grugulis, 2012). The employability agenda is also lengthening the time taken to find employment, as the burden of this falls on the individual and risks of finding work grow (Smith, V. 2010). Even, in countries with more institutionalised labour markets (such as Japan) there are also problems with VET (Vocational Education Training), as colleges traditionally locked into supply lines for local firms are increasingly failing to deliver the places required to absorb the numbers of students coming out of the Colleges. In Japan recent research shows a falling percentage of students placed in companies following internships, and rising in numbers of students having to find their own internships and jobs outside of the traditional institutional web (Hori, 2009). The situation in Germany remains one where the transition between school and work is more integrated and institutionalised between, school, employers, trade unions and young people. Vocational education is institutionalised, giving certainty around education and employment, but at the cost of inflexibility –“flexibility for most of the German apprentices was also curtailed by their earlier placement into one of the lower secondary education streams, which limits their access to high quality apprenticeship positions and puts higher post-secondary education virtually out of reach.” (Lehmann, 2005: 123). This is in contrast to more disjointed transitions in liberal market capitalist countries like Canada, the UK and US (Lehmann, 2005).

There is increasingly a disjuncture between vocational education and demand from employers, as the economics of colleges change from state funding to student fee income, and colleges are forced to expand popular courses as ‘commodities to sell to students’

rather than as part of an integrated capitalism, where educational credentials, training and expertise were managed by the college for the employer, and the balance of supply and demand was maintained by regular state funding and close partnerships between colleges and local employers. This has changed to neo-liberalism, with a disjuncture between education and work (Mok et al 2009).

### **Internships in China**

China's contemporary educational reform emphasizes the expansion of vocational education in the service of social and economic development and student internship has become an indispensable component (Durden and Yang, 2006; Murphy and Johnson, 2009). Building on earlier industrial training and elementary schooling foundations, the post-Mao government expanded access to education with the goal of advancing the "four modernizations," that is, agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. Upon completing nine years' compulsory education, eligible students can either continue their studies in the general track high schools or enroll in vocational institutions. The admission age for standard three-year vocational education is often 15 to 16. At present more than 21 million full-time students are enrolled in vocational schools (not including those in vocational colleges or adult vocational education). The ten-year outline of China's national plan for education reform and development projects an increase in vocational school enrollment from 21.79 million in 2009 to 23.5 million in 2020 (China Central Government, 2010). A comparable decline in the number of students in high schools is planned. While students in high schools are prepared for university entrance examination, those in vocational schools are trained for skilled work or higher vocational education.

Woronov (2012: 707) states that vocational education has changed from an institutionalised supply line for state owned jobs to one where the individual students have to fend for themselves:

Vocational secondary schools are not new in China. Originating in the Mao era, vocational schools were originally established to train midlevel bureaucrats and technocrats for the urban work unit system. Until the early to mid-1990s, graduates of secondary vocational programs were funnelled directly into lifelong employment in the state sector, where they formed a respected management strata. Today, however, as the state sector shrinks under reform-era privatization policies, far fewer vocational graduates are posted directly into iron rice bowl jobs. Instead, the majority must seek employment in the private job market.

Traditional apprenticeship in China meant three year vocational training, with a placement/internship in the third year following two years classroom study. Like all vocational education it followed the principle of "theory into practice", a period of classroom study within structured career orientated course followed by a period of internship closely linked to the programme of study (Qiu, 1988). This gave employers certainty that the

students they received had been pre-selected by the school, that they were theoretically trained and job-focused. For the student it meant a predictable and practical training with greater certainty of employment at the end of the course. The students in this research reported the internships taking place at any time over the three years, and hence a loss of control over the timing of internship for student. More critically, there is a disconnection between theory and practice, with placements being unrelated to the course studied by the student. Further, the internships length seemed to fit the seasonal and flexible production needs of the employer and not the learning cycle of the vocational course. Hence the internship is no longer controlled by the student, but rather there is structured by employers, local authorities and vocational schools.

There is increased complexity and uncertainty:

The degree structure of vocational education is complex, and is changing rapidly. In general, most secondary vocational schools in both rural and urban areas offer a three-year (*zhongzhuān*) programme. These normally include two years of classroom work that combine general secondary education with technical training in the specific field. Most schools also offer some kind of apprenticeship (*shixi*) for part or all of the final year, although in our experience these are extremely informal and vary widely from student to student. In addition, some schools now also offer five-year secondary degrees that result in a higher certification (*dazhuān*), based on four years of course work and one year of apprenticeship (Hansen and Woronov, 2012: 6).

In an urban school studied by Woronov, the vocational school was funded by the local authority and had traditionally supplied skilled worker and technician levels to the same local authority – but these skills had been degraded to “low-level functionaries” such as ticket sellers for the local subway, but nevertheless there was job linked study: “This school offers three-year secondary vocational (*zhongzhuān*) degrees, and its marketing lure to incoming students was precisely its links to the municipal government.” (Hansen and Woronov, 2012: 7). Woronov’s study of two Nanjing vocational education schools emphasises a misalignment between the content of the classroom study, and the actual jobs the students ended up doing. For example, “the “subway” program at the Bridge School, students dozed through a year of lectures on the engineering principles behind building subway tunnels and designing subway car engines [and] after graduating, they would be assigned jobs as ticket sellers, station cleaners, and security guards in the municipal subway system” (Woronov, 2012: 709). Or “the students studying bookkeeping at the Canal School spent hours perfecting their skills using an abacus, a device no longer used in Chinese businesses. After graduation they would find work as cashiers” (ibid 709). The ‘academicisation’ of vocational courses Woronov suggests was part of the ‘value added’ to the human capital investments made by the students and their parents. We think this is a general process, when vocational education and employers needs separate through market

forces. But the specific interventions of large firms in creating interned 'student labour' also needs to enter this equation between VET and employers.

What is emphasised in research reported here is not that the individual student is somehow a free agent to select their future employment, but rather that, the local state, vocational schools (public and for profit private schools) and large private firms have intervened in the educational supply lines such that 'student-interns' are converted into a new category of 'student-labour' dispatched en masse to large employers to fit into production needs of the company not the educational needs of the individual student. Woronov (2012: 708) argues that schools are commodifying education, selling courses to aspirational students (and their parents) such that "students thus become consumers, purchasing a promise for their future—that vocational education will be a kind of investment in their human capital, which they then can cash in by finding a decent job after graduation." But what requires emphasis is the growing forced nature of this sale; as vocational schools sign contracts with large firms to 'supply' interns on a mass scale, irrespective of the nature of the educational course studied by the student or the individual student's wishes for their industrial placement.

In China it was not always possible to find an exact match between courses studied and company or occupational preference of the student, but that there was always an effort to do this (Qiu, 1988). But now there has been a change, with vocational schools expanding and supplying students on an industrial mass scale, for periods of internships that suit the companies not the student, and on work that is parallel to regular work of permanent workers. Teachers, instead of remaining in schools and monitoring the quality of the placements for students from a distance, are now incorporated and paid as supervisory labour, 'caring' and controlling the labour power of interned student labour inside the factory. Student interns are being integrated into the workforce as 'permanent' part of the peripheral workforce – up to 15 percent of the workforce at the case study site. Under these conditions the old understanding of the function of internship is being challenged.

Within the terms of our framework, the mobility power of student-workers is more constrained than in the case of migrant or local workers – who are able to voluntarily quit and find better employment opportunities with other employers. Labour turnover is an endemic problem in China, and has been a significant driver of workers income, as exits or job hopping replaces voice as the main means of bargaining for disenfranchised workers, with a central union functioning in the interest of employers and not workers (Lee, 2007; Jiang et al., 2009; Cooke, 2012). Labour mobility is often the only freedom available to young workers:

After graduation, the new graduates exercised their flexibility by moving to better jobs ("jumping feeding troughs" [*tiaocao*] in contemporary slang), sometimes as often as every two to three weeks. They jumped for different reasons, not just more for money or better opportunity for mobility. Sometimes they found a job slightly closer to home. At other times they left to avoid a growing conflict with a co-worker,

or to find a nicer boss, or even because they found better food at the company-provided lunches. Although this behaviour seems capricious or even irrational by standards of human capital accumulation, there is, as Susan Willis [1998] notes, a particular logic to jumping jobs. By doing so, these young people are exercising the only real power they have in this economy: the power to quit (Woronov, 2011: 96).

Moreover, the dormitory labour system (Smith, 2003; Pun and Smith, 2007) in China facilitates mobility and turnover, as the constraints of rents/mortgages and private housing are absent in the ubiquitous provision of industrial dormitories to house factory workers. Movement is freer compared to local labour markets where work opportunities are geographically constrained by travel-to-work times – despite these being extended (Smith, C., 2010: 272). But in the case of student-workers, the state, school and company operate a ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey, 1982) on labour power, preventing the exercise of mobility power by students. To pass exams, students need to complete internships, but students do not choose. Legally, students are not workers but ‘internees’ in this sense the freedom of movement that the labour law provides does not apply to them, and therefore this legally constrains movement. Schools judge teachers on performance – keeping students in work – this involves daily monitoring of attendance and moral, social and educational threats to keep them in the factory and on the job.

Theoretically, if one dimension of labour power is constrained in this way, the other dimension should compensate. If mobility is more controlled by the employer, workers will compensate by reducing effort – through go-slows, sabotages, absenteeism, misbehaviour – largely informal but nevertheless collective expressions of ‘effort restraint’ to compensate for tight management control over mobility power. Students can’t quit (easily), so they will reduce or withdraw effort and good will; they will not behave because work is presented to them as a coercive and no-consensual exchange, which infringes the basic rules of capitalism, that waged labour has a formally voluntary not forced nature, and capitalist labour markets facilitate free circulation of labour around the system based on mutually agreed rules of exchange – however much this description is an ideal, not real one, interned student labour is delivered to the employer without consent as traditionally understood. Student interns cannot quit, but they also have problems regulating hours at work. Night work and overtime work is not within their control, and this again infringes ideas of consent and agreement, and builds resentment and disillusionment. They will ‘play up’ (see forms of resistance below). While effort restraint is attempted there is also pressure on student workers’ effort powers as they are new and green labour – inexperienced, temporary, psychologically or subjectively divided from other workers by virtue of being ‘student interns’ without legal, social and collective bonds of solidarity with regular workers who have ‘consented’ to work for the case study company. Student interns interviewed for this research dreamed of returning to the classroom; to other workplaces aligned to their area of study, and as such their consciousness was fractured and not integrated into the new migrant working class in the mass assembly factories. The pressures when mobility power

and effort power are controlled by multiple powers – line managers, teachers, state officials, parents – can lead to dysfunctional outcomes – such as suicides and self harm – both reported in concentrated numbers at companies which employ large numbers of student interns. Student labour turns inwards, if the legitimated forms of resistance (quitting, voice and effort restraint) are closed off.

### **Research Methods**

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted in concentrated bursts over a two year period, and involving interviews and document gathering, alongside participation by one of the writers in a NGO campaign for social justice on behalf of migrant workers and student-workers. Interviews were conducted in dormitories or spaces outside of the production process. One of the researchers stayed in the industrial dormitories with the student interns, and through this process got to know the respondents very well, and using this ethnographic approach, immersed herself in the life of the students, including trips into town away from the factories. Through this process, trust and a rich picture of the working life of these internees was built up.

During fieldwork 38 formal student interns were interviewed using a semi-structured format. These were all taped and have been transcribed. They varied in length, from one to several hours. The students were on internships at the same company, a giant contract manufacturing and assembler with factories across China. Informants came from several sites – two in Longhua and Guanlan Towns, Shenzhen (Guangdong), and the others at Chengdu (Sichuan) and Chongqing. In addition to students, 14 teachers working at the same factories were also interviewed using the same method. In December 2011, six government education officials and corporate human resources managers in charge of school-business cooperation and internship programs were interviewed to learn more about the student internships administered by governments and schools at the factories. Interviews revealed that the student interns were pursuing a wide range of majors including arts, music, automotive repair, petro-chemistry, preschool education, Chinese herbal medicine, horticulture, village administrative and economic management, secretarial services, logistics, business management, sales and marketing, hotel and tourism, graphic design and many more. Even the students in electronics and mechanics – perhaps especially these students – had very different expectations about internship training at the workplace from what they encountered on the assembly line of the case study company.

### **Vocational Schools and Institutionalised student labour supply**

Vocational schools offer employment-oriented courses for students in their first and second years. During their third year, students are to intern at enterprises that are directly relevant to their studies. In a statement to the media on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010, Foxconn a giant contract manufacturing firms said “Interns currently comprise 7.6% of our total employee population in China and at no time has this percentage ever exceeded 15% even during the summer

peak seasons when more students want to enrol in the internship program” (Foxconn, 2010). According to the “Regulations on the Management of Vocational School Student Internship,” issued by the Ministries of Education and Finance in June 2007, internship is an integral part of vocational education and “shall be in line with the curriculum and learning objective” (Article 3). When interned in the workplace, interns are not entitled to employment contracts, which define labor relations under the Labor Contract Law (effective 1 January 2008). However, prior to an internship, the students, the school and the enterprise are obligated to sign a written agreement making clear each side’s responsibilities, rights and duties (Article 10). Employers are also required to pay interns for their labor (Article 8).

Through the mechanism of internships, employers gain access to a flexible reserve army of vocational school student labour of more than 21 million. Whereas the law specifies that vocational students should do internships during the final year of studies, at the case study company students were interned earlier than is legally allowed (that is, in their first and second years). Sichuan’s Chengdu Industrial Vocational and Technical School, the product of the 2010 merger of six schools, is China’s largest public school, with 20,000 full-time and 10,000 part-time students. Its educational aspirations are being “number one in Sichuan province, number one in China, international acclaim.” In June 2011, the school notified parents of the entire first-year class:

According to the “Chengdu city directive to vocational schools to further the pursuit of moral cultivation to lay a foundation for the job market through activities that expose students to industry,” during this year’s summer vacation our school will organize students enrolled in 2010 who are at least 16 years old to go to [Case study] Chengdu Company and participate in an internship.

Regardless of whether the student was majoring in construction, automotive repair, fine arts or whatever, the summer Internship plan was applied and continued the following year. The school’s educational mission is: “Unification of school and business, unification of theory and practice, unification of teacher and technician, and unification of student and employee.” According to the interviewed students, only the first goal was accomplished, and that only from the perspective of the company, that is, the combination of school and business through the supply of students en masse in the name of the internship.

### **Student experiences**

Research on student’s expectations for employment while studying in vocational schools conducted by Woronov suggests that they were ‘realistic’ about the type of jobs they could achieve, and that they “saw through” the hype of the Schools:

Although the schools promised that a diploma with the institution’s name on it would magically open doors across the city, the students knew better. They would

eventually find jobs through a combination of luck, connections, good looks and perseverance—not because of skills that they learned in school (Woronov, 2011: 95).

Many studied not because of any intrinsic interest in working in a particular job or occupation, but to gain the status of continuing to be a ‘student’ – something valued in China; or to enter the labour market quicker and avoid burdening parents with too much education debt. Her detailed ethnographic research of school life is a useful corrective to a utilitarian or linear view of vocational education as a win-win for student and society. Research reported here encounters students during their placement or internship experience, with them reflecting back on their expectations of this against what they had been studying in class. And while for some, the internship was simply a way of earning additional income, for the majority of the 38 students interviewed, there was a sense of disappointment with their internship. It had little relationship to their specific classroom studies, was not considered to be adding value to their education, and the pressures, intensity and relentlessness of working as a regular worker (but on student pay and status) was perceived negatively. Woronov (2011: 96) notes from her research that: “Although some were bitter and angry at their schools for teaching them virtually nothing, most of the graduating students were resigned to a future of flexible service labor.” The contrast for our research was not between poor quality education and poor quality internship, but rather more on the low quality of the internship against expectations of internships as a chance to marry theory and practice in constructive and integrated fashion.

Liu Siying, 18, came from Sichuan’s Mianyang city, told us how she became an intern at the Shenzhen Longhua factory in the 2011 fall semester.

This is my final year in electronics and mechanical engineering. I really enjoy my studies and have been studying very hard. I even review coursework in the school library during summer vacation. My original plan was to seek an internship at Huawei Technology but our teacher persuaded my whole class of 42 students to intern at [case study Company]. He emphasized that [the company] has a worldwide customer base including Huawei and that the company is investing billions in high-tech research. In short, he stressed that we’d learn a lot through the internship.

Virtually from day one, however, Siying was “tied to the PCB [printed circuit board] line attaching components to the iPad back-casing.” In her words, it “requires no skills or prior knowledge.” Although we cannot verify if the internship program offered by Huawei Technology would have been any better than that at the case study company, she regretted her choice. “During the night shift, whenever I look out in that direction [pointing to the west], I see the big fluorescent sign of Huawei shining bright red, and at that moment I feel a pain in my heart.” There was a long silence. The south wind blew through the acacia trees in the early autumn evening. The Huawei and the case study company headquarters are on opposite sides of the Meiguan Expressway in Longhua Town, Shenzhen.”

Fieldwork revealed that the student interns were assigned to a one-size-fits-all “internship” which involved factory work completely divorced from their studies and interests. In a typical response, a 17-year-old student intern told us:

Come on, what do you think we’d have learned standing for more than ten hours a day manning the machines on the line? What’s an internship? There’s no relation to what we study in school. Every day is just a repetition of one or two simple motions, like a robot.

There was also the sense of independence that came from earning money and not having to rely on parents. Xiao Li (one informant) said, “The only happy thing is that I don’t have to ask my parents to send me money.” None of the three interns had been able to save money, let alone sending any back home. In the bustling and exciting city of Shenzhen, they dreamed of buying new cell phones, singing in karaoke bars, and having fun with new friends. Perhaps urban consumption is a way of social life among the young working people, and a rebellion against the alienated factory labour. What was certain is that the trio felt bored and exhausted at work but still felt that they had to work overtime to earn enough money for minimal personal enjoyment.

Interviews revealed that the top three grievances among the interns were: first, failure of the company to provide training in their fields of study; second, sickness due to overwork; third, intense work pressure. There was indeed a disjuncture between the so-called internship and individual career goals. A student protest took place at the Zhengzhou College of Traffic Technicians (Henan province), which was governed by the city-level Human Resources and Social Security Bureau. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of students “rioted” against forced internships: on 17 June 2010, they vented their anger by setting papers and blankets ablaze and throwing fireballs onto the ground of the student dormitory at around 10 p.m. The cause of the mass incident was that some 1,000 of the 5,000 students were told they would have to intern at the Shenzhen Longhua and Guanlan plants, where they were to receive “training;” and the trained students could choose to work in the new Zhengzhou factory later that year. The internship was scheduled to begin on 27 June 2010 and last until 22 January 2011, a seven-month period. The students, in their first year, argued that internships at the electronics factory had no relevance to their fields of study. Over 85 percent of the students were from rural families, who aspired to become technicians and engineers, according to an interviewed teacher.

Zhengzhou College of Traffic Technicians offers two broad streams of study: automobile technology and transport, and information services. According to the school enrollment brochure, the three-year program involves two years at school and one year of internship. In the fall of 2011, one of us interviewed Li Wei, a 17-year-old student who had enrolled in the course of automotive repair in September 2009. “In our first semester we studied Auto Body and in the second semester we studied Automatic Transmission,” he said. In a very low

tone, he told how he and his classmates were tricked into interning at the case study company immediately after the first year exam in June 2010:

Before we departed for the [case study] plant, our teacher pledged that after the internship was completed, he'd make up any remaining specialized classes. In January 2011, we finally completed our internship and returned to school. In the new semester in February 2011 [the second semester of the second year], the school started teaching a class on motors. But then in April, the school began to arrange internships at auto plants for graduates. The school had still not finished teaching our specialized classes, and they began making internship assignments. We've yet to complete even the core classes of our specialization, nor have we learned the basic skills of automotive repair. How're we going to do an internship?

A valuable period of seven months "was completely wasted at [case study]," sighed Wei. Joining hands with dozens of fellow classmates, he mustered courage to talk to their teacher, but the efforts were futile. "After that, we sought out the senior school administrator who told us that we'd have to extend our studies by paying one more year's fee for 'a higher diploma' before studying the remaining specialized curriculum." He continued:

We're depressed. We'd followed the rules and paid for three years of tuition, but we haven't completed professional training. The school violated the most basic agreement, contradicted the student recruitment brochure, arbitrarily changed the students' curriculum, treated its students' future like a plaything, and failed in its responsibility to students. We students didn't attain sufficient knowledge in our education, and come time for employment, we'll have no competitive advantage. This is the consequence of the school's irresponsibility.

Wei's feeling of betrayal, anger and frustration were strong. Vocational schools are required to arrange an internship in their field with the students' consent in the third year, and it is against regulations to organize an internship sooner. Internship is an integral part of the curriculum and is vital to linking theory with practice. Vocational schools have to compete for new students. Internships at big companies are key selling points in the large student market. Xie Shumei, said: "Parents want their children to do better, and not have to endure hardship. That's why they even borrowed money to put me in school." Another student, Lintong, was born to a peasant family in rural Henan, the only child. His father is a part-time primary school history teacher in a neighboring village. Lintong, who believed that he was "not good enough to be admitted to the key high-school in Shangqiu," cherished studying at the 3,000-person vocational school. "Education is most treasured by my parents. When they were young, in the 1970s and early 1980s, they didn't have a chance to go further after receiving basic schooling. I can't let them down." Lintong, the "qualified" 16-year-old interning student, like hundreds of other interns from his school, wasted his valuable time

and his tuition fee to work at the case study factory during the summer holiday of 2011 and the first semester of his second school year that followed.

Zhumadian Higher Technical School, with an enrollment of 6,500 students, is directly governed by the Human Resources and Social Security Bureau of Henan province. After attending the open day in spring 2011, when they learned about a “no tuition” offer, Shumei and her friends signed up for the course in the hope of reducing the family burden. The school publicity reads:

The country has good policies: low-income families pay no tuition!

To look for a job without learning technical skills is a life-long mistake!

It is best to have a skill in this world, to save you if times get tough!

For a technically skilled person, the world is wide open, the benefits last a lifetime!

Shumei and her friends hoped to build a better future than their migrant worker parents through acquiring new skills and knowledge. But will they merely be student workers on an assembly line in the next year and thereafter?

Sun Junyi majored in computer-assisted tool making; under pressure from the school, he was redirected from a planned internship at an automobile plant and sent to the case study company during his final year of study. On the line, he was doing “trivial tasks like checking product screens and cleaning the LCD [liquid crystal display] surface.” In childhood he set a goal to become a skilled technician to “lead a team of tool makers in a modern Toyota plant in Shanghai.” He was frustrated at “repeating the same boring work all day.” This story was repeated by the majority of those interviewed.

### **Teachers – the paradox of incorporation into control**

Zhang Lintong’s teacher announced that all vocational schools in the central China’s Henan province had to cooperate with local government to send students to our surveyed electronics factory through internships. Lintong testified, “Unless we could present a medical report certified by the city hospital that we were very ill, we had to depart immediately.” For most of the interviewed student interns, assembly work is irrelevant to their studies and they were keenly aware that it is a violation of the concept of internships that are supposed to provide an integral part of their schooling.

During fieldwork in at the case study site in Chengdu, we learned that the company paid teachers to co-supervise the interning students. Teachers received two paychecks, one from their schools and the other from the company. They received 2,000 Yuan/month (US\$320) for normal work time in 2011-12 at the Chengdu facility. Teachers were requested to report for duty to the administrative office from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. during weekdays, not on weekends or at night. Their main duty was to monitor the attendance of their students.

They had access to student attendance records via the company intranet, which lists the students' punch-in time at the start of the work shift, punch-in time after meals, punch-in time for overtime work, and punch-out time at the end of the shift. As a result, they could react swiftly to cases of "missing students." In some circumstances, the teachers checked student's sick leave application and decided whether to approve it. In the eyes of interns, the teachers were perceived as "part of factory management", as this respondent explained:

The real reason our teachers are here to guide us is out of fear that we will want to quit, so they will work with those of us who are moody and advise us to stay. They also come forward to fix behavioral or disciplinary problems. We have a troublemaker. A boy came from our school; he loved to go online, you know 24 hours on his Play station, at the dorm. He went online, played the video games, and didn't go to work for two days. Our teacher thought that he was sick but then caught him. He received a written warning.

In cases where students were in fact ill, due to overwork and stress on the line, neither company supervisors nor teachers seemed to be available for help when interning female students most needed it. Parents and siblings at best offered suggestions by telephone, such as the purchase of pain killers or antibiotics for sore throat and minor infections.

Wang Meiyi, 16, suffered menstrual disorders when she was assigned to the packaging workshop at the Chengdu plant. On a chilly morning in December 2011, she asked if the researcher could take her to see a doctor as we walked in the local neighborhood shopping strip. She recalled, "I used to have relatively regular menstrual periods, but this time my period was delayed until the first week in October. I was frightened. I had cramps so severe that I was covered with sweat on the line, where it's air-conditioned." In November and December, Meiyi's irregularity and pain persisted. Her line leader was a young man with whom she did not feel comfortable talking about the "girl matter." "I also did not report my sickness to Teacher Tan ... for the same kind of embarrassment." "At school, we only have six classes a day, and I got good rest. But here [at the factory] it's different: we don't have breaks whenever we're behind on the production targets. And it's no use to complain to my teacher."

In order for longer-term internships not affect "teaching," in some cases school tests were actually taken to the factory in order that students to be tested after work. A student interviewee said: "A teacher came with the test papers and administered the test. What was laughable was that we did not even have books, the teacher brought one copy and we just copied the book; that counted as our test."

Teachers motivated and encouraged their students. For example, a teacher allayed the fears of students who were exposed to the radioactive environment at work.

I explained to my students that the radioactivity at the company is well within safety standards, it's just like the modest [radioactive] level of a cell phone. It's not dangerous. Take a moment to think about the selflessness of the scientists and the medical teams when Japan reported the tragic radiation leak this March [2011]. None of the Japanese withdrew from rescue work. So, every one of us should take responsibility for the good of humanity.

With their own teachers slighting basic dangers such as radioactivity, incidents of work-related injuries and diseases among interns were difficult to report.

A teacher had some students who were reluctant to go to work during the first week they arrived at the company and he patiently counseled them.

I asked my students to manage their emotions. Calm down. Think carefully if you want to leave – won't your parents be disappointed? I visited my students in the dorm to see if they felt okay on Tuesday night. They answered 'not too bad.' I met them again on Friday night. They said 'fine.' They've gradually got used to the work rhythm. Finally I asked if they want to go. They replied 'no.'

Maintaining a high retention rate of the students was a primary criterion for judging teacher performance. In the unambiguous statement of Teacher Chong Ming said: "We don't educate our students about labor rights; otherwise, we won't be able to keep them." Only self-protection from workplace sexual harassment was discussed. In one case, the teachers held the line-leader responsible for repeatedly harassing a girl student-worker.

During the internship, student applications for sick leave were routinely rejected even when there were compelling reasons. The dormitory labor system replaced a freer school environment with a high-pressure factory regime. Instead of acquiring useful knowledge toward their various specializations, the interns were placed on the line and ordered to build iPads for excessively long shifts of 10-12 hours, dealing a blow particularly to those who had high self-esteem and ambitious career objectives. The repetitive manual tasks were mind numbing. On several assembly lines, verbal insults toward the interns by line leaders only made the situation worse. The entire month of night shift work in October 2011, and the interns' subjection to forced overtime up to 6 to 7 days a week was simply "too much" (this followed the day shift in September, the beginning month of the internship).

On 1 November 2011, a conflict erupted between Han Chinese and Tibetan student interns. Nearly two dozen interns from "a number of schools" got into a fistfight during working hours. All were laid off, while some others, fearing retaliation, left on the grounds of personal security. The spontaneous, mass incident sounded an alarm, so that a vice principal from the Pujiang Vocational School (in Pujiang county, southwestern Sichuan) arrived at the scene the next day to "look after his students." The case company demanded that the

school immediately “take back the bad students.” The dual control over the interning students exercised by school and enterprise became transparent in the course of managing the crisis, pulling aside the curtain on practices that had been presented as “self-development and training.” We would also suggest that such action did guarantee that students would be removed from oppressive internships.

An even more dubious practice was covering up child labour under the cloak of student internship. In September 2012, when a new school semester began, the electronics factory used underage students as workers to manufacture game consoles at its Yantai plant, the largest industrial employer in Shandong province. Among the thousands of student interns, 56 of them were below the legal minimum of 16 years of age, with the youngest at 14.

Teachers arranged the very young students, even those in the first semester of their first year of studies, to intern at the Yantai factory. The hidden issue of child workers was made public when an intern, born in December 1997, approached one of the researchers for help. Punching in at 7:40 p.m. he said, “Whenever the work is done is when you get off your shift”. The underage interns were racing against time to meet the precise production targets of Nintendo’s Wii U play stations.

### **Analysis**

There is a need for more research to evaluate the employer’s perspective on increasing the use of interned student labour as part of the ‘core’ or regular workforce in China. From research reported here, we have the views of students, teachers and some managers, but further research is required before more robust conclusions can be made. However, we can speculate about the timing of the new practice, which correlates with rising wages and improved employment regulation for regular workers in China. Being outside employment law, having flexible access to work and being cheaper to employ, may be some of the advantages employers receive from using student interns, which combined with the quick delivery of the institutionalised character of their supply to the factories, can outweigh the disadvantages that can flow from using young workers who have not formally consented or chosen their internship. These disadvantages are around work effort, motivation and morale – the negatives that flow from workers whose mobility power has been hugely constrained by employers, and in case of student-interns, by vocational schools and local authorities as well.

Addressing the question of what employers in China like the one reported here are getting from student-labour, there are five reasons.

Firstly, student-workers offer flexible labour to fit the demand cycles in the electronics sector (with May-December being the hot season). Student interns are easier to recruit and cheaper to remove. Student interns are the disposable workers that managers in the flexible factory seek to effortlessly respond to corporate demands for rush orders. Unlike regular

employees, interns can be laid off without 30 days' prior notice, which maximizes company flexibility to respond to the ebb and flow of orders. Since interns are not legally defined as labourers, they are barred from trade union membership and protection. While the case study company provides its rural migrant and local workers with labour contracts, it does not establish a three-party agreement with its interning students and the schools. At the case company student interns were subjected to the same treatment as regular workers including alternating day and night shifts monthly and extensive overtime, defying the letter and the spirit of the education law. With reference to the 2007 Regulations (Article 5, "Interns shall not work more than eight hours a day") and the 2010 Education Circular (Clause 4, "Interns shall not work overtime beyond the eight-hour workday"), the common understanding is that the maximum eight-hour internship training ought to take place during daytime to ensure the interning students' safety and physical and mental health. Chinese Labour law provides stronger protection and the requirement for written labour contracts, social security, welfare, prior notice termination and maximum hours for regular workers. Against the more expensive and protected workers, student-workers needed: no prior notice before termination; weaker protection; more flexible – to meet reasonable production or fluctuations in the product demand.

Secondly, student-labour was cheaper – as the costs of migrant labour had risen with increased legislation, organisation and pressures to raise wages due to labour shortages. In the case company formal employees qualified for a skill subsidy of 400 Yuan/month (US\$63), while interns were not entitled to skill assessment or wage boost throughout the entire internship, even though interns and entry-level workers have the same starting wage of 950 Yuan/month (US\$150). Moreover, interns were not eligible for productivity bonuses or quarterly prizes, regardless of how well they do their jobs. Although the case study company claimed to have taken out collective insurance for all interned student-workers, it was not possible to verify the numbers. Empirically all interviewed interns had not received information about an insurance policy. When they had a fever or a cold, the interviewed student interns simply visited local drug stores on their own, not knowing how to apply for company medical reimbursements, if they were entitled to any. The interviews showed that including overtime premiums, student workers earned between 1,705 Yuan and 2,480 Yuan a month (US\$270-393), before deductions for food and lodgings.

Thirdly, student-interns were attractive due to the mass or industrial scale of their recruitment. The building of institutionalised supply lines partially represented a re-institutionalisation (a return to Danwei style functional dependencies between schools and factories) and partly a borrowing from German and Japanese systems – but there were also major differences, especially around the lack of continuity between the internship and the eventual job of the student. All 38 of our interviewees said they would not seek to work in their placement company after they had completed their studies. On the question of mass recruitment, the local governments in Jiangxi province assisted the case company to interview 24,208 persons and ultimately to hire 10,169 between August 2010 to January

2012. But the numbers of those who stayed on for a year was “extremely small” (Jiangxi Daily, 8 February 2012). In the face of persistently high turnover, the case company makes good use of its corporate power to negotiate with local governments to demand that schools supply interns to its production lines.

Fourthly, the recruitment of student interns might be undermining of worker militancy, segmenting the total workforce by employment status, students can be considered ‘naive’ non-workers who weaken or dilute the resistance capacity of permanent workers. With few seeing the internship as a route into permanent employment in the company we examined, this also creates a detachment from work, and hence the avenues to defend labour rights. Against this there have been cases at Honda and other factories of student-interns participating in mass industrial action (Butollo and ten Brink 2012; Hui and Chan, 2012).

Finally, traditional internships are part of the processes of recruitment and selection – used as a screening device to pick ‘good’ workers for the company. But as none of the students interviewed here wished to work in case company, this rationale does not seem to apply. Several students made the comment that had they wanted to work in the placement company they could have gone there directly and not as interned student labour. We would need more research – surveys of schools on the placement to analyse if there is any correlation between internship and final job of students once they have graduated. This finding is an inversion of conventional ideas about the internship, and on the one hand it seems to waste the opportunity for screening provided by a period of extended work experience, but on the other it is indicative of a more dominant logic to lower labour costs and increased flexibility within a labour market context where internees are not in short supply.

## **Conclusion**

The model of internship discussed here is not sustainable. In the longer term the misalignment between the needs of the student and poor training offered, will reduce the attractiveness of VET. Others have highlighted functional problems with education and society in China (Rena et al., 2011). However these issues will not be settled simply with management being persuaded of the benefits of a satisfied workforce (Jiang, 2009). The findings here suggest that contract manufacturing firms in China are continuing to pursue low cost production: “much like their counterparts in other developing countries, Chinese factories seek a very specific type of employee: industrious, mobile, with low salary expectations, and willing to work long hours” (Jiang et al., 2009: 170). Evidence from this research, suggests contract manufacturing firms in China face massive cost pressures from customers and these are passed on to their workers. The case study company makes good use of its corporate power to negotiate with local governments to demand that schools supply interns to its production lines. With governments providing grants for schools that meet the factory’s labour demands, and with teachers earning extra income for monitoring student interns, the ties between government, schools and the corporation appear strong.

However in conclusion, we would like to highlight some of the potential contradictions of the current arrangements.

For teachers there is the welcome attraction of earning a second salary, but the media and public opinion have highlighted the conflicts of educators being transformed into factory supervisors, as this is seen to transgress professional pride, status and identity. Moreover, students expressed disillusionment with their particular teachers, who were “too close” to factory management, and did not look after their interests as students. Tensions within this divided identity remain unresolved.

It is not sustainable to sell internships to students that are disconnected from classroom training and learning, as this also infringes basic principles of education and vocational training. But so long as the schools have to compete for state funds, and large firms wield investment power over local authorities, it seems that the interests of the employer will continue to pose a challenge to VET.

Schools cannot be *incorporated into capital* without contradictions. Serving the interests of capital and not those of students, parents and human capital needs for Chinese development creates societal ambiguity between these stakeholders. Therefore it is likely that students, parents and schools will engage in power struggle with large employers over the specific needs of the different actors.

For employers, involuntary labour is problematic for skill formation, for increased supervision and for motivation and morale. Asked if student workers were any different from migrant workers in their emotional behavior, one production manager said:

If a student is found emotionally unstable or seriously ill, we can ask the responsible teacher to “take back” the student. In this way we avert the risk of suicide and monitor the labour conditions with the assistance of teachers.

An emotionally unstable and often depressed workforce is more likely if recruitment is coerced or involuntary. Greater worker satisfaction is needed for long-term productivity, improved quality and sustainable production. A compliant, but stressed and “emotionally unstable” workforce does not seem to be an answer. A high volume and high flow of student interns creates productivity and quality problems for companies. We interviewed a team leader, Fenghui, who was sandwiched between management and the workers. “If something bad happens I get screwed; one level screws another.” He recounted the trouble created by mass recruitment of student interns:

Several batches of student interns were dispatched to the workshop, with over a hundred interns in one batch. There were only four hundred people in the entire workshop. Having so many students come in at one time puts enormous pressure on the rate of defective products. Before that, there were just 3-4 defective products per day, but after they arrived, sometimes it was 20-30 items in an hour.

For Chinese society, institutionalised, involuntary student-labour reinforces China's low skill model of development, and does not help with moving up the value chain.

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