



Trading Up

**BN Vocational School: Giving China's
marginalized youth a shot at success**

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BN VOCATIONAL SCHOOL: GIVING CHINA'S MARGINALIZED YOUTH A SHOT AT SUCCESS

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By providing free-of-charge vocational education to the disenfranchised children of migrant workers and ethnic minorities, BN Vocational School (BNVS) has helped to improve their career prospects — and meet the growing need for well-trained and confident workers in China's burgeoning services sector.

In May 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang addressed a crowd that he was unlikely to have come across before. He was in the African nation of Angola on an official trade mission to the continent, where he was due to sign economic cooperation agreements in four countries and address the African Union. But that day in the capital city of Luanda, his audience comprised some 70 Angolan youths from low-income families training to be electricians, mason workers, and machine operators. With the country's Vice President Manuel Vicente looking on, Li Keqiang unveiled a plaque to formally open BN Vocational School (BNVS) Angola — the first international campus in a network of Chinese schools that is changing public perceptions of vocational education.



An Angolan BNVS student getting work experience. (BNVS)

Since its first Beijing school was founded in 2005, BNVS has expanded to nine branches in the cities of Chengdu, Nanjing, Sanya, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Dalian, Yinchuan, and Lijiang — and now one far from home, in Luanda, Angola. The Angolan branch has embarked upon a program of vocational training that has been tried and tested by 2,500 underprivileged young people from across China who have graduated from the BNVS network, armed with a set of vocational skills to help them navigate their way through the country's competitive labor market.

CHINA'S ISOLATED GENERATION

From its inception, BNVS has offered the option of free vocational training to those who might otherwise lack the opportunity to continue their education. The organization's original focus was on the children of low-income migrant workers, whose

movement from the countryside to the cities has underpinned China's remarkable urbanization story. The National Bureau of Statistics estimated at the end of 2014 that there were slightly more than 168 million migrant workers who have left their home towns for jobs elsewhere in China. Driving this large-scale movement of people is the search for better jobs and the bright lights of the city, as the Chinese economy shifts from agricultural activity towards higher-value manufacturing and services.

Migrant workers could either leave their children in the care of relatives in their hometown or bring them to the cities, where they can attend junior secondary school until they reach 14 years of age. But to continue on to high school in a certain city or town, students' families required the relevant residence permit, or *hukou*, which determined where and how citizens accessed essential public services such as health care and education.



An electronics workshop at BNVS. (BNVS)

Without a local *hukou*, the children of the so-called “floating population” were typically required to return to their rural hometowns for senior secondary school. Administrative barriers were not the only challenge. BNVS founder Yao Li observed that low-income migrant workers and their families also faced day-to-day discrimination from other city dwellers. In the face of these hurdles, the children of migrant workers tended to enter the job market at a disadvantage.

BNVS was created from a recognition of these inequalities and a strongly held belief in the potential for education to help redress the imbalance. “BN” is an abbreviation for *bainian*, which translates to “100 years” from Chinese, reflecting a core belief in the long-term, transformative power of education. Yao Li was already a successful businesswoman when she founded the organization with a vision that vocational education done properly can play an important role in poverty alleviation and social stability. She was cognizant of its potential not only to impart young people with the skills needed to succeed in China’s workforce, but also to instill a culture of lifelong learning to help workers evolve in sync with the job market of the future.

A MEETING OF MINDS

As a senior executive in a property management company in the early 2000s, Yao Li struggled to find skilled workers in Beijing to build and maintain the properties in her portfolio. Recognizing that the dearth of trained maintenance workers was a barrier to the growth of business, she saw that the skills shortage was potentially a limiting factor in the development and professionalization of China’s property market. At the same time, she was evaluating her own contribution to society and considering ways of giving back. Yao Li had already dipped her toes into philanthropy by rallying her staff at the property management firm to volunteer for and give to causes in support of primary education. But she wanted to do more and was seeking ways in which she could have a greater, more lasting impact.

Not long after, Yao Li contacted Simon Li, a former adviser on property and housing management with the Hong Kong government, to seek his advice on the challenge of finding skilled labor in the property sector. “She couldn’t find even a few handymen, artisans, and fitters because there was virtually no training for such people,” said Simon Li. It was on that phone call that the penny dropped. “We had already identified that the children of migrant workers had little chance of entering into higher education. If they were offered the chance of learning a skill, you would also help the community to develop and contribute to a more balanced society,” he said.

Yao Li struck upon the idea of providing free vocational education including tuition, textbooks, uniforms, and meals for the children of migrant workers who were otherwise being left out of China’s economic miracle. BNVS was conceived as an alternative to give these disenfranchised youths the chance to feel “hopeful about their lives and the future,” said Yao Li. Over time, this would also bolster the pool of workers to help alleviate the skilled labor shortage. “Of course, you cannot produce skilled workers overnight,” said Simon Li. “But there must be a program and you must start somewhere. It’s a process.”

Yao Li realized that she would need help to execute an idea of this scope and ambition. In late 2004, she floated the concept to her network, which included business contacts acquired during her years in the real estate industry and from her former position heading up a state-owned paper trading enterprise. Some friends pledged financial support and to volunteer their time, while others, including academics and government officials, offered valuable suggestions and advice.

In developing the blueprint for BNVS, Yao Li visited many schools to examine the various models being applied. This fact-finding mission would help shape a core principle of BNVS: the school would not emulate what was already out there. It would forge a new model, incorporating the best practices in vocational education to improve the

employability of its graduates in the work place. Yao Li also visited relevant government departments, including the municipal bureau of labor, to seek approval for the school.

A JOINT VENTURE

A meeting with the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), one of China's oldest and largest national public foundations, would be decisive in launching BNVS and sustaining its growth. CYDF was founded by the All China Youth Federation, which included the Communist Youth League of China. In 1989, CYDF launched Project Hope, a major national program to encourage people at home and abroad to sponsor Chinese youths to continue their education. From its founding in 1989 through the end of 2013, Project Hope has raised nearly ¥10 billion (approximately US\$1.2 billion in 2013 dollars), helping close to 5 million poor primary, secondary, and college students in rural areas. With support from domestic firms and multinational companies operating in China such as GE, Coca Cola and Microsoft, Project Hope has established 18,335 primary schools, built 20,604 education facilities and trained almost 80,000 rural primary school teachers.

CYDF's clout means that it plays an important role in setting youth development priorities in China. Around the time that Yao Li was raising support for the BNVS concept, Tu Meng, CYDF's then vice chairperson and secretary general, was becoming cognizant of the need to train rural workers for urban jobs, and to improve the quality and availability of vocational education. Like Yao Li, Tu believed that free vocational education would offer migrant adolescents a chance to compete in China's increasingly services-oriented job market.

Yao's initial discussions with Tu came against the background of a broader shift in how the Chinese government viewed the social sector's developmental role. In the past, the majority of social services, and practically all education services, were provided by the state. From the 1990s, as China began the process of economic reform, authori-

ties had begun to consider different approaches to delivering services to its citizens — in some cases through the private sector and in collaboration with non-profit organizations. CYDF was at the forefront of this movement in education, and it would be a critical partner in piloting the BNVS model. Back then, the laws and regulations didn't provide the optimal circumstances for Yao Li to do her job, said Tu. One barrier for Yao Li was public fundraising, which required special authorization for non-profit schools. "What you are missing, we have it all," Tu Meng told her at the time.

Tu and Yao soon reached an agreement whereby CYDF would subsidize BNVS from its Vocational Education Fund. Through this affiliation with CYDF, BNVS could now raise domestic funds—a crucial factor in its development and growth. This unique partnership also meant that BNVS could benefit from the use of CYDF premises. But perhaps even more important has been the endorsement inferred upon BNVS by its partnership with CYDF, which Tu described as a "successful innovation."

GROWTH AND GOVERNANCE

Beijing BNVS opened in September 2005, and Yao Li left her position at the property management firm to dedicate herself to running the school. In its first year, BNVS enrolled 84 students from 150 applicants across three majors where Yao Li herself had seen a shortfall of skilled talent in the property market: home and property management, building maintenance and electrical work, and plumbing and air-conditioning.

One successful applicant to the inaugural class was Wang Lin, from Hebei Province. Like many migrant workers, his father was employed on a construction site in Beijing. When Wang Lin received the notice of his formal admission into a top senior high school in his hometown, his mother was seriously ill with cancer. Because the school charged fees, he was unable to attend—the cost of attendance including tuition, accommodation, and his other needs was simply too high. Instead, he spent two years working on a construction site



BNVS students of the 2005 class. (BNVS)

to help his father support the family and pay for his mother's medical expenses. When he heard on the radio about BNVS' plans to offer free training to migrant children, he became excited. "I knew that this opportunity would change my whole life," recalled Wang Lin. He passed the entrance exam and won a place at BNVS, where he studied building maintenance and electrical work for two years. Wang Lin is now director of the mechanical department at a property management company in Beijing. Having joined the firm upon graduation from BNVS, in the intervening years he has bought an apartment in Beijing's suburbs and will soon be married. Wang Lin's success epitomizes what Yao Li and her supporters believed was possible when they set up the first branch of BNVS.

Despite the timeliness of the idea and support from influential members of Chinese society, the early days of BNVS were nonetheless challenging. "We were the first tuition-free vocational school at the senior level in China," recalled Yao Li. "We were widely doubted. As pioneers in this field, we had no one to follow." BNVS elected its first board

in early 2006, selecting Yao Li as chairperson. BNVS' free-of-charge education model received a boost in March when a government work report from the annual National People's Congress stated that the government would continue its efforts to help migrant workers, and better support education for their children. In June 2006, BNVS received official certification to grant secondary vocational education qualifications to its graduates.

With official endorsement and the ability to raise domestic funds through its affiliation with CYDF, BNVS was able to attract donations from Yao Li's network and beyond. Financial support began accruing from individuals, philanthropists, government agencies, corporations, foundations, and education institutions. In later years, former students such as Wang Lin also provided support to the school; over a third of alumni has made donations. For Yao Li, BNVS' ability to attract funding is in large part due to the attention paid to maximizing its resources. "We do not let the classrooms become shabby to gain compassion from donors," she said. "On the contrary, we hope

donors can see the changes their resources and efforts yield, and convince them that their donations have been spent on the right thing.” In 2013 alone, donations totaled more than ¥41 million (around US\$4.9 million at the time).

From the beginning, Yao Li posited that BNVS should be run in a transparent fashion, bringing her experience and knowledge of good governance from the corporate world. “We introduced methods from business to school management, encouraging innovation in teaching, while setting strict regulations and management procedures,” she said. For instance, the role of the board in ensuring accountability is paramount at BNVS, and school principals are required to take cues and direction from the board in a manner similar to that of a chief executive officer of a corporation. Yao Li chairs the board, which comprises professionals from corporations, universities, law and accounting firms, and social organizations. Members include Simon Li and Tu Meng alongside Wang Zhi, a well-known former media personality and former CCTV journalist; Wang Jie, vice president of Schneider Electric China; Zhu Maoyuan, senior partner at Beijing Zhonglun Law Firm, and Sabina Brady, a China philanthropist and former executive director of the Clinton Foundation’s China program.

Board members are asked to contribute to the school through their time, knowledge, or connections, enabling BNVS to tap into a rich pool of expertise. For example, Simon Li draws on his decades of experience from working with Hong Kong charities to share best practices and help BNVS operate to international standards, while Brady has provided guidance on replicating best-of-class systems and practices in the China context. The board has steered BNVS as its network expanded, ensuring that the schools augmented rather than replaced government efforts, and that they employed world-class governance, management, and operational practices. BNVS passed muster when it received the international ISO9001 Quality Management System certification in August 2006.

CHANGING THE GAME

When the inaugural class graduated in 2007 and all its members found employment, BNVS marked the first of many victories toward alleviating poverty through education. It was around this time that BNVS began to appear on the radar of foreign governments seeking to support the development of the Chinese education sector. The United States Department of State included BNVS in its Access English Micro-scholarship Program, which supports the teaching of English to economically disadvantaged youths across the globe, while the Irish government is also a prominent donor. BNVS’ focus on transparency and good governance helped attract many multinational corporate donors, such as Citibank, Dell, Walmart, Schneider Electric, Deloitte, and Pearson, some of which have hosted BNVS students as interns. Its across-the-board appeal was sealed in 2008, when Yao Li won the national charity award from China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs. The following year, BNVS was named one of China’s top ten charitable organizations by the One Foundation, established by movie star Jet Li.

The expansion and replication of the BNVS school model was triggered by a major earthquake in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province, in 2008. The enormity of the disaster reverberated throughout Chinese society, prompting an unprecedented outpouring of philanthropic giving. The destruction of schools in Sichuan – home to many of China’s ethnic minorities – prompted BNVS to establish its first school outside of Beijing in the provincial capital of Chengdu. Its aim was to support Sichuan’s underprivileged youths whose lives had been disrupted by the earthquake. With young people from ethnic minorities and impoverished rural families among their recruits, the opening of the Chengdu school marked a departure for BNVS, which up to this point had focused its efforts on educating the children of low-income migrant workers in the nation’s capital.

BNVS graduate Deng Jie was one beneficiary of the organization’s expanded focus. Orphaned as a toddler, she was raised by her grandparents who

were corn and rice farmers. Deng became a good student and was accepted to the top high school in her hometown. While her grandparents were willing to pay the school's tuition fees, Deng did not wish to burden them financially — at the time, their yearly income was ¥2,000-3,000 (around US\$180-250 in 2008). She was accepted to BNVS Chengdu, where she majored in kindergarten studies, and received a diploma in 2013. She now earns around ¥3,000 (around US\$400 in 2015) a month, which has helped to make a difference in her grandparents' lives. "When I was in high school, my grandparents had to farm under the heat of the sun to support me," she said. "Now they no longer have to."

The Chengdu school was modeled on BNVS Beijing, utilizing the same governance structures



Dai Wei, also known as Byrant, on an internship placement. (Colum Murphy)

and operational processes — but adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of its students and the demands of the local job market. Twenty-four-year-old Aduciba, a member of the Yi ethnic minority and a graduate of BNVS Chengdu, grew up in a poor, isolated part of Sichuan where Chinese is not commonly spoken. "Our Mandarin is not as good as others, even though it is a prerequisite to finding a job," he said. BNVS Chengdu offered Chinese language and elocution classes to help Aduciba overcome that hurdle and secure a job upon graduation as a technician at the International Hotels Group, a multinational hotel chain.

Following the establishment of the Chengdu branch, the rollout of the BNVS network of schools gained momentum, with the support of CYDF and its other partners. The first wave saw new schools in Nanjing, Wuhan, and Zhengzhou, followed by schools in Yinchuan, Nanjing, Lijiang, and Dalian. In early 2014, with Premier Li Keqiang on hand, BNVS expanded internationally and opened its first overseas campus in the capital of Angola — a country where the Sino-African trade relationship is of great significance, and where Chinese infrastructure and mining firms are major employers.

Yao Li said she never imagined that BNVS would expand to Africa. But in discussions with CITIC Construction, a construction and engineering subsidiary of the CITIC Group conglomerate, executives based in Angola told her that while they would prefer to hire domestically, they were forced to bring in Chinese workers on construction projects because few local workers had sufficient training. CITIC invited Yao Li to consider opening a branch of BNVS in Luanda. "Vocational education in China is progressing well," she reflected at the time. "Maybe the time had come to help more people outside of China?" In April 2014, the CITIC-Angola Bainian Vocational School opened its doors and began offering no-cost vocational education to 70 registered students in construction electrics, machine operation, and masonry work. The project was largely underwritten by CITIC Construction, which supported the building of

the school, teacher salaries, and student food and stationery to the tune of US\$700,000.

For Yao Li, this was an unexpected development on BNVS' journey, but one that met an obvious need. She witnessed this firsthand when she visited Angola and saw a level of poverty that is much less visible in modern China today. "Please go to Angola to see how they struggle," she responded to doubts as to whether BNVS would do better to stay focused on China. Yet, the establishment of BNVS Angola was remarkably well-aligned with China's domestic priorities. The Luanda initiative was consistent with the interests of Chinese companies seeking to develop the local labor force and communities. At the same time, the export of the BNVS model of vocational training was an important demonstration of high-value corporate social responsibility programs by Chinese businesses operating overseas.

QUALITY FIRST

In its early days, BNVS focused primarily on training its students for specific vocations. As its network expanded, it customized each school's curriculum to best meet the needs of the local job market. While most schools offer electrical and comprehensive maintenance, and hotel and property services, some majors are unique to specific locations and reflect local demands. For example, the school in Yinchuan, the capital city of Nixhia Hui Autonomous Region, offers special programs in Halal cooking to cater to the local Muslim population. Courses related to elderly care are available in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, which is one of China's most populous regions and one of its fastest-aging.

But with demands from the labor market changing so rapidly, the usefulness of certain skills can have a short shelf life, according to Yao Li and senior staff at BNVS. This realization prompted them to adjust their approach. BNVS now aims to teach students at least two or three additional life skills alongside vocational skills. Yao Li draws a comparison with learning a foreign language. "When you learn English, then you just learn English. But when you learn other languages — for example,

Japanese or German — you learn how to learn a language," she said. Life skills taught at BNVS include English, computing, health and hygiene, and social morals and ethics, with around 60 percent of student time devoted to such learning. "Our goal is to let everyone know more about this world, how to socialize with people, and how to learn new things in a lifelong process," said Yao Li.

Outside of the classroom, a requirement for students to complete daily chores is seen as important for character-building and an opportunity to hone important work skills for those aspiring to careers in the hospitality sector. A recent visit to the Chengdu BNVS student dormitory highlighted the importance the school attaches to values such as personal hygiene and self-discipline. Pristine white sheets and pillow cases were impeccably folded, just like in a top-grade hotel. Under the beds, sneakers were lined up neatly. For some new students, BNVS' standards may necessitate a major lifestyle adjustment. "Some of the students have never used a flush toilet," said Zhang Tingwang, vice principal at BNVS Chengdu. For her, the importance of personal hygiene, how to live and cooperate with others, and organizational training equip BNVS students with skills essential for service-oriented roles.

Extracurricular activities are also encouraged, particularly those that expose students to other cultures. To support them in improving their English, teachers encourage them to mingle with foreign volunteers — one popular activity is to share pizza. Other supporters, including the wife of the Irish ambassador to China, conduct English classes at the Beijing school on a regular basis. In Chengdu, where BNVS attracts many students from China's ethnic minority groups, traditional dance is a popular after-class activity helping students to share their cultures and, at times, bridge differences.

But perhaps the most important part of the curriculum is the prerequisite for students to apply their class-learned skills through internships. In the past, students would spend one year in the classroom and one year working for a company

in a field related to their major. While new rules introduced by the Chinese government have extended the length of time students must spend studying in the school, the core importance of the workplace remains.

Dai Wei is one student currently learning in the field. The 20-year-old likes to play basketball and is a fan of the American superstar Kobe Bryant. His gold-colored Ritz-Carlton-issued staff badge gives his name as “Bryant.” “I like his ‘never give up’ spirit,” he said. Dai is ethnic Tibetan. Dressed in a sharp black suit, white shirt, and a black and gray striped tie, he sports a fashionable haircut, wears large black glasses and a silver-colored wristwatch. Dai has already completed one year of schooling at BNVS Chengdu, where he majors in hospitality. Dai spoke highly of his teachers at BNVS. “The teachers are often people who have worked full-time in the hotel industry,” he said. “They know the industry well and have insights to share.”

Close ties to industry are an important part of the BNVS approach, and suggestions and recommendations from its corporate partners are reflected in the curriculum. In order to understand companies’ needs, BNVS staff meet with the interns’ host organizations frequently, while executives and practitioners from the companies visit and teach at the schools — for example, staff at Dai’s host organization, the Ritz-Carlton in Chengdu, visit the BNVS campus on a quarterly basis. But most of all, time spent working with the host organization helps students to develop the experience and characteristics required for success in the workplace.

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

At a time when China desperately needed to expand its pool of skilled workers and when there was growing space for social organizations to play a role in public service delivery, BNVS proved that there was a sustainable model. Reflecting Yao Li’s experience in business, BNVS has a set of clear and measurable goals, and a well-qualified core team to implement international best practices for voca-

tional training, and then adapt the curriculum to local needs. Like some of the most successful start-ups in the corporate world, BNVS has benefited from a motivated and well-connected board. Simon Li shared his decades of international expertise managing and running charities in Hong Kong, while Tu Meng acted as an important conduit between government and BNVS, providing insight into the government’s plans for vocational education and youth development.

Keeping up with socioeconomic change is a challenge for all higher education institutions. For vocational schools, that need is arguably greater, and BNVS will need to keep alert to emerging demands from industries, companies, and the job market to make sure that its students are equipped with appropriate skills. At the same time, China’s demographics are shifting, with a rapidly aging population creating new pressures on the public purse. This will drive demand for workers skilled in geriatric care, as the state and private sectors expand efforts to care for the growing elderly population. Just as Yao Li saw how the need for better-skilled workers in the construction industry represented an opportunity for the children of migrant workers, BNVS has too taken heed of this trend.

At some schools, including the Chengdu branch, students are already majoring and working in the field of elderly care. Zeng Peng, 17, is a second-year student at the Chengdu school, where he studies geriatric care. He is from the village of Chongchou, near Chengdu, and lives with his grandfather, Zeng Shujian, a 62-year-old farmer. Zeng Peng’s mother had left him as a young boy, and his father was killed in a construction accident in Tibet where he was a migrant worker. Zeng Shujian’s annual income as a rice farmer was around ¥3,000 (around US\$480 in 2015), too little to afford to pay for high school education for his grandson. So when one of his teachers suggested that Zeng Peng apply to BNVS, he jumped at the opportunity. To gain work experience, Zeng Peng is currently conducting market research for a start-up that seeks to provide home care to China’s elderly, a position where he is

in regular contact with senior citizens. Zeng Peng said he was originally drawn to majoring in this field because he was raised by his grandparents. “I want to be able to take care of them,” he said.

Through BNVS, Yao Li and her supporters were able to provide an alternative for thousands of underprivileged youth and children of migrant workers who would otherwise have missed out on an opportunity to continue their education and develop workplace skills. From its earliest days, BNVS’ potential was not lost on the government and its affiliates, who recognized in BNVS an opportunity to experiment with a different mode of service delivery. “BNVS has moved the needle as the current government has elevated the discussion on vocational skills training,” observed Sabina Brady, who has been on the board of BNVS since 2007. “They want to upscale the population to move into jobs of the next few decades and not the last few decades.” Reflecting this priority, Yao Li was invited to participate in the 2014 National Conference on Vocational Education organized by the State Council, China’s top administrative authority.

Of particular importance has been the ongoing support of CYDF, enabling BNVS to raise funds domestically through a dedicated bank account and to make use of premises for classrooms and offices. In the case of the Zhengzhou school, classrooms were provided by the Henan Communist Youth League, the youth branch of the Communist Party. In addition, CYDF has been helpful for BNVS in attracting the teaching capacity required for its schools, particularly as a start-up in a sector that still suffers a poor reputation. “The inferiority of vocational schooling on the education ladder persists as both public perception and objective reality,” wrote researcher Minhua Ling in a 2015 academic paper titled “Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools,” citing one of the study’s interviewees. Nonetheless, BNVS’ ties with CYDF have been helpful in attracting experienced educators.

While they form the backbone of a highly experienced staff, some late-career veterans and retirees from traditional schools are more familiar with a

rote learning style of teaching, which can pose a challenge for BNVS in executing its “life skills” approach. “Some of our teachers feel they are not that young,” said Yao Li. She hopes to modernize through training sessions and overseas visits to promote best practices and motivate the staff. A part of the answer would be to bolster BNVS’ volunteer base and attract more practitioners and teachers with experience of the modern workplace — perhaps even alumni and affiliates, who make up a network that spreads far and wide. It even extends to Angola, where the Luanda school recruited a young teacher who was a volunteer at the Beijing school in 2010.

Talent management is a question that BNVS must continue to address right up to the top of the organization. Yao Li and her fellow board members have been instrumental in shaping the BNVS story to date, with their expertise and links to government, donors, and corporations, driving its growth through what was ultimately a collective effort.



Yao Li, founder and chairperson of BNVS. (BNVS)

“We rely on everyone — the whole of society. You can’t just rely on one part,” said Yao Li. Still, the impetus of the board — and indeed of Yao Li as a driving force — has been critical to BNVS’ success, which raises the question of how the organization will institutionalize the passion and influence of its founder and supporters beyond their tenures.

OUTLOOK

As the landscape for vocational education in China evolves, a key challenge facing BNVS is of how to remain a relevant force. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has reported that China’s vocational education remains underfunded, despite government plans to eventually spend around 20 percent of its education budget on it — up from around 11 percent in 2013. Perhaps taking a cue from the BNVS model, the government has announced plans to increase the number

of vocational education schools across the country, with a target of universal free-of-charge training. At the same time, China is taking steps toward addressing the socioeconomic issues related to the rigid *hukou* restrictions. Under new rules that were announced in January 2016, migrant workers are able to apply for a permit that will give them access to public services in the cities where they work. These reforms offer hope that equality of access to public education for the children of migrant workers might be attainable.

In a fast-changing policy environment, BNVS is now faced with new pressures. Beginning from 2015, closer government enforcement of rules pertaining to vocational education means BNVS students must spend three years at vocational school, as opposed to two years, to attain their qualifications. In practice, this means students will spend two years on campus and the third year



Farmer Zeng Shujian with grandson Zeng Peng, a second-year student at BNVS Chengdu. (Colum Murphy)

gaining on-the-job experience. Yao Li has said that this new system is a positive development because it will allow students to acquire more skills during their time at the school, though it does place pressure on BNVS' limited resources. "The impact on us is mostly financial, meaning that we have to raise more money for this program," said board member Simon Li. BNVS will also need to consider how this extra year could impact the number of placements it can offer, and the implications for students from low-income families, because another year in the classroom delays their full entry into the job market. "The pressure on the teaching staff and whole setup will be tremendous, so we will need more career masters and student counselors to look at the practical situation," he reflected.

With this shift, and with more students being afforded the opportunity for vocational training, BNVS will also have to consider how it can raise the bar and do more so that its graduates stay competitive in the job market. BNVS graduates who specialized in hospitality are still entering the industry as security guards or in housekeeping roles — arguably positions that they could have secured without attending vocational school. The challenge for BNVS is to look at how it can impart its graduates with the type of skills that will enable them to secure higher-value jobs upon graduation, perhaps through the teaching of technical skills that are sought after in the market. "Our aim was to start with helping individuals to stand on their own feet in society, giving them the training and the skills to be a proper member of the community," said Simon Li. "This core value will not change, but the implementation will have to. We have to train slightly more skillful workers according to the needs."

As the government takes on the task of expanding the vocational education infrastructure network, Yao Li sees the future of BNVS as a standard bearer. After a decade of operations, BNVS has reached only a small proportion of the disadvantaged youth who face barriers to continuing their education — close to 5,000 have attended BNVS in the past decade, with around 2,500

students completing their courses and finding jobs after graduation. But needless to say, this barely scratches the surface of providing educational opportunities to the 100 million children who UNICEF reports have been affected by internal migration in China.

As the government steps in to roll out free-of-charge vocational schools across the country, BNVS has made a decision to cease expanding its domestic network, but to focus on developing and modeling its existing schools. "There are 600 educational institutions in China that have to be turned into tertiary vocational skills training institutes. BNVS has demonstrated how to do it differently and well, and there is now an opportunity to replicate the model," said board member Brady. BNVS is in a position to draw upon its experience and expertise to support the public endeavor to scale up. One such area is in the proliferation of best practices, which the organization is well-placed to advise on. Having developed and documented a curriculum that covers a full range of critical life skills and vocational education areas — the latter including housekeeping, hotel, reception, painting, woodwork, plastering, and nursing care — BNVS has literally written the manual. "The other vocational schools don't have the same zeal as we have to do it," said Simon Li. "It is an amazing document."

From the outset, BNVS' mission was to raise the quality and applicability of vocational education and to graduate skilled, relevant workers into the job market. The model of balancing professional skills with the life skills necessary for success in the workplace was pioneering in China. "We wished for BNVS to be like a beacon, to light and guide the journey of each student," said founder Yao Li. It remains to be seen whether the flame that BNVS has lit will result in large-scale, structural change for vocational education in China — and beyond. 🌍

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QUANTITATIVE INDICATORS

Financial	2013-14*	2014-15†
Planned budget versus actual expenditure for the fiscal year	Budget: ¥21.3million (US\$3.45 million) Expenditure: ¥20.97 million (US\$3.4 million)	Budget: ¥24.43million (US\$3.96 million) Expenditure: ¥20.23 million (US\$3.28 million)
Income composition by source: Individuals, corporations, events, trusts, other (please specify).	Corporations: 43% Individuals: 37% Foundations: 14% Government: 3% Income from interest: 3%	Corporations: 51% Individuals: 21% Foundations: 11% Government: 5% Income from interest: 12%
Income composition: domestic versus international	Domestic: 86% International: 14%	Domestic: 93% International: 7%

Personnel

Staff retention rate	95% (95) staff retained	95% (95) staff retained
Turnover rate	5% (5) staff left	5% (5) staff left
What is the board composition?	Occupation: education, business, non-profit organizations, media Gender: 8 men; 10 women	
How many meetings does the board hold per year?	One	
How many staff members are there?	100	

Quantitative Indicators Continued

<p>How many staff members have attended some non-profit or management training course?</p>	<p>Internal training for more than 200 attendees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual management review conference ● Teaching symposium ● Financial auditing and training ● Capacity building (in-office and online administrative ability and social media management ability) ● Training for assessments and supervisions <p>External training for around 50 attendees include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● International Youth Foundation: training of trainers for life skills courses ● Bliss and Wisdom Foundation of Culture and Education: teacher training camp ● Citi Foundation: Asia-Pacific Financial Inclusion Summit ● American Embassy to China: training for English Language Instructors (2013-14 only) ● Vocational Schools in Denmark and Germany: vocational education system and model training (2014-15 only) <p>Open workshops (for more than 150 attendees) such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● BN VocEd workshops ● Volunteer workshops at local BNVS ● Campus tours and workshops for vocational education professionals
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Organizational

<p>Do you publish an annual report?</p>	<p>Yes</p>
<p>How many sites/locations do you currently operate in?</p>	<p>Domestic: Beijing, Zhengzhou, Chengdu, Sanya, Wuhan, Lijiang, Nanjing, Dalian, Yinchuan</p> <p>International: Luanda, Angola</p>
<p>Do you measure results? Yes/No</p>	<p>Yes, results are tracked as per the BNVS management manual and self-evaluation form. Indicators include the development of graduates and stability of donor revenue over time</p>
<p>What types of outreach?</p>	<p>Voluntary events, community bulletin boards, website, publication, and social media</p>
<p>Do you regularly meet with government representatives? Yes/No</p>	<p>Yes</p>
<p>If yes, on a scale of 1-3 how close is the relationship with government? 1 = not close; 2 = somewhat close; 3 = very close</p>	<p>Closeness of relationship = 3</p>

* Exchange rate used for 2013-14: US\$ 1 = ¥6.1709 (as of 2014 August 31)

† Exchange rate used for 2014-15: US\$ 1 = ¥6.1647 (as of 2015 August 31)