

"Promoting Education Through Commerce": Contemporary Relevance of Zhang Jian'S Thought on Chamber of Commerce Participation in Vocational Education

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Abstract: This paper explores the contemporary relevance of Zhang Jian's philosophy of "saving the nation through industry" and "saving the nation through education" for chamber of commerce participation in vocational education. Centered on the core idea of "promoting education through commerce", Zhang Jian utilized chambers of commerce to fund vocational education through factory operations, promote an integrated school-enterprise model, and leverage chamber resources to introduce foreign capital and expertise, thereby establishing platforms for school-enterprise cooperation. Guided by this philosophy, the Nantong Chamber of Commerce developed a "industry as the mother of education" model, achieving deep integration between vocational education and industrial needs. Contemporary chambers can draw from Zhang Jian's experience by integrating resources to foster school-enterprise collaboration, advance the internationalization of vocational education, and support the cultivation of technical and skilled talent. The research demonstrates that chambers of commerce, acting as a bridge between schools and enterprises, play a vital role in the high-quality development of vocational education.

Keywords: Zhang Jian, Chamber of Commerce, vocational education

1. Introduction

As a renowned center of education, Nantong has long been committed to the development of vocational education. Zhang Jian, a late Qing zhuangyuan (top imperial examination scholar), proposed the influential philosophies of "saving the nation through industry" and "saving the nation through education." Under his intellectual leadership, Nantong's business organizations played a significant role in school-enterprise cooperation within vocational education, contributing to the prosperity of Nantong's vocational education sector.

2. Chamber-Run Factories as a Starting Point: Funding Sources for School-Enterprise Cooperation in Vocational Education

In the late Qing dynasty, Zhang Jian proposed the ideas of "saving the nation through industry" and "saving the nation through education" to rescue the country from crisis, implementing them in his hometown of Nantong. In 1895, the Dasheng Cotton Mill, a "gentry-led merchant operation", was established in Tongzhou. Unlike previous state-run, state-supervised merchant-operated, or state-merchant jointly operated enterprises, it "possessed the distinct nature of an independently managed merchant enterprise from the outset." [1]. The National Agricultural Association, a precursor to modern chambers of commerce, was founded by Zhang Jian based on his new understanding of commodity economy and agricultural production gained during the establishment of the Dasheng Mill. This later led to the formation of the Tongzhou General Chamber of Commerce. Zhang Jian asserted that "education must rely on funding, and funding can only come from industry — hence industry is the mother of education," and that "today's global competition is the competition of agriculture, industry, and commerce; the competition of agriculture, industry, and commerce is the competition of knowledge," emphasizing that "only when agriculture, industry, and commerce flourish can education become universal." [2]. Recognizing that vocational school development required an industrial economic base, Zhang Jian leveraged his influence within chamber organizations to encourage industrial development as a funding source for vocational education. The Dasheng Cotton Mill became the center of Nantong's vocational education endeavors. While revitalizing industry and resisting foreign economic encroachment, the mill utilized its profits to establish vocational education institutions, providing them with funds, sites, equipment, and teaching staff. In turn, vocational education supplied Dasheng and other industries with technical and managerial talent, achieving mutual benefit.

3. The Integrated Model of Chambers: School-Enterprise Cooperative Bases for Vocational Education

Guided by the principles that "industry is the father, education the mother", and that "industry without education will not prosper, nor will education without widespread industry" [3], the Nantong Chamber of Commerce strengthened collaboration between enterprises and vocational schools. Profits from enterprises funded vocational education, while vocational education cultivated talent tailored to enterprise needs, serving the economy. Chambers typically established corresponding vocational schools while founding enterprises. For example,

After establishing a local bank, the General Chamber of Commerce founded a Banking Specialized School and a Type B Commercial School to train business talent.

Following the creation of Tongzhou Hospital, the Tongzhou Hospital Affiliated Medical School emerged, later renamed Nantong Medical College. Its teachers were both doctors and instructors, emphasizing the integration of theory and practice.

After the establishment of the Tonghai Reclamation Company, an Agricultural College was founded to train agricultural professionals.

During road construction and Yangtze River shipping development, institutions like the Traffic Police Training Institute, Surveying and Civil Engineering Department, and Wusong Merchant Marine School were established [4].

The founding of the Textile Training Institute (later renamed the "Textile College") exemplifies this model. Funds were raised proportionally from various Dasheng factories. Located adjacent to the mill, technicians served as part-time teachers, and the mill provided student internships, enhancing practical skills and integrating learning with production. Specific internship regulations ensured effectiveness. This integrated school-enterprise model achieved an organic combination of education and industry.

4. Chambers' "People-to-People Diplomacy": Channels for Introducing Foreign Capital and Expertise into School-Enterprise Cooperation

Zhang Jian actively leveraged chambers to seek development. Facing domestic capital shortages, he advocated "opening the door to utilize foreign capital as a strategy for industrial revitalization." He negotiated preliminary cooperation agreements with American business delegations and facilitated discussions between chamber representatives and U.S. counterparts on joint ventures. In education, his initiatives included printing textbooks reflecting Western scientific achievements, introducing Western drama to Chinese stages, and showcasing embroidery from the Nantong Women's Vocational Institute at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (where it won awards), promoting Chinese art globally. Chambers played crucial roles in these activities, introducing foreign capital and resources into vocational education partnerships [5][6]. Today, "education diplomacy" remains a key method for the Nantong Chamber to promote international cooperation. The Nantong Federation of Industry and Commerce (General Chamber of Commerce) established the Nantong World Tongshang Association in 2009. Its overseas branches and hometown associations now operate in 33 countries and regions, attracting industrial enterprises and overseas students to return and start businesses, laying a solid foundation for Nantong's vocational education to "go global." To promote global industrial and supply chain cooperation and facilitate enterprises' overseas expansion, the "Empowering Nantong Private Enterprises for Global Expansion Training Course" was successfully held at the Zhang Jian Entrepreneur Institute. Nantong Vocational University collaborates extensively with the tongshang (Nantong merchants abroad), establishing training goals for "applied," "entrepreneurial," and "international" technical talent. It engages in cooperative education with institutions like Ansan University in South Korea and other international schools or enterprises, arranges student internships in South Korea, provides job referrals, and drives the internationalization of vocational education.

5. Chambers' "Proactive Bridging": Platforms for School-Enterprise Cooperation in Vocational Education

In the new era, Nantong's local Federations of Industry and Commerce (General Chambers of Commerce) create collaborative platforms for vocational institutions and industrial enterprises through various channels. Supported by the Nantong World Tongshang Association, the Nantong Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the Municipal Communist Youth League Committee, and Jiangsu Alipay Biological Technology Co., Ltd. jointly established the "Youth Entrepreneurship Service Center" to provide comprehensive services for tongshang enterprises. The World Tongshang Association also partnered with member units like Nantong Vocational University and Jiangsu Alipay to set up the "Overseas Chinese Home Innovation and Entrepreneurship Incubation Service Base," enhancing the effectiveness of international

talent cultivation and the educational level of vocational institutions. Addressing the shortage of manual carving technicians and mahogany product designers in Nantong, the Nantong Home Furnishing Industry Chamber, supported by the Municipal Federation of Industry and Commerce, collaborated with Nantong Industry and Trade Technician College for cross-industry cooperation. Since 2024, 20 municipal and county-level industry associations or chambers have partnered with universities and research institutes under the "New Quality Empowerment · Double Entry Double Service" initiative. Examples include: The Nantong New Energy Industry Chamber's strategic cooperation with the Nantong Nanjing University Institute of Materials Engineering and Technology aiming to solve technical challenges and boost member enterprise development, Hongsheng New Materials Co., Ltd. achieving technological breakthroughs through cooperation with Nantong University, and Textile industry associations collaborating with research institutes and universities to enhance professionalism and advance industry standards and projects[7].

6. Conclusion

Zhang Jian's philosophies of "saving the nation through industry" and "saving the nation through education" profoundly shaped the Nantong Chamber of Commerce's approach to vocational education participation. His practice of "promoting education through commerce" retains significant contemporary relevance. By establishing factories to fund schools, creating integrated school-enterprise models, introducing foreign capital and expertise, and building cooperative platforms, the chamber not only propelled the prosperity of modern Nantong vocational education but also offers valuable lessons for contemporary development.

Against the backdrop of the new era, chambers retain broad scope for participating in vocational education. On one hand, they can leverage their resource integration advantages to deepen school-enterprise collaboration and ensure precise alignment between vocational education and industry needs. On the other hand, chambers can utilize their international networks to support vocational education's "global reach" and cultivate technically skilled talent with international competitiveness. Zhang Jian's thought and practice demonstrate that the sustainable development of vocational education requires broad societal participation. As bridges connecting enterprises and schools, chambers of commerce should be pivotal forces in advancing the high-quality development of modern vocational education.

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