Why Chinese Industrial Designers Oppose Vocational Qualification Certification?

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The Chinese government implemented the Industrial Designers’ Vocational Qualification (IDVQ) system since 2010 and has been formally implemented in two provinces. However, the execution of the IDVQ system has been opposed by many industrial designers. Three surveys were carried out in regard to the approval rating and usefulness of the IDVQ, in addition to concrete reasons for opposition. Analysis was carried out on the survey data and the reasons for opposition on the basis of several principles in behavioral economics and social psychology including loss aversion, causal schema, availability heuristic, subjective probability and the misjudgment of representativeness, and fairness. Some of the conclusions were further validated through surveys. It was discovered that subjectivity and emotional factors contributed tremendously to many industrial designers’ opposition to the IDVQ. On the basis of analysis and in combination with successful experience in the vocational systems of the United Kingdom and other countries, the following four suggestions were offered: building an environment of trust, increasing the probability of opportunities, uniting service objects, and cooperating on curricula education. These suggestions are expected to facilitate the implementation of the IDVQ and play a positive role in improving China’s vocational market of industrial design.

*keywords: industrial design; vocational qualification certification; opposition; behavioural economics*
Introduction
The Industrial Designers’ Vocational Qualification (IDVQ) system is a state-run policy implemented for the purposes of promoting employment in industrial design and stabilizing the talent in the creative industry.

Industrial designers had no specific professional titles. Their professional titles have been appraised as engineers, and they are forced to spend much time preparing for unfamiliar engineer title examinations. Guangdong Province and Zhejiang Province issued the first IDVQ certificates in 2010 and 2013, respectively, becoming the first two provinces in China to implement the system.

Plagued by employment problems, most developed countries have built their own vocational certification systems. The experience of the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia, among others indicates that a perfect vocational qualification certification system plays a tremendous role in promoting employment. The “National Vocational Qualification” (NVQ) that began to be implemented in the United Kingdom in 1986 has been regarded as the most typical and widely recognized vocational qualification certification (Jessu, P.G., 1991). Design vocational qualifications include design, design management, design support, applied arts and design, etc., belonging to the type “crafts, creative arts, and design”. Japan enacted the Human Resources Development Promotion Law in 1985. Australia has gradually promoted the unified Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and established the correspondence between the AQF and the diploma level since 1995. Germany’s vocational qualification certification was primarily based on the Vocational Education Law enacted in 1969, and the “dual system” and the “three certificates” system are used to definitively prove the level of one’s ability. In 1973, Korea enacted the National Technical Qualification Law, which was mandatorily defined as what must be passed for specialty education (Gill Helbyet, 1999).

China’s IDVQ system is still in its infancy. However, many designers have voiced opposition and some voices of opposition had already been popular in various professional network communities even before IDVQ certificates were awarded in Guangdong Province for the first time in 2010. Through the observation of the voices in the network community of industrial design, it was found that most opposition was not based on emotional responses. It was these responses that prompted the surveys and subsequent analyses presented in this study.

Surveys on the Recognition of China’s Vocational Qualifications for Industrial Designers
Three surveys were carried out in China’s most active network community of industrial design (www.Billwang.net) through voting and group discussions, becoming the first domestic surveys in regard to this issue and resulting in abundant first-hand data.

The First Survey: Do you support the IDVQ?
The data of the first survey carried out in the forum of Billwang.net are shown in Figure 1. The subject of the survey was “Do you support the IDVQ?” and there were three options: support, oppose, and look on.
The data showed that only 43% of industrial designers supported the IDVQ and up to 33% opposed it. This percentage was a figure that could not be ignored.

**The Second Survey: Does the IDVQ benefit you?**
According to the statements in the forum for the first survey, most people’s attitudes towards certification were based on personal positions and they supported or opposed it from the perspective of whether it benefited themselves. The subject of the second survey was “Does the IDVQ benefit you?” The results are shown in Figure 2.

Unlike the first survey, the second survey studied designers’ understanding of the relationship between certification and personal interests and filtered out the effects of other factors. However, it can be said that industrial designers’ predictions and opinions about personal gains and losses were independently made.

The comparison of the results of the two surveys showed that the percentage of the respondents who believed the IDVQ benefited themselves exceeded the percentage of the respondents who supported the IDVQ (44%), reaching 51%. Only 21% of the respondents considered the IDVQ as “harmful” and this was 12% less than the percentage of the respondents who opposed the IDVQ (33%). In other words, 7% of the respondents admitted the IDVQ benefited themselves but did not support it, and more than one third of the opponents did not oppose the IDVQ on the basis of personal gains and losses. The difference between the data of the two surveys indicated that the IDVQ’s low approval rating among designers did not only result from the biases of personal benefits, but was also caused by other complex reasons.

**The Third Survey: Why you oppose the IDVQ?**
The data of the second survey indicated that 12% of the opponents were against the IDVQ for non-personal reasons. For a deeper understanding of the basis of their opposition, the
third survey was carried out. Through the analysis of the results of the first two surveys and the statements of the respondents, seven reasons for opposition were listed in a multiple-choice survey. The results are shown in Figure 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why you oppose the IDVQ?</th>
<th>Total Votes</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designer’s ability has no evaluation criteria</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>50.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doubt about the authorities’ motivation</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>51.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t believe the IDVQ can work</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>44.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can prove my ability in other reliable ways</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>20.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment restriction without IDVQ</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>37.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a constraint on designers’ creative activities</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>51.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic certificates are enough</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10.24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3  Data of the survey “Why you oppose the IDVQ?”**

According to the data of the survey, seven reasons for opposition covered nearly 90% of the votes and the “other” option only accounted for 10.24% of the votes. Therefore, it can be considered that these seven options appropriately summarized the reasons for opposition.

Through the analysis of the anonymous voters’ remarks, the reasons for opposing certification could be summarized as follows:

1) **The difference in the recognition of the industry.** Industrial designers recognize the industry as a service industry and most people consider that industrial design should be entitled to more tolerant evaluation criteria like the arts. Two options (the first option, 50.79%; the third option, 44.88%) examined industrial designers’ recognition of the industry and both obtained a great number of votes.

2) **The psychology of resistance to constraints.** The implementation of the certification system was considered as the government’s strengthened management, as well as a constraint on industrial designers’ creative activities (the sixth option, 51.18%).

3) **Doubt about the authorities’ motivation.** Negative public opinions and information about authorities on public media have given rise to designers’ distrust of the IDVQ. This was interpreted as the authorities’ excuse for charging application fees and training fees (the second option, 51.57%). According to the interviews, most designers didn’t understand the related vocational qualification certification systems in foreign countries and they believed foreign countries “are absolutely unlikely to have” the IDVQ.

4) **Misunderstanding of intention.** Certification was interpreted as the mandatory “threshold for access” to the industrial design industry, as in the cases of teachers, lawyers, and architects, etc. Industrial designers feared that restrictions would be imposed on their employment if they were without certification (the fifth option, 37.40%).

5) **The conformity effect.** Most of the opponents lacked confidence in the certification of their ability (according to the fourth option, only 20.47% of the opponents could certify their ability) and clearly knew that the role of education was limited (the seventh option,
11.81%). The contempt of some accomplished, confident designers for rules affects a large number of new entrants and the people with ordinary abilities that follow their lead. As a matter of fact, certification can genuinely help individuals that lack professional experience.

**Analysis of the Surveys**

This section attempted to have in-depth discussions about the data of the three surveys on the IDVQ on the basis of psychology and economics, with a view to drawing some conclusions beneficial to the means of implementing this system.

*“The Re-Queuing Effect” and Risk Aversion*

This study tended to consider that the proportion of this survey datum roughly conformed to “the re-queuing effect”. That is, the instruction “to re-queue” will be supported by the people at the end of the queue but strongly opposed by the people at the head of the queue. The respondents’ words in surveys conducted in the community confirmed the above analysis. The majority of the designers with years of experience opposed the IDVQ. These designers were confident and accomplished, which objectively caused them to reject being managed and examined by any rule or regulation.

The requeuing effect can be interpreted as a reflection of the psychological “loss aversion”, which is an important aspect of the prospect theory in economics. It means that people are more unable to accept losses compared to possible gains, even if the gains are far bigger than the losses. Loss aversion causes people to give too much weight to “stop-loss” when making decisions, preventing the objective maximization of gains (Kahneman, Tversky, 1979/1991).

*Non-technical Problems Caused by the Evaluation of Industrial Designers’ Abilities*

Whether the ability of industrial designers can be evaluated was one of the most debated issues of the surveys. Over 50% of designers thought that their ability was “not evaluable”. This viewpoint also widely exists in other fields of the creative industry.

The key to this problem should lie in whether the “evaluation ability” of designers’ talents as knowledge assets can be enhanced through technical means, to enable human resources departments of enterprises to find a more efficient, low-risk way of identifying their desired talent beyond time-consuming interviews and countless resumes. This is essentially a technical problem. According to the surveys, the crux lies in that people who questioned the cognizance of designers’ abilities didn’t intend to discuss this problem in the field of technology. The opponents generally first give a negative judgment and then upgrade the costs to a level of trust: “The government is prepared to do something that is destined to fail and so there must be other hidden purposes.” The opposition caused by the technical problem was only the embodiment of the deeper issue of trust.

*Causal Schema and the Availability Heuristic: The Trust Problem Caused by Information Asymmetry*

51.7% of the opponents revealed their distrust of government agencies that implemented the IDVQ, and this distrust was the primary reason for opposition. The information in the public debate is mixed with the responses to the event itself and the responses to the environment of the event, both of which interact by varying degrees for different people.
In the analysis of the survey data, the first step was to identify whether the opposition was a response to the IDVQ itself or to other disturbance variables. In the third survey, designers’ distrust of the implementing agencies seriously affected their objective evaluation of the effects of this management policy itself.

Related comments showed that most people did not understand the motivation for implementing the IDVQ from the perspective of improving industrial designers’ employment. The opponents interpreted the motivation as the government taking the opportunity to collect application fees and training fees, and its improper interference in the development of the industry. The mistrust leads to the casual schema (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) unfavorable to the government. In the study of the casual model in the judgment under uncertain conditions, Tversky (1973, 1974) pointed out that the frequency of focusing has a considerable effect on the estimation of the probability of the cause of an event. This principle is also referred to as “the availability heuristic”. That is, if an event is easily imagined or recalled, people will establish a causal relationship between this event and the issue being discussed on the basis of this heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, 1982). There is much negative information about the government on networks and this information is frequently seized on.

Subjective Probability and the Representativeness heuristic: The Opposition Caused by the Interference of Influence

The most famous research on the representativeness heuristic was carried out by Tversky and Kahneman (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). In short, they found that people’s estimation of “representativeness” differs greatly from the results of scientific probability calculations. The survey data indicated that the supporters of the IDVQ accounted for 43% and the opponents accounted for 33%. However, many speakers insisted that the voices of opposition represented the overall will of designers. This was because the proportion of the opponents that spoke was far greater than that of the supporters, as most of the supporters voted without voicing their opinions. The influence of the information expressed by concrete opinions was far greater than that of abstract (but objective) statistics. The earliest research on this was carried out in 1927. As far as the respondents of the surveys in this study were concerned, due to influence, the opinions of the senior designers in a minority were interpreted as representing the interests of most of the people in the industry and followed blindly. For mid-level designers in ordinary positions, the voices of opposition from senior designers who had achieved career success and serve as the “spiritual model” and “authority” in the industry had much greater influence on them than on low-level designers.

The results of the first survey indicated that the supporters of vocational qualification certification outnumbered the opponents. This is because the group of designers is in the shape of a pyramid like most hierarchical groups: senior designers are a minority and low-level designers are a majority. The supporters supported the IDVQ silently, while the opponents opposed it loudly, thinking that louder voices of opposition would be more unfavorable to the implementation of the new order and the maintenance of the status quo was the most favorable to them. Therefore, an illusion occurred—it seemed that the opponents opposed vocational qualification certification on behalf of the interests of most people.
Fairness Constraints in the Distribution of Costs and Benefits: The Opposition Caused by Doubts about Fairness

For the current mode of implementing the industrial designers’ vocational qualification system, costs are reflected in two aspects: one is the cost involved in the “marketization” of designers’ abilities, namely the development of a reasonable, effective system for assessing talent’s ability to be used by employers. This cost is primarily borne by the government. The second is the cost of using this “marketized” system. Currently, the cost of using the certification system is jointly borne by the government and designers: the government needs to organize the assessment and evaluation work, and designers need to spend money, time, and energy in preparing for certification.

From the perspective of the benefits of certification, the benefit to the government is obviously the normalization of the talent market and the improvement of employment (assuming that the assessment system is effective), and the benefit to enterprises is the significantly reduced costs of concluding transactions in talent, which is reflected by improved efficiency and reliability. However, for designers, the transparency of ability differs. Compared to an industry without certification, the certification system causes every designer to incur the costs of preparing for certification. However, the result of certification is not necessarily favorable to all, because after re-queuing, some people’s rankings will be worse than before. This situation is an inevitable phenomenon during the transition from an old order to a new order, as well as one of the important voices of opposition.

Suggestions on the Implementation of the Vocational Qualification Certification System in China

On the basis of the survey results, the following suggestions on the institutionalized management of industrial designers were put forward:

Building an environment of trust in order to change the distorted causal schema
Building a trust-based information environment for certification can improve the “visibility” of valuable information. It is a time-saving behavior for information processing, reducing the costs and improving the efficiency of information processing, which are very necessary in an age of fast-paced information. The building of an environment of trust includes three aspects: process transparency, information symmetry, and a foundation for understanding.

Facing the actual situation of industrial design and reducing designers’ loss aversion by increasing the probability of opportunities
Uncertain opportunities are an effective driving force to inspire a passion for creative work. Therefore, the method of assessment should consider the proper improvement of the proportion of non-cumulative accomplishments and the inclusion of knowledge, skills, learning abilities, and accomplishments in different certification levels in order to obtain all levels of designers’ recognition of the management system.

Uniting service objects, realizing fairness, and building a reasonable system for the distribution of costs and benefits
The industrial design industry essentially belongs to the service industry. Therefore, the service objects can be united to jointly implement institutionalized management. The statement that “there are no evaluation criteria for designers’ abilities” in the 51% of the approval rating clearly won’t be recognized by the service enterprises. Granting enterprises the right of assessment for certification is not only an honorary incentive to enterprises, but can also strengthen the communication and exchanges between creative people and the service enterprises.

*Cooperating on curricula education and focusing on serving the immediate beneficiaries of IDVQ*

The frequent reservations of “why is vocational qualification certification necessary with certificates of degrees” in the surveys indicated that there was not a clear understanding about the division of labour between curricula education and vocational education in China. For this, China can learn from the successful experience of the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, Japan, and others, by increasing the acceptance and popularity of the vocational qualification management system among students.

**Conclusions**

The surveys in this study were carried out during 2010-2012. The industrial designers’ vocational qualification system began to be formally implemented in Zhejiang province in 2013. Since then, a total of 77 designers have obtained junior professional titles, 105 designers have obtained intermediate professional titles, and 21 designers have obtained senior professional titles. From the perspective of the public opinion concerning the one-year implementation, the IDVQ is gradually being accepted and the topic that is discussed has shifted from whether it should exist to how to prepare for examinations. The most compelling reasons for opposition listed in the surveys have not been continued topics. A number of senior designers resigned from design companies after obtaining certificates and went to colleges to teach. Of course, deficiencies and defects still exist. A few individuals reflected that the examination questions cannot fully represent the abilities of a designer, but this topic is basically under technical discussion and has not aroused negative emotions related to fairness. Designers who failed the examination were mostly reserved and did not blame their failure on the process of examination, possibly because the obvious fairness of the IDVQ examination inhibits this emotional viewpoint.

Now, the IDVQ is currently implemented only in Guangdong Province and Zhejiang Province. The in-depth analysis of the voices of opposition provided valuable references for subsequent promotional strategies for the certification system.

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