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Young Rural-Urban Migrant Fathers in China: Everyday 'China Dream' and the Negotiation of Masculinity

Xiaodong Lin (University of York)

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Introduction

Rural-urban migration has transformed China's urban demographic landscape since its economic modernization in the late 1970s. Extensive studies in relation to gender and rural-urban migration (see Yan, 2008; Lin, 2014) have documented both male and female rural-urban workers' everyday life in both public and private spheres. Recent studies on rural-urban migration suggest that differences in relation to work and the family are experienced between the older and the younger generation of migrant workers (Wang, 2008; Pun and Chan, 2013). However, a younger generation's accounts, particularly in relation to their personal life, are still scant in the field of gender and migration in China. In response, I examine a younger generation of rural-urban migrant men (age between 20-25) and their understanding of fatherhood in this paper[1]. Existing studies in the field of migration, family relations and childcare/parenting in China highlight the problematic issues of migrant children or left-behind children, in relation to issues of parenting and education (see Zhang and Luo, 2016). More specifically, the national discourse of the 'China Dream'[2] advocates individual aspiration of prosperity and upward mobility that are in line with the pervasive national discourse of modernization and economic development. As Chinese President Xi maintains, it is the nation's goal to realize people's desire for a better life. This is elaborated in his remarks at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012 that 'our people have an ardent love for life. They wish to have better education, more stable jobs,

more income, greater social security, better medical and health care, improved housing conditions, and a better environment. They want their children to have sound growth, have good jobs and lead a more enjoyable life. To meet their desire for a happy life is our mission.'[3] Thus, within such a national aspiration for individual happiness and prosperity, an individual's everyday negation for a 'better' life has become a site of reflection and negotiation in making sense of how the China Dream is lived out in different communities within the context of rapid social changes and development. This paper seeks to examine a group of under-theorized rural-urban migrant young men's subjectivities as urban working class men and their active negotiation of an 'ordinary' life in light of the national discourse of the China Dream. Rather than seeking to identify new types of fatherhood, the paper explores the resources the migrant young men draw upon in articulating their expectation as fathers, the tensions in achieving masculine ideals as fathers, and their active negotiation in maintaining and justifying being fathers. I pay particular attention to the cultural values on parenting, children's education and gender responsibilities, in order to highlight how their masculinities as fathers are negotiated in their everyday lives.

Everyday Life Masculinities and Migrant Fatherhood in Neoliberal China

Within the context of global neoliberalism and social changes, critical studies on men and masculinities have highlighted multiple possibilities and meanings of masculinity (see Stahl et al., 2017; Cornwall et al., 2016). Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994, p.12) maintain that 'meanings of masculinity also vary across cultures and admit to cultural borrowing; masculinities imported from elsewhere are conflated with local ideas to produce new configurations.' Emerging discussions on individual responsibility and governmentality in the context of global neoliberalism have also critically interrogated how power and values

continue to (re)shape local meanings of masculinity through individuals' everyday life practices (see Cornwall et al., 2016).

In China, the government continues to make links between individual desire for success and the nation's ongoing modernization objectives, as articulated in the discourse of the China Dream. The new norms and expectations on individual responsibilities and selfhood also maintain the material constrains in achieving individual success and desire in the context that the national discourse of the China Dream promises. In the context of rural-urban migration, migrant workers are usually seen as citizens that 'lack' quality due to their low economic, social, and cultural capitals, or a population that lacks *suzhi* (human quality), in light of the connotation of their rural origin and social inequality as a result of the rural-urban division of the household registration system, or *hukou* in Chinese. Kipnis (2007, p. 390) engages with the concept of *suzhi* to understand how issue of class underpines the national modernization project. As he maintains, the concept of *suzhi* 'offers a way of speaking explicitly about class without using the word 'class''. Thus, *suzhi* does not create a discourse of addressing the issue of human quality, rather it reflects a broader social issue of inequality and moral anxiety of falling behind in the process of rapid social economic development (Kipnis, 2007). While the discourse of the China Dream might seem gender neutral by offering aspiration and opportunity for individuals' self-transformation to become better citizens while engaging with the country's neoliberal modernization project, Lin and Mac an Ghaill's (2017) critical discussion on '*suzhi* education' (education for quality) highlights how an emerging national anxiety about 'failing boys' at school speaks for the role of patriarchal masculine ideals in the construction of the nationalist narratives of modernization and development. Drawing upon interviews with male youth in the final year of their secondary education in Beijing, Liu's (2017, p.1) recent study further develops the discourse of *chenggong* (success/outstanding accomplishment) as a hegemonic form of masculinity,

highlighting its role as 'a prerequisite for the "the good life," "the good person," and "the good man"'. The meanings of masculinity in relation to the hegemonic discourse of *chenggong* (success/outstanding accomplishment) will be of importance in further investigating how masculine aspirations are internalized in socially marginalized young migrant men's everyday lives, with a focus on being a father.

Gender studies have approached the issue of fatherhood as a site of change, through which complex negotiations of paternal masculinity (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003) have developed. Diverse representations of fatherhood (see Chesley, 2011; Johansson and Klinth, 2008) have served as important cultural signifiers of contextualizing normalized masculinity, thus responding to the well-established field of critical studies on men and masculinities (see Connell, 1995; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003). In China, discussion on fatherhood is emerging (see Li, 2016; Liong, 2017), addressing both transformation and continuity engaging with traditional gender hierarchy, particularly in relation to patriarchy in the studies of gender relations in China. The figure of the father in China carries significant symbolic power within familial relationships. Ho (1987) describes the traditional pattern of Chinese fatherhood as emotionally detached and affectionately distanced, which are the opposite characteristics to the projected ideal of motherhood. Thus the constellation of *yan fu ci mu* (严父慈母 strict father, kind mother) is maintained within traditional family ethics (Li, 2016, p. 5). Fathers represent the moral standard and are involved in the discipline of their children. In traditional Chinese culture, education/discipline is central in the notion of parenting, especially in relation to the father's role. For example, Li and Lamb (2013, p.18) highlight the relations of education/discipline and fatherhood in a Confucian Classic, the 'Trimetric Classic' states that 'the misbehaviour of children was their father's fault（养不教, 父之过）.' The meanings of being a father are mutually constituted with other familial relations and identities. For example, in relation to the Confucius tradition of 'filial piety', Ho

acknowledges that 'children ought to be respectful, obedient, and devoted to their fathers' (1987, p.241). Significantly, within a traditional son-preference Chinese society, Lan (2011, p. 814) points out that, 'family membership, inheritance of property, and distribution of authority are defined through the main axis of father and son'. In this patrilineal family connection, being an adult son carries important filial obligations, including providing the offspring (Chen and Mac an Ghaill, 2015; Lin, 2014), living with and looking after the parents in old age (Murphy, et al, 2011), which are seen as ordinary practices of *bao da* (报答 payback) to parent's raring and financial investment. Thus, there are expectations of patrilineal mutual support and interdependence between generations in Chinese families.

The above cultural references of family relations have become important cultural resources in making sense of the tensions and negotiations in the everyday practices of fatherhood in the context of rural-urban migration. For example, Choi and Peng's (2016) ethnographic study on Chinese rural-urban migrant men suggests the notion of emotionality in making sense the men's relationships with their left behind children. The notion of rationality in making sense of Chinese masculinity is also illustrated in Lin's (2014) study on rural-urban migrant men in China. His study highlights that male migrant workers are actively negotiating their masculinity through reflecting on traditional relational gender values, such as deploying the traditional expectation of being a filial son, thus illustrating the symbolic significance of being a modern adult man. In so doing, it has become of central reference point in understanding the meanings of domestic masculinity in a Chinese context.

Methods and the Fieldwork

I select 13 young rural-urban migrant men[4], who self-identified themselves as fathers, out of a bigger sample that I collected in a fieldtrip in a coastal city in south China during the summer of 2015. I arranged with my contact to carry out the study in a local delivery

company. Express delivery was one of the emerging businesses within the growing service industry in urban China, due to the increasing number of online shopping[5]. Also, delivery companies are understood as workplaces where younger male migrant workers are on demand and employed due to the physical demand of the job. I purposively recruited the participants through a gatekeeper in order to make sure that they fitted into the category of a younger generation of migrant workers. All the participants were born in the early half of the 1990s. The interviews were carried out in the evenings, before their shifts and during their breaks while they were sorting parcels before next day's delivery. As a small-scale study, the study focuses on meanings of their everyday life as migrant young fathers through a reflexive narrative approach, aiming to tease out different layers of meanings in relation to their family lives. Lawler (2002, p.242) acknowledges the central role of culture in studying narratives in relation to 'what can be said, what stories can be told, what will count as meaningful, and what will seem to be nonsensical.'

During the fieldwork in the summer of 2015, there was pervasive media coverage on the falling price of the shares market in China[6] and its impact on the increasing participation of urban middle class in light of their aspiration for prosperity of material life within the discourse of the 'China Dream', seeing the notion of 'aspiration' as a process of masculine identification (Stahl et al., 2017). What interested me was how the rural-urban migrant young men, who are at the margin of the urban economic prosperity, respond to the news on the turbulence of the stock exchange market and what it means to them as urban working class young men in relation to aspiration of prosperous life. Therefore, I chose the news about the shares market and asked my participants if they have heard about it and to comment on it. The reason for choosing the news of the shares market as an ethnographic vignette (Finch, 1987) was a reflexive consideration of what is relevant at the moment of interview. It was a strategy that I deployed to locate their narratives within a particular social-historical juncture

of rapid economic development as well as the pervasive public discourse on a neoliberal market economy, marked by the 'China Dream' and individual aspiration of prosperous lifestyle (Chu and Chiu Hail, 2014). Although the national discourse of the 'China Dream' is not an everyday language people explicitly use or talk about in their daily conversation, the conversation on the news regarding the shares market became an important ethnographic moment when the young migrant men began to reflect on their material marginality in the city, as well as revealing their gendered experience of a specific aspect of their lives as 'young' fathers. As Willis (2004, p.181) argues that masculinities cannot be understood within a vacuum. Rather, he maintains that 'they form always in some institutional, class, and power context and in relation to other discourses and symbolic relations in order to really make progress'. The young fathers' narratives also corresponds with Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003, p.112), who have critically examined pro-feminist methodology and maintain that 'the shift to an anti-oppressive research framework invites the operation of particular scripts for the researcher and the research participants. The selected participants here highlight a reality involving married life with early age children. This enabled me to shift the research question at an early stage in the empirical research from looking at a younger generation of migrant workers' aspiration, to focus on their understanding of fatherhood. Through the discussion in relation to their narratives of being a young father, I started to explore how they mobilized various cultural resources in the construction of fatherhood, as well as its attendant meanings, tensions and values in their everyday negotiations.

After the fieldwork, the data were first categorized into different themes by establishing similar conceptual statements from their narratives about their aspiration for themselves and for their families. For example, a general theme emerged in terms of the young men's narratives about their views on what they thought was important as fathers in bringing up their children. This was followed by a search for associated narratives in relation to their

expectations on parenting, children's education and their relationships with their parents in relation to parenting. It is important to emphasize that the data analysis in this study does not seek to represent the experience of all young migrant men in the country. Rather, it aims to capture 'meaningful experience-structure links' (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, p. 93) that are important for a particular generation and at a particular historical context in contemporary China.

Materiality, Aspiration, Masculinity and Migrant Fatherhood

> Zhou Min (25, with a 5-year-old son): Yes, everyone is talking about 'shares'. I don't even think about it. First, I don't have much 'culture' (meaning: knowledge, education credentials) and I don't know how to do it. Second, even if I have some spare money, I wouldn't have spent it on shares. It is like gambling. I have heard that some people make a lot of money over night, but then lose everything.

The above comment by Zhou Min was common among the young migrant men, alongside the issue of lacking economic resources to take the risk, Zhou Min implied his inadequacy in terms of knowledge in taking part in the shares market. Most of them stressed that given that they had small children, they did not want to take the risk of participating in the stock market. Thus, providing material stability for their young families is indicative of a winding path towards their own 'China Dream' (also see Chu and Chiu-Hail, 2014). The young fathers' awareness of their lack of economic resources also speaks for how the intersectionality of class and masculinity were lived out in their subjectivities as young fathers. I have selected a few representative comments from the young men,

Wang En (24, with a 2-year-old daughter): I have my child to feed. You have to think about the family. Whatever you do, you need to think about the kid.

Yang Da (25, with two daughters aged 1 and 4): (if you) only feed one child, it is possible. I have two. The costs of going to the kindergarten and everyday spending are high. I save a little…But it is for the kids when they need it in the future.

Zheng Si (21, with a one-year-old son): It (participating in the shares market) is too complex. My son was just born. My wife won't allow me to. She said if you have saved any money, we should do some small business, selling small things on online, to subsidise the costs of family spending.

On the one hand, the above extracts might seem to illustrate that the men lack desire and ambition for a better material life and they that appear to emphasise the issue of 'feeding' the family. This might seem alien within a context where the whole nation's active involvement in economic activities is to invest in prosperity (see Ren & Hu, 2016). However, their accounts imply that they are socio-economically marginalized, particularly regarding their concern about the risk of losing money in the market. On the other hand, the comments explicitly mentioned that if they lose money in the shares market, it would have an impact on their family, especially when they have early age children. Their narratives highlight the central function of economic stability in the negotiation of becoming a sensible father, such as managing the family finance, as the primary paternal role as a breadwinner is to 'feed' the family. Their accounts also illustrated the notions of gender expectations, familial cultural responsibilities and obligations as fathers, which serve in their reflections on the right thing to do at this stage in their lives.

Fatherhood beyond a breadwinner

The lack of economic resources seems like a key issue for the migrant young father as breadwinners, as they articulate above the importance of their central role to 'feed' the family as ordinary practices of fatherhood. Xiao Liang was one of the sorting workers that actively sought opportunities to provide a good life for his son. At the age of 23, with a 2-year-old son, Xiao Liang had experience of several jobs. At the time of interview, he had two jobs at the same time.

> Xiao Liang: Many of us here have two or three jobs. I used to have one job. About two years ago, I started to work part-time in the evening here (the delivery company). In the daytime, I work in another factory.
>
> Interviewer: Why did you need to have two jobs.
>
> Xiao Liang: The cost of raising children is high. Children now spend more money than us. I would like save up some money for him to go to nursery and primary school. I thought I didn't have work at night at that time, why not have a part-time job in the evening so that I can make more money.

Provide economic stability was acknowledged by the young migrant men as a central way of being a father and a breadwinner. Meanwhile, they also expressed strong views of being a moral role model beyond a breadwinner for their early year children. For example, Zhou Min maintains that,

> I am quite strict. It is important for him to have enough food to eat and to grow up healthily. Some parents try to fulfill their children's demand. I seldom buy toys for him (his son). I think it is important to teach him when he is still young that it is not easy to make money, and not to spend money without purpose.

Li Qi is 23 and has a 3-year-old daughter. Unlike Zhou Min, he revealed that he was what he referred to as a 'softer father' to his daughter, compared to his wife as the 'strict mother'.

> Li Qi: My wife complains that I always act like a good person in front of our daughter… I am indeed spoiling her (the daughter). In the normal day, I don't spend much time with her. It is her mother looking after her. She always *sa jiao* (撒娇 be affectionate) to me when I am home. She knows she can ask for anything from me. Her mum complains that my 'job' is to just give her candy.
>
> Interviewer: So her mum is stricter than you.
>
> Li Qi: She is stricter than me. I told her that she (the daughter) is just little, naughty, it is normal, no need to be too harsh. But I only become serious when she is impolite in front of adults. Sometimes, we might just think about providing a good life for our children. I don't have much culture (meaning: knowledge and education credentials), but I think it is important to well *guan jiao* (管教 manage and teach/discipline) them (how to behave).

Zhou Min and Li Qi seemed to represent themselves as different types of father to a son and to a daughter. There are indications of different attitudes to being fathers to a girl and to a boy. However, both of them stressed their moral responsibility as a father. Significantly, Li Qi implied his 'inadequacy' in terms of his intellectual capability that the modern value of education seems to emphasise, including education credentials, which he lacked. In this process of self-reflection, Li Qi reclaimed his masculinity as a moral role model in responding to his expectation for his child in a context where the national discourse of the China Dream overwhelmingly celebrates materiality and desire for prosperity as a marker of individual success.

'I would like him to have the same things as the other ordinary kids in the city…'

Existing studies on migration and education (Ji and Koblinsky, 2009; Li. 2001) maintain that Chinese migrant families are committed to enabling their children's success. Within the context of rapid economic development in China, the issue of rural-urban migrant children's schooling has been raised in recent studies on education and migrant children (see Zhang and Luo, 2016). The rural-urban migrant young fathers' aspiration is expressed through their expectation for their children's educational success, which appeared to be important in their negotiation of fatherhood. Yu Ming had a 6-year-old daughter. He was one of the older migrant men I interview, at the age of 25, Yu Ming had worked for the delivery company for 3 years as a team leader. When he talked about being a responsible father, Yu Ming mentioned the notion of giving his daughter an ordinary person's life. Education was becoming a pressing issue for Yu Ming given that his daughter is reaching an age for school.

Yu Ming: I would like to give my child an ordinary person's life.

Interviewer: What do you mean by ordinary person's life?

Yu Ming: It doesn't mean that I will promise her to go to what kind of school, or promise her to buy anything she wants. But I will give her what I think is the best for her. I don't care about myself. I will try my best to give her all the necessity in her life. Once I have fulfilled her everyday necessity such as education.

Interviewer: Is she going to school nearby?

Yu Ming: It is difficult to say. We might have to send her to the primary school back to our hometown. I don't want to think about it now. It would be difficult for her… she has never left us.

Interviewer: How do you feel about it (sending her back to your hometown)?

> Yu Ming: It will be difficult. She is still little, she won't understand us. But I need to be concerned about her future, and to let her go to a better school.

Yu Ming's interview indicates the challenges and concerns of migrant fathers in relation to the issue of education and the harmony of family life. His notion of providing an "ordinary person's life" entails the tension between living as an ordinary family, who can stay together and a possible situation of having to send his daughter back to their hometown for school. Although the Chinese government has initiated policies to support migrant children to attend urban public schools since 2001, in many cases, being a migrant child without the city *hukou* (household registration) and relevant documents are still preventing migrant children from attending 'ordinary' public schools in the city (see Zhang and Luo, 2016). In the migrant men's accounts, education has become a reference point for them to understand whether they have fulfilled their responsibility as a good father. There is a sense of lacking in Yu Ming's account about the issue of fatherhood. This was illustrated in his anxieties of not being able to send his daughter to a public school in the city. However, Yu Ming justified his sense of being a good father is to provide an ordinary person's life for his daughter although it would be contradictory if he needed to send his daughter back to his hometown. Apart from ordinary schooling, the notion of an ordinary person's life was equally endorsed by other migrant young fathers' anxiety about extra curriculum activities, which were common in the city.

> Lin Qiang (25, with a 5 year-year-old daughter): sometimes we (my wife and I) have an argument about small things, such as whether to buy an electronic keyboard for my daughter or not. I told my wife that we don't know whether she like it or not, don't waste money in case she doesn't like it. When she is a bit older, it is up her to decide. Apart from the electronic keyboard, as long as she wants to learn, buying a piano is worthy.

> Wang Jie (25, with a 4 year-old-son): He (my son) has just started to go to nursery. I would like him to have the same things as the other ordinary kids in the city. If the other kids learn music instruments or painting, I would like my son to have the same if he (my son) wants to in the future.

Education seems to be key in shaping the young migrant men's understanding of adequate fatherhood. Studies on rural-urban migrant children has suggested that migrant children tend to experience marginalization in urban schools that prevent them from achieving good academic performance (see Zhang and Luo, 2016). Wang Jie's view furthered supports Lin Qiang's account, emphasizing the symbolic meanings of providing extra-curricular activities to their children. Significantly, the notion of 'having the same things as other ordinary kids in the city' in his narrative is of significance in demonstrating his understanding of a good parenting. Equally of importance, is their ways of articulating their expectation for their children to be 'ordinary' through taking part in extra-curricular activities to become citizens with 'quality'. This is particularly critical within the discourse of *suzhi*, which is prevalent in the context of neoliberal modernization, regarding the issue of aspiration and improving human quality through education (Lin, 2017; Lin and Man Ghaill, 2017). The migrant men's aspiration of being able to afford extra-curricular activities for their children's education illustrate how they have internalized of the values of the *suzhi* discourse, seeing extra-curricular activities as a way of cultivating their children to become the same as other urban children in the context of the neoliberal market economy. Simultaneously, it also speaks for the anxiety of their inadequacy as migrant fathers. That is, in order to fulfill the role as a good father, they believe that it is important for their children to have the same opportunity for extra-curricular activities, which are seen as the norm among urban middle class families in China (see Lin, 2017). Meanwhile, some migrant men in the study also demonstrated their roles as strategic decision makers since they have become a father. Li Qiu (23 years old, with

a 4-year-old son) was committed to choosing a right place for his family. He appeared to have no plan of staying in City T for good. As he insisted the importance of sending his son to a state school near where they came from,

> …It is not in my long-term plan to stay here. When my son is growing older, he will need to go to school. You must have heard about the difficulty of going to a city school. I am very worried about his future…

Li Qiu expressed his role as a father in arranging a good living and growing up environment for his children. Although the city might seem to be a better place for Li Qiu to bring up his son, however, the expectation of ensuring his son received a better educational opportunity has enabled him to make a strategic plan for his future. His account also implies the limits of material conditions as a migrant father. Many of the migrant men I interviewed had early age preschool children. Issues of their children's future education seemed to have emerged in their everyday life parenting, as indicated by Li Qiu. Unlike Li Qiu, Zhou Min indicated communication and mutual reflection between him and his wife, who was working as a manager at a local convenience store, on their children's future education. In relation to his son's education, Zhou Min said,

> 'It really concerns us about the issue of school. It is important to ensure he attends a good school. But it is easy to say, difficult to make a decision. It won't be easy for us to send him to the village to live with his grandparents. It is certainly not easy for his mother. We have been discussing, such as we might go back to our hometown together. I can just find another one. But it would be difficult for her. It is not easy for her to find a similar job there.'

From the above extracts, it may appear easy to conclude that children's education play an important part in shaping young migrant men's understanding as a father. However, the

process of aspiration for their children's education requires complex reflection on their material conditions as working class migrants, as well as their gender negotiations as a husband that is implied by Zhou Min's accounts.

Migrant fathers, inter-generational supports and filial piety

The above extracts suggest that the men's material aspiration plays a key role in maintaining and negotiating the masculine ideal of being a father. This has been demonstrated through their accounts of anxieties as well as their aspiration regarding their children's future education, as an expression of fulfilling their responsibility as fathers. The men also illustrated alternative ways of negotiating material life in their and their families' future. Liu Lu (25, with a 4 year-old-daughter) reflected on the choice of investment.

> Liu Lu: Since I started to work here, we have been renting a place to live. Until recently, my wife and I were discussing about buying a *fangzi* (house/apartment). After my daughter was just born, I bought a car a few years ago. I thought it would be more convenient if I took her out. Now I don't think it is too pragmatic. Our child is growing up gradually; it is time to have a stable home.
>
> Interviewer: What kind of *fangzi* you would like to buy?
>
> Liu Lu: I don't have many requirements. I can't afford a big one…a small one is good. I had started to have some savings a few years ago. But I still need to borrow some money from the family.

The temporary symbolic meanings of investing in materiality are important for the migrant men in securing their masculinities and performing paternal identities. Liu Lu realized the meanings of buying a car and a *fangzi* in different stage of his life. Buying a car has enabled

him to become an involving father when his daughter was small. While his daughter is growing, he realized that a *fangzi* is of importance for the long term in symbolically claiming his ability of providing a stable home as a father. However, the reality could be challenging as it was not easy for migrant workers, such as Liu Lu, to secure enough money from their wages so that they were taking the risk of relying on borrowing money from their friends and families, as Liu Lu mentioned. However, unlike Liu Lu who was saving money to buy his first property, Tang Tang's (22, with a two-year-old son) parents were buying a second hand apartment in a suburban area near their home village where his sister and brother-in-law also lived. As Tang Tang said,

> They (my parents) and my sister want to live close by so we can all look after each other in the future. A second hand apartment is still affordable. My parents have saved some money from working in the city. They said the flat is bought for me. Now my son is still young, staying with us. When he is growing older it is better to move back to my hometown to live with my parents so that he can go to school there. It is more settled, and we can look after each other.

A similar case of receiving family support was mentioned by Yang Dong. Yang Dong was a 23 year, with a 5-year-old son. He was working part-time at the delivery company, while having another job at a local factory. Once he finished his day shift at the factory, he came to the delivery company to sort the mail and parcels at night. When he was discussing his views on the shares market, he revealed his aspiration in relation to his family, particularly as a father. His account also illustrates how traditional patrilineal support worked together with neoliberal ideology, highlighting the 'enterprising' aspect of becoming a sensible father in negotiating financial risks. Significantly, his account implied the role of

intergenerational support across three generations in realizing the young migrant fathers' masculinities.

> You don't know what will happen in the future. You might end up losing everything and have nothing to leave for your children. Owning a *fangzi* (house) means that it belongs to me and I can pass it on to my children.

Buying a house for him and for his children was regarded as fulfilling his desire for a better material life that might help us make sense of how an ordinary 'China Dream' was lived out. However, as a migrant man, his aspiration for providing a stable material future for his son is limited by his economic position and so he is financially supported by his father:

> …My father said they don't need money and asked me to spend it on my son. Now we just give them some money when we go home. They said they would save it for me in case we need the money in the future. I talked to them before saying we were thinking to buy a house. And they would like to help to make the first payment…. People like us won't be able to afford a house without our parents' help.

Yang Dong's account of buying a *fangzi* illustrated his aspiration of being father and as a neo-liberal subject investing for the future. He believed that buying a *fangzi* (house/apartment) would enable him to make a masculine achievement as a father through passing it on to his son. Such a perspective is typical within patrilineal societies such as China, where the son preference is the norm (see Murphy et al. 2011; Lin and Mac an Ghaill 2017). Yang Dong's account also highlighted the economic marginalization and the negotiation of a good father. In his case, his lack of economic resources resulted in his needing to receive financial support from his parents. Simultaneously, an extended line of patrilineal familial practices of being a man as a father and as a son was demonstrated in Yang Dong's accounts through which he was able to claim his masculinity as being a good father. Sun (2002) points out that Chinese

family members are interdependent and that there is a strong cultural expectation of mutual assistance being offered when in need. At the same time, such practices of 'grandparent - father- child' relations imply a link between different responsibilities attached to different gender roles among the three generations and patrilineal support for aspiring to a better life for the next generation. In this case, the notion of 'fatherhood' has become a collective entity as articulated in the collective familial practice of buying a property for the younger family, which is indicative of how the local China Dream is lived out through intergenerational familial support. For example, as demonstrated in Tang Tang's accounts previously, his parents were buying a house for him so that they would be able to live together with his parents. While his parents would help look after his child, he would also be expected to look after his parents when they are old. Through this intergenerational support and connection, migrant men, such as Yang Dong, were able to demonstrate the simultaneity of their masculine identities as both a filial son and a responsible father.

The correlation of being a filial son and a good father in their narratives of fatherhood were further elaborated upon in other migrant young men's narratives on grandparents and grandchildren relationships. For example, Zhou Min discussed earlier parenting about the importance of not leaving his child behind, also revealed that he had to send his son to his hometown to live with his parents while he is on holiday.

> Interviewer: Do your parents look after him in the summer holiday?
>
> Zhou Min: Yes, just for the holidays. In normal days, it is better to stay with us. The grandma and grandpa spoil him too much. They (my parents) are just happy that he is there.

In Zhou Min's account, letting his son stay temporarily with his parents in the summer seems like a sensible solution. For example, he can still perform his fatherhood for most of the year

and maintain the parental standards he has set for his child which are not shared by his own parents, while at the same time sending his son to be looked after by the grandparents also makes his parents happy as they 'perform' their roles as grandparents (see Xie and Xia, 2011). Their ways of enacting 'family practices' (see Morgan, 2013) regarding intergenerational support, thus maintaining harmonious intergenerational relations, was acknowledged by the migrant young men as important cultural resources in making sense of their masculinity as a father, as exemplified by Wang En, when he discussed the symbolic connection between a sensible father and a filial son. Wang En was 24 year old when we met. He and his wife had been married for almost three years. Soon after their marriage, his wife gave birth to a baby girl. At the time when I interviewed him, they were living in a small rented flat in a suburban village. He was talking about how intergenerational relations were maintained despite living away from his parents and highlighted the symbolic connections between being a sensible father and son.

> Wang En: ...They (my parents) are in their 40s, almost 50s. So they are still young and healthy and don't have any problems. We give them a call once a week. I just need to manage my little family and my child can receive merit education. It is their (my parents) opinion too…. They don't ask for much in terms of money and material needs. As long as they know that we live a good life and my child is healthy, they are pleased.
>
> Interviewer: They must be missing your daughter.
>
> Wang En: We call them on the phone. My parents like talking to my daughter. My daughter knows her grandparents. No matter what she says, she can always make my parents happy, even just keep calling them 'grandpa, grandma…', they (my parents) are so happy.

The case of Wang En illustrates the explicit interconnection between being a good father and being a filial son, as a way of demonstrating an ideal life in neoliberal China where many family members are living apart as a result of migration and work. It is his way of keeping the family in 'harmony' and be 'normal'. To be able to look after his young family in the city, and provide a good education for his daughter are symbolically meaningful of being a good father. Equally of importance, they also represent the quality of a capable son, which is a masculine ideal of a successful adult man in China, another example that illustrates Liu's conceptualization of *chenggong* (2017) (success/outstanding accomplishment) as a hegemonic form of masculinity. While Wang En's narrative endorses the priority of being a father in his account to be able to provide a good life, such as high quality education, to the children is also a way to demonstrate his filial responsibility as a capable son.

Conclusion

The men's narratives highlight how the national discourse of 'China Dream' has been lived out through ordinary migrant men's articulation of fatherhood. The paper does not intend to reinforce a one dimensional gender role discussion on fathers, thus reproducing a cultural essentialist account (Narayan, 1998) on fatherhood, or highlighting a new fatherhood. Rather, the paper brings to light complex negotiations of masculine ideals as adequate fathers. The paper acknowledges how moral values, educational investments and inter-generational kin supports were strategically deployed by the young men to compensate for their social economic disadvantages in order to negotiate their subjectivities of becoming responsible modern fathers. Their accounts highlight the intersectionality of class, gender and culture in shaping fathering practices at a time of economic uncertainty, particularly for the working class. Speaking at a particular stage of their life course, when they are in their early 20s with

early age children, the young migrant men reflect on this unique 'transitional' period of being a young father marked by anxiety, aspiration and expectations in a neoliberal context.

The young men's aspiration to provide education opportunities and a stable economic life for their children involves a complex negotiation of being a working-class migrant man, a husband/partner and a son. While expressing anxiety and their sense of 'lacking' as rural-urban migrant men, they also deployed different cultural resources of gender expectations in family relations, such as being a moral role model and a filial son in maintaining their adequate masculine ideals. Their accounts suggest the importance of addressing different social and cultural forces in understanding masculinity that have been articulated in the young migrant fathers' narratives. Through these forms of identification, including cultural expectations and aspirations, the young migrant men were able to maintain, justify, perform and negotiate masculine ideals, involving wider family relations in making sense of their own meanings of modern fatherhood.

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NOTES

[1] The paper is based on a British Academy funded research project (Ref: SG142139), entitled 'Revisiting rural-urban migrant men in China: exploring youth, masculinities and aspirations'.

[2] Wang (2014) acknowledges that the concept of the China Dream is maintained by the Chinese President Xi as a dream 'to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. The concept has been simultaneously promoted by the government 'to convince the general public that the dream was also for each individual Chinese. The realization of this dream for the country would be the catalyst for the realization of the dream for the individual.' (Wang, 2014: 8)

[3] Full Text: Xi Jinping's remarks to the press. http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/18da/2012-11/15/content_27121782.htm (accessed on 15th March 2018)

[4] All the participants in the study have been anonymized.

[5] China's online shopping activities are growing. It is reported that 2.47 trillion yuan of sales was achieved just in the first five months of 2017, up 32.5 percent year on year. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-06/16/content_29775936.htm (accessed on 30-01-18)

[6] Elliott, Larry. 2015. China's stock market turbulence is over? Don't count on it. *The Guardian*, Sunday 12 July 2015 https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jul/12/china-stock-market-turbulence-is-over-dont-count-on-it (accessed on 31-01-18)