Original Article

# “We have many options, but they are all bad options!”: Aspirations Among Internal Migrant Youths in Shanghai, China

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**Abstract**

This article explores the considerations internal migrant youths in Shanghai make as they orient themselves towards the future. Unlike their parents, these youths come of age with dreams and desires that mirror those of their local middle-class peers, yet they are funnelled into the vocational educational system since they do not have local household registrations. Cast as non-aspiring and failed students that break with doxic middle-class aspirations, I contend these youths still find ways to aspire and strategize to achieve a better life. As such, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the grounds on which vocational education is chosen. Rather than a negative choice, I argue that migrant youths who attend vocational education may do so as a compromise between potential material gains, prestige, feelings of belonging, filial piety and closeness to family and friends. Therefore, educational aspirations cannot be untied from broader desires for the future.

**Keywords:** Aspiration, China, Internal Migration, Youth, Education

**Introduction:**

Studies of Chinese educational governance have uncovered substantial problems in the access and equity within the country's education system that strongly disadvantages youths of a rural migrant background (See Dong, 2010, Qian and Walker, 2015, Wang, 2016, Wang et al., 2017, Xiong, 2015). Ethnographies of migrant education have made important contributions in mapping the manifold social, economic and political structures that young people and their families of a rural background have to relate to (See Goodburn, 2009, Koo, 2012, Kwong, 2006, Wang, 2008). Combined, the literature demonstrates that migrant youths' ability to achieve upwards mobility is challenged by poverty, state structures such as the household registration system (*hukou*) and educational regulations. While being contextually relative, in China young people have to make important decisions about what educational or vocational pathway to follow in their early teens (for further insights, see Willy Sier in this issue). This moment of transition has particular implications for migrant youths, who do not have full local welfare rights to public education due to their non-local household registrations (*hukou*). While they may attend public primary schools, they are subsequently faced with an educational choice that has existential consequences. They may migrate back to the place of their household registration, in practice meaning their parents' rural communities in the interior provinces, to attend years of arduous secondary education in the hope that they can secure a place for themselves at a university. This is a journey that is fraught with challenges and pressures of an academic, economic, emotional and psychosocial nature (Hansen, 2015, Koo et al., 2014, Ling, 2017). Alternatively, they may stay in the city of their upbringing, and attend vocational education. While the latter option does not offer prestige in Chinese society, and is commonly regarded as leading to a life of manual labor, most migrant youths choose this latter pathway. Recent anthropological and sociological studies devoted to youths in vocational schools show that they experience limited upward social mobility (Hansen and Woronov, 2013, Koo, 2012,

2016, Woronov, 2011, 2012, 2015). Indeed, some studies have noted how vocational education is about passing time (*hun*) in the classroom, since neither teachers nor students attribute much practical value to what is taught and learned (Koo, 2016, Ling, 2015, Woronov, 2012).

Thus, we are left with a rather bleak picture of the public education available to migrant youths. Indeed, we may be left with the impression that the educational structures are so stifling that the youths fall into apathy in vocational schools, rather than aspiring for a university diploma and apply themselves to achieve it. This logic of the failed vocational student is commonsensical in China (Woronov, 2015: 2). In other parts of the world, policy makers and economists have referred to this as a self-sustaining vicious cycle, where the marginalized internalize their low positions and view the outcomes of privileged aspirations as unattainable for them. Furthermore, they have conceptualized the aspirations of the poor as 'low', and how this leads to underachievement, which they term 'aspiration failure' (Flechtner, 2014, Ray, 2006). Educationalists and anthropologists have been critical of such conceptualizations, and the supposed need to 'stretch' or 'raise aspirations'. This is because they argue these distinctions reflect a middle-class bias of what aspirations are considered worthwhile (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, Gale and Parker, 2015, Scandone, 2018). It is problematic to only view university graduates as aspirational, as this does not grasp the basis on which such or alternate orientations towards the future are grounded.

Migrant youths seemingly "have many options, but they are all bad options", as Liming, a 16-year old girl once jokingly told me. However, while I have named this article accordingly, it seeks to nuance the victimhood that Liming alludes to. I do not refute that there are problems in Chinese vocational education. However, I demonstrate that there are reasons why a vocational educational trajectory can be seen as a better path than the precarious road to higher

education. As Sam Sellar, Trevor Gale and Stephen Parker (2011) have noted, while higher education does offer important benefits that may both be cultural and economic, it is not a given that a higher education will yield better returns than other educational and occupational pathways. Based on the reflections of vocational students like Liming and other youths I studied in Shanghai between 2010-2012, I contend that vocational students of a migrant background do not necessarily orient themselves to their futures or strategize less than locally-registered middle-class high school students do – even if this is how they are commonly portrayed (Woronov, 2015). Crucially, I emphasize that educational aspirations cannot be separated from broader desires towards achieving a 'better life', as the former is often so fundamentally formative of the latter. That is, migrant youths who enter vocational education might not do so as a result of negative choice, but compromises of a series of aspirations for what constitutes 'a better life' than doxic ideas of 'the good life' in Chinese society. As such, my endeavor is to nuance studies that focus solely on educational aspirations as a form of rational choice, and where migrant students end up being categorized as victims or failed students because they do not aspire 'highly' enough. In the following, I begin with outlining how I understand educational aspirations.

**Theorizing educational aspirations in the context of China**

Since the reform era started in the 1980s, the Chinese government has invested heavily in all levels of the country's educational system. In concert with this, Andrew Kipnis has asserted that China is currently suffused with what he terms 'educational desire', the widespread sentiment that higher education is an end in and of itself. Importantly, Kipnis found that educational desire was not governed by a small group of elites, but was "carried out by various representatives of state agencies, by teachers and parents, by children vis-à-vis one another, and by everyone vis-à-vis him or herself" (2011: 5). Furthermore, it "invokes a system of prestige

in which those with educational accomplishments are marked as superior to the noneducated" (ibid.). This, in turn, relates to other systems of inequality in China, and is reinforced by Chinese development discourse focusing on human capital and quality (*suzhi*). Kipnis weaves together a wide range of political, economic and culture-historical factors across different societal levels in order to uncover the sources of educational desire. In my interpretation, the implication is that university education has become close to a national aspiration in China. Kipnis' study starts at the county level and becomes increasingly macroscopic. Given this, and a stronger focus on the perspectives of parents and teachers rather than those of the young people themselves, I believe more may be said about the dynamics happening at the micro-level of individuals, families and local communities. I argue that educational desire must be understood in light of the ways in which individual youths negotiate it in relation to the particularities of their own life situations, and their own dreams and desires. After all, not all youths have the same abilities to act on their educational desire, and this difference between desire and action is important.

Arjun Appadurai argues that aspirations are relational and "always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life" (2004: 67). Therefore, he contends that the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed in any given society. This is not to say that the poor have any less sense of what they view as good lives than people who are better off, nor fewer desires, dreams or wants. Rather, they have fewer opportunities than the well off to learn about their talents, opportunities and goals. Furthermore, they are disadvantaged in their collective ability to shape their sociocultural context so that their aspirations are considered legitimate and valid. Appadurai therefore argues that a stifling aspect of poverty is how it affects the navigational capacity the poor have to act on their aspirations.

Lew Zipin, Sam Sellar, Marie Brennan and Trevor Gale (2015) argue that following structural shifts and neoliberal modes of rationality, a form of governance has appeared in 'advanced capitalist nations', where investment in peoples aspirations has replaced welfare state logics of responding to citizen expectations (2015: 228). While the aspirational working middle-class is valorised, those who fall behind are blamed for myriad social problems due to their poverty of aspirations (ibid). According to the authors, this is the result of a key governmentality of our times, where individuals are personally responsible for their own well-being as lifelong learners and entrepreneurs of the self. If unsuccessful, it is the fault of the lazy and unaspiring individual. A case in point, China has simultaneously maintained the household registration system (*hukou*) from its socialist past, while it has also retreated from and individualized its previous role as a welfare supplier following increasingly neoliberal politics. In practice, this means that non-local young people are caught between limited educational rights, and an individual responsibility to nonetheless surmount these. Combined with a development discourse on 'population quality' (*renkou suzhi)* that emphasizes the vital importance of education for the progress of the nation (Anagnost, 1995, 2004, Kipnis, 2006, 2007), this leads to a deficit-view. This pathologizes people of a rural and migrant background without considering the context that they navigate within, to use Appadurai's term (Hartas, 2016, Scandone, 2018). Following a Bourdieusian framework, Zipin et al contend that aspirations are on the one hand doxic. That is, as a logic, aspirations are subject to taken for granted, 'common-sense' and normative meanings and values of everyday life. As a form of omni-present aspiration, I believe educational desire (Kipnis, 2011) is doxic. However, there is a symbolic violence in this, as doxic aspirations are rooted in middle-class realities and not those of lesser-privileged groups such as migrant youths, who nevertheless aspire accordingly. When underprivileged groups internalise their low positions and this affects their aspirations, Zipin et al argue the latter

become habituated. This means that individuals embody a self-limiting of possibilities within given structural positions (2015: 223-224).

However, doxic and habituated aspirations do not sufficiently account for the dynamic ways in which young people may try to navigate their realities, they claim. And so Zipin et al coin a third conceptualization of aspirations as emergent. This is a "locus of agency wherein young people have possibilities to exceed older generational inheritances, reading the world anew and – particularly if power-marginalized – wrestling anew with the cruel optimisms that history bequeaths to them" (2015: 243). That is, young people may interpret and act on their outlooks in new generational ways that transcends "habituated dispositions and populist doxa, leading towards reformations and transformations" (ibid). However, I believe it is important to avoid what Sumi Madhok has termed 'action bias' in the study of agency. This is when single and specific actions or outcomes are interpreted as indicative of the presence or absence of agency, rather than viewing them contextually as part of a larger sequence of events (2013: 108). In applying this perspective to aspirations, those who stay behind for vocational education neither have to be less agentic or aspiring than those who migrate for high school and university education. On the contrary, my research points to complex considerations of a range of factors leading to a *compromise* to stay behind. Youths who aspire and navigate towards 'a middle way' break with the binary understanding of youths who either aspire and migrate for (higher) education, or who are non-aspirational and stay put.

I propose that a more constructive approach to understanding the aspirations of the young, is to do so through a relational and generational focus. For Roy Huijsmans, relational thinking "emphasizes relationships, networks, interaction, negotiation, the everyday and power" (2016: 4). Ontologically then, relational thinking seeks to look past static agency-structure binaries.

This approach situates young people's lives contextually and historically in order to grasp how they are shaped by, and in turn also shape, forces outside of their immediate environment (Huijsmans et al., 2014: 165). In line with Huijsmans, I believe a generational focus is important to show how landscapes of opportunities, limitations and threats change over time. On the one hand, such changes may implicate that the aspirational horizons of the young change over the course of their lives. On the other, aspirational horizons change intergenerationally. In Appadurai's terms then, the children of internal migrant workers in China have different capacities to aspire than their parents and grandparents did when they were young. Although the young have a different outlook on life than their parents, also the latter aspire -- as adults. Furthermore, they aspire on the part of their children. After all, a central reason why migrant parents choose to migrate to the cities, is because they believe there are better opportunities for themselves *and* their children there. Growing up at different times and in different places during the era of 'reform and opening up' (*gaige kaifang*), also gives rise to tensions in the power-relations between parents and children – tensions that also center on disagreement on what a good life would be. This is true for local middle-class families in Shanghai, and it is true for migrant families. However, Appadurai's model does not sufficiently account for this generational change in outlook. In relation to studying aspirations generationally then, it is important to focus on the young, but situate the material thus generated relationally. For if there is one thing that childhood and youth studies have taught us, it is that age categories are cross-culturally variable and contextual. I see aspirations as a life-long process of sacrifice, negotiation and compromise between multiple potential and desired futures.

This is an important nuance that stands out in Bittiandra Somaiah, Brenda Yeoh and Silvia Arlini's work (2020) on left-behind young women in migrant-sending villages in Indonesia. In common with the research participants of my study, these women have parents who have

migrated for work towards the end of improving their own and their children's prospects. However, unlike their parents, they opt not to migrate themselves, but rather seek meaningful futures through local careers and lives. Describing this as *cukup*, 'enough over excess'(2020: 2), these women know of the sacrifices their parents have made through their work migration, but staying behind is nonetheless both a filial act and an active choice. Using a household-relational lens, Somaiah et al's framework is both relational and generational as they explore how these women use the concept of 'enough' to form a powerful counter-discourse within a culture of migration (2020: 239). Following the methodological section of this article, I illustrate how migrant youth make multiple considerations of their broader life when they opt for a vocational education.

**Methodological approach**

The ethnographic data on which this article is based stems from a research project that explored the ways in which internal migrant youths in Shanghai experience, reflect on and negotiate having limited educational rights, and how this affects their orientations towards their futures. To this end, I spent fifteen months in Shanghai between 2010-2012. A charitable NGO that I call Holding Hands Volunteer Centre quickly became my main fieldsite. The centre caters exclusively to children and youths of an internal migrant background, by offering them extracurricular classes and tutoring. In addition, Holding Hands offers a variety of arts classes aimed at empowering the young people who frequent it. The majority formally hailed from the nearby provinces of Anhui, Henan and Zhejiang, while the origins of others were from faraway provinces such as Guangxi and Sichuan. Most youths did not have strong ties with their "hometowns" (*laojia*), and had only ventured there occasionally to celebrate the Spring Festival with their extended families or sort out formal documents from the local municipal office. Throughout my fieldwork, some of my research participants moved back to their hometowns

in order to try their luck in the national entrance exams to high school and university (*zhongkao* and *gaokao*), and in these cases I visited them over several fieldtrips. In working with various youths of a migrant background and following their patterns of movement during my fieldwork, both within Shanghai and cross-provincially, I engaged in what Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) has termed 'mobile ethnography'.

My access to Holding Hands Volunteer Centre was granted on the condition that I took on the role as a teacher of spoken English for 15 youths ranging in age from their early teens to their early twenties. These youths became my main informants, but I also interviewed and talked to a range of youths, parents, teachers, academics and volunteers in several schools and organisations in Shanghai, Anhui and Henan. While I was allowed to visit schools, my subject position as a foreign researcher impeded my ability to do longitudinal research there due to security restrictions. I gained insights from a variety of educational sites, but as an extracurricular setting where the youths also came to relax, Holding Hands Volunteer Centre was a good place to engage with them. I would arguably not have had the same access or rapport with them if my study primarily took place in a formal school setting, where they would be busy and subject to school regulations. Interviews were done in a casual and informal way in order to make the research participants relax, while teachers sometimes required a formal list of questions to be provided beforehand. Generally, I would prepare a rough thematic interview guide, but kept my conversations open to my interlocutors' redirections.

Teaching English became a way for me to do participant observation at Holding Hands and befriend the youngsters who frequented it. While this approach was not without its challenges, as I have described elsewhere (Kaland, 2012, 2016), it also provided me with a local role to meet and engage with those who would become my main research participants. Gradually, they

included me in their lives also outside of the NGO, and invited me to spots they would hang out, their schools and their homes (including those of their extended families in the countryside). To understand the experiences, reflections and actions of my research participants, I further engaged in repeat semi-structured interviews, observed them, and tried my best to participate in their everyday lives. While the core data were compiled between 2010-2012, I have spent time with most of my main research participants on annual trips to Shanghai since then. This article is based on child and youth-focused anthropology, a paradigm that views young people as social actors in their own rights (James and James, 2008, Mayall, 2002, Prout and James, 2015). Given this, and that the majority of my main research participants frequented an institution that sought to empower them despite the limitations imposed by governmental barriers to their educational rights combined with their relatively poor backgrounds, the critical reader could argue that my research participants are subject to a self-selection effect, where I have focused on youths who are particularly opinionated and active. In the following, I will therefore take this as the starting point for the empirical discussion of this article.

## Chasing a Vocational Dream?

Holding Hands Volunteer Centre's mode of seeking to empower its members includes making them reflect on their aspirations and dreams, and mediating on their behalf with 'good' schools. Given the latter, the leader of the organization, Wang Yucheng, often noted to me how migrant youths within and outside of Holding Hands Volunteer Centre were different, as the activities accessible at the centre broadened the youths' minds. He argued this was particularly so with regard to their aspirations and how they reflected around these in light of their disadvantaged subject positions,

> 'In Holding Hands Volunteer Centre, we have taken the children to vocational schools, high schools and factories and have invited people from different professions to talk about their jobs. So the Holding Hands

> children have started to develop their own goals, including ones attainable through a vocational education. Children outside of Holding Hands, who have not done so, don't know how to choose a good vocational study. They believe that once they step into those schools, they become losers and are bound to work manually for others for the rest of their lives.

With this in mind, he took me to a children's school in a peripheral part of the Pudong district where the majority of pupils were of a migrant background. In addition to an overwhelming odour of sewage and rubbish emanating from a dried-up canal next to the school, the exterior of the institution seemed worn as bricks revealed themselves underneath cracked grey paint. The courtyard was large but appeared dreary, consisting merely of a concrete pavement with a few pine trees in one corner, while in another stood three basketball hoops. As we went to one of the classrooms where Mr Wang had organized for ten children ranging between nine and fourteen years of age to partake in a focus group with me, the students were smiling as they leaned comfortably on padded chairs behind sturdy desks. After introductions and some small talk, I asked them questions about their educational plans. 'The schools in my hometown are extremely competitive and not well-organized', said one boy. 'If only we could have 12 years of free education', said another. When asking whether they wanted to go back to attend the *zhongkao* and *gaokao*, out of the ten children, only one said he would do so. The same boy said that although that was the case in this group, the majority in the school wanted to. However, Mr Wang pointed out that it was common for students in primary and the first year of middle school to claim they would go back, but that the amount decreased with every school grade as they would have a change of heart when they realised the toll such a choice would imply. In 2009, a study was done by Wuhan University of some 300 migrant students aged approximately 15-16 years of age and about to graduate from middle school. The study found that only 18 percent chose to continue with their studies in high school, while 72 percent chose vocational school and 10 percent chose to find a job directly (Xiaoyan, 2011: 227). Asking what they

wanted to become in the future, one said he liked maths, another thought she did well with computers, a third said she thought archaeology and digging for treasure was cool, to which another followed up and replied Chinese history. Lastly, a young boy topped it all by standing up on his chair shouting ‘Saving the world!’ After the group stopped chuckling, a more timid girl raised her hand and told me how her teacher had said that despite such dreams, a realistic goal for migrant students should be to get high enough grades to enter a vocational high school. Doing well there could mean ‘a way out’.

At first, my impression was that there was certainly no lack of aspirations or dreams in this group of children. However, as pointed out by both Wang Yucheng and the aforementioned girl, as the children grew older, they would reorient their aspirations towards to more ‘realistic’ trajectories. From an Appaduraian viewpoint, this could allude to how the children’s capacities to aspire are impeded by their marginality. Or, from the Bourdieusian perspectives advocated by Zipin et al, it could be construed as a case of their habitus (and related aspirations) solidifying as these youth become more aware of their structural position. A third perspective stems from the literature focusing on the generational effects of expectations on migrant youth aspirations (cf Kirui and Kao, 2018, Lazarus and Khattab, 2018, Meyer, 2018). Here, expectations can both mean the ones that parents have for their children, and those of the children themselves, which at times diverge. On the one hand, these studies tend to point to a degree of optimism in orientations towards the future, while they also show how aspirations are redirected as young people are faced with familial and societal impediments to their wishes.

In comparison, I generally found that the children and youths who went to Holding Hands Volunteer Centre had stronger opinions regarding their subject positions as migrants, and that this informed their educational reflections. However, despite Mr Wang’s claims, this did not

rule out feelings of uncertainty about what they wanted to do in the future. That is, besides a shared mantra about how it was important to study and work hard in order to achieve success in life, within their reflections I also perceived mixed feelings of conflict, ambivalence, insecurity and hope. The notion of trying to find ‘a way out’ was often expressed by my research participants when we talked about their education and future. They expressed a sense of being stuck between a range of pressures from their families, friends, schools, communities, and wider society to be successful with their education and careers; differing pressures from these same factions regarding which educational and vocational pathways to follow in life; structural limitations on their rights to education due to their non-local household registrations *(hukou)*; limited money and resources with which to finance and support their educations; and their very own dreams and aspirations for the future. It was an expression of being in a quandary with no viable end, but trying to make the best of their situations.

Given their positions in Chinese society, the youths were therefore not only aware of their own subject positions, but pushed to think more critically and creatively about their futures than their local peers. From Zipin et al’s perspective, this could be an example of emergent aspirations, in that the youths frequented an organisation that capacitated them to reimagine their futures, and attribute new meaning to the pathways available to them. The authors emphasize the elusiveness of emergent aspirations, as they emerge in youths as their lives ‘apprehend the present-becoming-future’ (2015: 236). As mentioned, I could discern uncertainty and ambivalence in my research participants orientations towards their futures. As they considered the various factors they related to in their considerations, what became clear to me was on the one hand how muddled they were. However, insofar as aspirations are the present-becoming-future, this is not surprising – although it stands in contrast to both the doxic aspirations of their peers towards higher education, and the conceptualization of aspirations by

policy makers. On the other hand, my research participants aspirations were often more concrete and pronounced than their middle-class peers.

When I asked my research participants at Holding Hands Volunteer Centre about their local friends' aspirations, they answered, "They just hope they can enrol at a good high school, and go to a good college after that", before elaborating, "They've never thought about particular jobs or work. All they want is to enter a good senior high and then a good college, nothing else". Interviews I did with local middleclass youths at some of the better high schools in Shanghai seemed to confirm the notion that they did not perceive any other pathway than an academic one after middle and high school. A male student I interviewed answered the following when I asked him whether he would consider going to a vocational school,

> "Neither I nor any of my classmates would even think about this. We are only considering universities like Fudan. Only these places. Other schools and institutions don't even occur to us, because we all have more than high enough scores to get into Fudan and Jiaotong University".

When I asked what he thought about vocational schools, he replied "All I know is that the students who go there have not studied hard enough", before elaborating,

> "They are not good at studying! They like to play computer games. They prefer to work with machines. They want to be good workers, not scientists. Workers in Shanghai are highly paid, and in this sense, they are better off than us future white-collar (*bailing*) workers".

Hearing this, a female friend of the boy leaned forward and told me, "Even if we would have wanted to go to vocational school, our parents wouldn't let us because they think such schools are filled with bad students who wake up late, don't study and don't prepare for classes".

The reflections of these youths clearly underline the power of taken-for-granted doxic aspirations towards higher education, or in Kipnis' (2011) terms, educational desire. Inherent in the sentiments of the male student is also the symbolic violence of doxic aspirations, as migrant youths are relationally cast as the antithesis to youths of his own background who suffer from various deficiencies (Zipin et al., 2015: 231, Woronov, 2015: 2). While vocational and technical schools were not thought of as viable choices among any of the local youths I interviewed, it was also characteristic that despite university being their goal, few of them had concrete plans or dreams for what to actually study there. Several high school students told me that there was time to consider and worry about this *after* they had finished their high school studies, as if developing more specific dreams and aspirations would somehow divert their attention from their preparations for the university entrance exam (*gaokao*). It remains clear to me that questions regarding the allure of a university diploma should not only be directed at migrant youths, but locally-registered middle-class youths as well. Whether in China or elsewhere, educational desire is not necessarily about desire to *learn*. However, according to the development discourse in China, high school students are nonetheless seen as normative, diligent youths, while vocational students are discursively positioned as non-aspiring failed cases. Liming, a 16-year old girl I knew from Holding Hands Volunteer Centre, commented on the symbolic value of the university track to education in the following way,

> Well, the difference is in the diploma you get, it's a social requirement. The higher the diploma, the better. So college graduates are definitely better. It's very much about face (*mianzi*). And then it may be easier to find a job. This is especially important in big cities like Shanghai, and even more so for locals, where status is important. It's a universal law (*pu bian gui lu*). Big cities want people who are excellent and have a high degree, so college graduates have higher status. Therefore, local children would definitely go to high school and then college afterwards. Generally speaking, for Shanghainese youths, that's their only option – they either succeed in the entrance exams (*gaokao)* or they don't. If they fail, they will go to a

> vocational school to learn a skill. Compared with them, we have many options, but they are all bad options haha!'

Liming here alludes to several important points. It is clear that migrant youths reflect on their aspirations in relational terms. Although discussing the concept of modernity in China, I believe the following insight from Lisa Rofel also holds true for aspirations: "it is a story people tell themselves, about themselves, in relation to others" (1999: 13). After all, I would argue that being an aspiring individual is central to a modern personhood in China. However, while aspiring middle-class youth may be discursively cast as free, agentic and entrepreneurial, my research suggests that doxic aspirations may turn into an ideological straitjacket that paradoxically affects these youths' capacities to aspire. As Terry Woronov has described, the primary "approved" activity of young people in China today is to study, which should ideally lead to high exam scores.

> This activity (studying) and parental investments that support their child's studying will ideally be repaid in the form of dividends generated in a new (moral) economy, where value accrues to high grades and good test scores, which then purportedly generate high-paying jobs, prestige, face and connections (guanxi) for the ongoing reproduction of the family as a means of producing the future (2015: 13)

Education is thus clearly linked with success, which in the new moral economy is linked with idealised notions of good lives. I contend then, that while migrant youths are subject to state marginalization through the household registration system (*hukou*) and limited resources, locally-registered and affluent youths may be subject to doxic and class-based structures on what is expected of them, with a loss of face (*mianzi*) as an overarching threat not only for themselves, but for their whole families if they do not fulfil these expectations. On the contrary, my research indicates that migrant youths can let go of such doxic aspirations. Cast as

underachievers, migrant youths may seemingly have a range of “bad options” to choose from. However, I argue that this is precisely why they may engage more concretely with their aspirations than their local peers. Importantly, as I demonstrate in the following, these orientations are based in compromises of a range of different factors and a desire for sufficiency, rather than excess.

**From ‘a good life’ to ‘a better life’**

Liming was already enrolled at a vocational secondary school (*zhongzhuan*) in Shanghai like many of her closest friends at Holding Hands Volunteer Centre. When I asked her to explain this decision, she smiled awkwardly and said her parents thought she could only have a good career and a better future if she went to college. However, she thought there were other ways to achieve this. While this disagreement would sometimes lead to quarrels, Liming held her ground and reflected,

> It’s not that I don’t want to go to university, it’s that I don’t want to go back for high school. It’s tough doing so and I know I would regret it. I don’t want to leave my parents and friends in Holding Hands. Also, I don’t think there’s much hope for me there. First, it’s really hard getting into high school especially since I’m already in my eighth year. Second, even if I manage to get in, it’s less likely that I would have a good job, because university students are everywhere right now and even they cannot find jobs. Therefore, I don’t think it's of much use to go to college. I'd rather learn a skill, that's what I think. Lastly, the education in my hometown is definitely not as good as in Shanghai. Given that I can’t do the *gaokao* in Shanghai, I have to accept my fate and go with the flow.

A 17-year old boy, Liujie, was enrolled in a vocational school specialized in information technology, where he did a first-year general introductory course. Like Liming, he maintained that enrolling in this school was his own decision rather than that of his parents, as was the choice of his major. Liujie noted, “my dad doesn’t have too much knowledge in this area. And

after all, it's my life, and should be decided by myself." In common with Liming, Liujie did not think the vocational school he attended was particularly good. He commented that neither were his peers particularly hard working, nor were his teachers motivated. He mentioned that several of his classmates were local Shanghainese students who were there as a result of having scored too low on their high school entrance exams (*zhongkao*). Others had migrant backgrounds like themselves. "Many fight, smoke and chase after the girls", he said. "But, regarding your dreams, do your parents hope for the same as you do?" I asked. He responded that his parents would have preferred him to try his luck with the high school entrance exam to university (*gaokao*), so he would not end up like them, "doing long hours of tiresome work, but being paid little". Liujie elaborated that if he earned a college diploma, it would mean his parents would get face (*mianzi*). "It's common for villagers to think like that," he commented. This did not mean however, that Liujie's parents had hopes for him doing any particular kind of white-collar work. "No, they don't think that far. They just think going to university will lead to a good job and a better life", he said. In contrast, it was clear that Liujie had both a short- and a long-term plan that extended beyond vocational school,

> "Although my major is a quite promising one, vocational school graduates are not well equipped for the market. On the other hand, college graduates with firmer professional skillsets will have better job opportunities and career development. So my plan is to get into college and continue studying my major there. In the future, I want a job with close-to-home location, a moderate workload and free time after work to hang out with friends."

While Liujie preferred working after having finished vocational school, he considered taking the *zikao*, the self-study version of the *gaokao*, in the long run. For Liujie, vocational school was about earning a better living and having more time to figure out his way in life, although he could also see himself studying to become a social worker. However, Liujie remarked how

getting a university diploma could be a way for him to express his devotion to his parents, "Every parent wants their child to go to university, and so even though I am a lazy person, I should give it a shot for them. They raised me up". When I asked Liming how she would define a good job, she emphasised that the most important aspect was that it made her happy and that she found it rewarding, although it would also be good if she could earn enough to take care of herself and her family. Concerning her parents' perspective on the matter, she answered that her happiness was paramount for them too. Would this not mean that she would do manual labour like her parents, I inquired. But Liming refuted this,

> "No, it is not the same way as them. I want to work for a state-owned company after I finish my technical education. While this leads to manual labour (*dagong*) it is completely different from my parents' type of manual labour (*dagong*). They are uneducated and do it purely for money, whereas I am educated and pursuing my dream."

What emerged from these reflections where alternate visions of 'the good life' as portrayed in popular and doxic narratives. As mentioned, being an educationally desiring subject who succeeds in school through to university constitutes a normative and honoured youth-subjectivity in China (Woronov, 2008, 2009). An aspiring and successful son or daughter also connotes positively to modern parenthood. Ideally, this leads to a secure and well-paid job that benefits not only the individual, but also the family, and ultimately the nation as a whole. From Liming and Liujie's reflections it is clear that they find a higher education desirable, yet have considered their options and found vocational forms of education to be viable compromises. They are no less oriented towards their futures than their middle-class locally-registered peers, but have a different relational and intergenerational outlook on their education than them. Through compromises, they aspire not to "the good life" as defined by Chinese development discourse or middle-class ideals, but to *"a better life"* than that of their parents. Crucially, the

notion of a "better life" was never only about being successful. Rather, the youths mentioned a range of ideals that went beyond the purely educational, professional and economic: being close to family and friends, having a comfortable home, eating one's favourite food, pursuing sports and hobbies, breathing clean air, living close to nature, travelling abroad and so on. I believe this would be the case also for groups of youths in other parts of the world, yet studies focusing on aspirations (or other conceptualizations of orientations towards the future) tend to focus on educational transitions.

Somaiah et al's household relationality framework on youth aspiration and mobility is useful for a critical understanding of gender and generational relations, identities and politics within families, as youth aspirations and their ability to act on them are dependent on intra-household statuses and relations (2020: 240). One important difference between Somaiah et al's study and mine, is that my research participants were not left-behind in the countryside, but had followed their parents to the megalopolis of Shanghai. Settling for an urban life, and not a rural one, their destination of migration is the inverse. When they are seen as passive, non-entrepreneurial victims, it is because they do not (re)migrate back to the countryside for secondary education, in order to gain access to tertiary education in what would often be a third location. However, this is still a result of relational and intergenerational changes within families affecting the aspirations of the young. When my research participants saw a life following a vocational education as sufficient, it was "a resistance, not a shirking of 'economic progression', but an intentional staying and satiation that places value beyond the purely economic" (Somaiah et al., 2020: 241). Or, in the words of Terry Woronov, "many were in vocational education not simply because they were failures, but because they and their parents made strategic decisions about maximizing opportunities and minimising risks" (2015: 57). I found three common considerations that these compromises rested upon.

First, while Liming, Liujie and others desired the prestige and potentially better future a university education could entail, they were reluctant to make the sacrifices this would require. Said differently, they did not want to end up with few qualifications like their parents and thus be trapped as the second generation of manual labourers experiencing limited upward social mobility. Nor would they subject themselves to the extreme pressure of the national entrance exams. After all, there were no guarantees they would score high enough to be eligible for a good university in Shanghai so that they could return as success stories to their family and friends, or even inferior universities in other provinces. This was especially so given the protectionist *hukou* and educational regulations stipulating that non-local applicants would need a much higher score than candidates with a Shanghainese household registration. One research participant told me that in order to be eligible to enrol at the elite university Fudan in Shanghai, she would need to score 680 points at the national entrance exam (*gaokao*) in high school, while local Shanghainese applicants would 'only' need 500 points.

Second, although a university education provided youths with status as educated and learned people, it was not a given that higher education would lead to a comfortable life of white-collar work. On the contrary, many youths noted to me how blue-collar trades could pay more than the jobs attainable to university graduates, and were easier to get. Others stated that they did not wish for a life full of prestige or money anyway. As long as they had their family, friends and enough income to get by comfortably, they would be content. In the minds of many of my research participants, vocational schools therefore manifested themselves as less prestigious middle-ways. That is, a compromise that bridged the gap between the compulsory education locally available to them and future careers, and let them stay with their family and friends in the city they effectively saw as their home.

This brings us to the third consideration my research participants made, concerning filial piety. Evident in both Liming and Liujie's reflections is how they relate to their parents' wishes in their orientations towards the future. While their parents have a bias towards higher education, their children believe they know better. In relation to filial piety and modernization theory, Charlotte Ikels has argued that the elderly lose a host of status-enhancing attributes as societies change from rural and agricultural to urban and industrial (2004: 10). However, I contend that this could also happen as a result of rural/urban migration (for another case, see Sier in this issue). From an intergenerational perspective, neither is being knowledgeable and experienced something that the parents and adults could lay particular claims to. The parents of my research participants grew up in countryside and only had access to basic education during the stunted educational era of Mao Zedong. In contrast, through attending urban schools, their offspring fast become more educated than their parents. As Liming points out, while her technical education will lead her to a life of manual labour (*dagong*), it is *educated manual labour*. Not only will she have a diploma and follow her dream, she will earn more money than her parents, and possibly some university graduates as well. Growing up in the cities, the youths believe themselves exposed to a broader variety of ideas and experiences, and no longer have to accept uncritically their parents' ideas and values. Furthermore, several authors have pointed out that the moral principles governing the parent-child relationship has changed, as filial behaviour among children and youths equates to pursuing their own happiness (Kipnis, 2011, Yan, 2011, Hansen, 2013). As one youth explained to me, "the basic idea of filial piety (*xiao*) is that children should make their parents happy. But nowadays parents are happy as long their kids are happy!" Thus, for my research participants there is a shift of relative advantage in the power-relations of the parent-child relationship. This is not to say that the power-relations are inverted, but that there is more room for youths to manoeuvre in with regards to their aspirations.

Nevertheless, filial piety does not necessarily lose its symbolic power in these relations. The way Liujie suggests that he could see himself take the self-study entrance exam (*zikao*) some years down the line in an attempt to gain entry to university, suggests otherwise. For him, this is both an act of filial devotion to his parents, as well as a way he can study social work. As such, he has negotiated a compromise where he both pursues his own dreams, and is filial to his parents by taking care of the family in the present/near future, and by potentially attaining a higher education in the long run.

## Conclusion

For the millions of youths with a migrant background in China, migration is not a one-off happening, but must be regarded as a process that in multiple ways defines their lives. That is, migration interacts with life-course dynamics, and at times demands active engagement from the youths. The question of what secondary educational pathway to follow is a case in point. Some choose to migrate back to the countryside, both for the instrumental aspects of potentially gaining access to a university education and all that may entail materially for their families and future selves, and for the intrinsic symbolic value this entails for their subject positions as normative and filial youths in China. However, the majority stay behind and attend vocational schools, which offers little prestige. At this point I wish to return to the title of this article, which is named after my research participant Liming's quote that youths like herself "have many options, but they are all bad options". At first sight, this might lead the reader into thinking that the overarching finding of this research has been that migrant youths who pursue vocational trajectories only do so as victims of state structures and their lack of resources to pursue other pathways. Moreover, that migrant youths are victims of habituated aspirations. I do not refute that migrant youths can become frustrated, averse and apathetic due to the limitations on their options. Neither do I refute the very serious problems with equity in the Chinese educational

system in general, or the particular problems with access to quality secondary education that migrant youths face in particular. However, I have asserted that it is precisely because migrant youths ostensibly have fewer structural opportunities to follow academic pathways, that they might also become more aware of their options and develop more pronounced orientations towards their futures than their local and middle-class peers do.

Furthermore, I contend that there are reasons why a vocational education can be a rational and desirable trajectory, despite its bad reputation. As argued, my research participants' aspirations were rarely expressed without reference to broader orientations toward their futures. As noted, they expressed desires for their futures beyond the professional, where a multitude of individual factors connoting to their happiness were important: living close to family and friends, staying in an urban, modern and "happening" part of China, having a comfortable home, pursuing hobbies and so on. Through a cost-benefit analysis done by the youths and their families, where they sought to maximize gains and minimize risks, vocational education stood out as a less prestigious middle way. Despite being a compromise between the opportunities available to them, their monetary resources and their own desires and aspirations, vocational education was still construed as a way these youths could achieve 'a better life' than their parents. Since this would break with normative and middle-class conceptions of 'the good life', one could ask whether this was form of resistance or a way to tackle limited of welfare rights and feelings of second-grade citizenship, but I believe that would be reductionist. On the other hand, it would also be problematic on my part to say that my research participants' vocational trajectories were smooth rides or their time in these schools dreams come true. They were compromises, just as their aspirations were. However, the assumption that people in general, and young people in particular, should have clear-cut aspirations is also problematic. While I see the benefits this may entail in terms of navigating and strategizing towards future goals, my research has found

that whether young people conceptualize their orientations towards the future as dreams, hopes, desires, wishes, aspirations, expectations or goals, they are more often than not muddled rather than clear-cut, multiple rather than singular, and dynamic rather than static. As such, I have advocated a relational and intergenerational (Huijsmans et al., 2014) approach to aspirations that takes into account the changes that can happen over time. There is a certain irony then, that youths who are collectively and individually discursively derogated for being lazy, apathetic and unruly, may have more pronounced and broader aspirations towards 'a better life' than the ideal youths they are seen to break away from.

**Conflict of interest**

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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