NEW MEANINGS OF MASCULINITIES WITHIN CHINESE MIGRATION: A REFLECTION OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETY

Xiaodong Lin

Located within the ever-growing theoretical literature on western men and masculinities, this paper addresses the connection of tradition, modernity, rural-urban migration and masculinities. A main focus of this paper is to investigate a more comprehensive understanding of the formation of migrating masculinities through their relations with their families and traditional ideology within family relations. I argue that the formation of migrating masculinities of male peasant workers is partially reflexively constructed through the interrelations between traditional male roles in families and the experience of rural-urban migration. Hence, I am focusing upon tensions between ‘old’ family ideologies (tradition) and ‘new’ urban experiences (modernity) within rural-urban migration, with reference to the construction and negotiation of masculinity of male peasant workers in relation to their families and workplaces. This paper also wishes to open up further discussion from the specificity of Chinese rural-urban migration to transnational migration through the lens of masculinity.

Key words: masculinities, family, migration, tradition, modernity, China

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1. Introduction: Men Matters in Migration

Men and masculinity is a relatively new established field of study in social science within which men’s lives and experiences are being examined as a gendered category (Segal 1992; Kimmel, 1987; Morgan, 1992; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007). However, within migration studies, gender issues still primarily focus on female migrants’ experience and their accounts of migration. My research is an attempt to bring Men and Masculinities into the field of Chinese migration, both in terms of rural-urban and transnational movement. This paper

1 Department of Sociology. University of Birmingham (United Kingdom), XDL525@bham.ac.uk

Correspondence to: Xiaodong Lin. Department of Sociology. Muirhead Tower, University of Birmingham. Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT. United Kingdom.
draws upon material from my PhD thesis on Chinese male peasant workers and internal migration. It aims to explore how traditional values of the family within Chinese culture helps to construct masculinity for Chinese male migrants in the process of rural-urban migration. I argue that the formation of masculinities of male peasant workers in Chinese rural-urban migration is partially constructed through the interrelations between their traditional embedded male role in families and the experience of migration. I explore the tensions between ‘old’ family and ‘new’ urban experience within rural-urban migration in relation to male peasant workers’ construction and negotiation of masculinities, while addressing the accounts of different age groups. The primary foci of my investigation are these new meanings emanating from the interplay between masculinities and migration. How do they reflect the men’s experience of modernity in urban settings with reference to their traditional family relations? Life stories of the male peasant workers will provide an insight into how gender and traditional Chinese family ideology construct each other in the rural-urban migrants’ everyday lives.

In addition, theorists of migration, such as Abril and Rogaly (2001), argue against conceptualising international and internal migration as having separate explanations and outcomes. While western literature on gender and migration mainly focus on international or transnational migration, I think is also important to integrate internal migration in developing countries like China that is currently marginalized in the field. This paper also aims to raise the issue of the continuity of the meanings of migrating masculinities from Chinese rural-urban migration to Chinese transnational migration. The paper hopes to draw attention to male migrants in a transnational context and the way they combine both traditional and modern ideologies that they negotiate through their experience in response to changing society in China and the attendant impact of globalization. The paper will conclude by proposing a revised and broader agenda for research on men and masculinities in migration studies.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In 2006, the International Migration Review issued a special collection on ‘Gender and Migration Revisted’, in which Mahler and Pessar (2006) emphasize ‘gender matters’ in migration studies, bringing gender into migration as a social process rather than a biological term. More specifically, the emphasis was on the importance of gender operating in the process of migration and social change and an urge for the need to look at migrants’ subjectivities and accounts of migration through the lens of gender.
Studies of gender and migration in a Chinese context have tended to focus on Chinese female migrants and their experiences (Jacka, 2005; Davin, 1996), in light of the political agenda on gender equality as part of the process of Chinese modernization. One of the key concepts used to develop an explanatory framework is that of patriarchy, which according to Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007:8) is ‘commonly understood as a social organization that structures the dominance of men over women’. In response to patriarchal domination, much of the literature on ‘Gender and Migration’ focuses on female migrants’ (Jacka, 2005) changing roles within the family, the household, and the labour market by highlighting their importance to the reproduction of the family and the wider society with the attendant suppression of women as wives, mothers and daughters. Within such research, Chant (1998:6) argues ‘the importance of considering “the household” in analyses of gender and rural-urban migration, both in respect of how it shapes the gender selectivity of migrant flows and how, in turn, the latter contributes to household diversity across rural and urban areas’. The study of the household highlights the inequity between men and women. Radical feminist, Walby (1997) is one of the most influential theorists of patriarchy. Patriarchy, according to her is a machinated system that produces a hierarchy in which men as a group are privileged so they dominate, oppress as well as exploit women. For example, from this perspective, in a family context, men are positioned as ‘breadwinners’, the ‘cornerstone’ as well as decision makers, while the role of women is that of a ‘dependant caretaker’ who is attached to men. From a patriarchal point of view, men and women are never socially equal; men are more powerful than women.

However, in critically discussing patriarchy, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) offers another perspective on migration with a gender lens. Hondagner-Sotelo focuses on the process and outcomes of migration and their influence on gender relations and social change. She maintains that patriarchy is a fluid and shifting set of social relations that different men exercise with varying degrees of power and control. The notion that all men oppress all women does not capture the lived reality that gender relations are changeable and variable in different contexts. However, this does not mean that women have become more powerful than men, but rather some men in some contexts may experience domination by some men or some women. In other words, there is a complex inter-relationship between the multiple categories of gender, class and ethnicity through which we live our lives.

In popular culture and media discourse, gender still appears as something to do with women. However, men appear to be the taken for granted hidden norm in gender and migration studies. This is reflected in the current literature on gender and Chinese rural-urban migration (Jacka, 2005; Davin, 1996; Fan, 2004), where women are invariably the research focus. In contrast, for Segal (1990), men are not one homogenous group centred on masculinity, rather, there are multiple
masculinities. Hence, men are changeable and can adopt different masculine styles in different social contexts.

In developing a contemporary understanding of men and masculinity, Connell (1995: 77) introduces the notion of hegemonic masculinity, which is defined as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ In response to Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, Hearn (2004:60) suggests that the term ‘masculinity’ is too narrow and maintains the need to pay attention to the ‘systems of differentiations of men and men’s practices rather than the social construction of particular ‘forms of men, as masculinities’. As Segal (1990:280) argues, the power of masculinity ‘derives not just from autonomy, or familial interaction, nor indeed from any fixed set of attributes that all men share, but from wider social relations’. In response, masculinities are subjected to change in different social contexts. I argue that migration has provided an important site to look at changing masculinities within the context of shifting locations.

This research is also located within a discourse of China’s current pursuit of modernization with Chinese characteristics with the emergence of industrialization and urbanization that are taking place. This is also of major significance in understanding the construction of Chinese migrating masculinities. Theorists of modernity, such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) argue that individuals in modern society are constantly reflecting on their own social behaviour and absorbing new knowledge in the construction of their lives without being controlled by traditions. Schein (1999:363-64) examines Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’, arguing that ‘people not only position themselves vis-à-vis modernity through multifarious practices but also struggle to reposition themselves, sometimes through deploying the very codes of the modern that have framed them as its others’. In this case, Chinese male peasant workers’ original identities as peasants and its relational role-identities in rural social relations have been dispossessed in the process of rural-urban migration.

Within these conditions, the hegemony within Chinese society that male peasant workers encounter emerges both through traditional values that they inherit from an older generation or older ideologies which are shaped within rural

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2 Tradition means ‘a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people.’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, seventh edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005). For Giddens (1990), an individual is detached from tradition and related obligations. Tradition is losing its salience in late modernity.
Chinese culture, as well as modern values that they experience in the process of rural-urban migration. The research in this paper is operating within this framework. It argues that gender roles, gender orders as well as gender relations are subjected to change in modern Chinese society that help shape the accounts of Chinese male peasant workers. This means that, in the process of migration, men and women are in a process of change regarding gender roles, gender orders and gender relations. However, in this process, they also need to negotiate their identity in order to accommodate themselves within urban spaces.

This research deploys a qualitative methodological perspective, exploring the meanings of migration and masculinities from Chinese male peasant workers’ accounts in terms of their experience of migrating to work and living in the city. This paper is based on the empirical data I collected from the fieldwork in Shantou, China, which was carried out during 2006 and 2008. It uses a biographical research method, based on semi-structured interviews, asking Chinese male peasant workers’ about their life history, particularly focusing on their family life and their experience of the workplace.

3. Family & Traditional Gender Ideology in China

This paper pays particular attention to the notion of the family and the traditional ideology of the family within Chinese culture, which influences how male peasant workers (re)construct their masculinities. Michael Kimmel (1996:2) defines gender as “the sets of cultural meanings and prescriptions that each culture attaches to one’s biological sex”. For Connell (1993: 601) masculinity is men’s places and practices in gender relations that are symbolically represented and constructed in men’s life course. In my analysis of men’s power and male subjectivities, I wish to emphasis the significance of the research participants being locating within a particular cultural context. This perspective is supported by Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) that ‘global masculinities are not simply connected to structures of economic production but are constituted and constitute cultural forms’ (2007:200). Before we address the meanings and the possibility of change of Chinese masculinity within the family, it is important to explore what masculinity means in Chinese culture. The family is a unit of collective interest with a functional division and attendant gendered meanings. A traditional model of a Chinese rural family is ‘man for the field and woman for the needle’ (or ‘men plough, women weave’). Jacka (1997:2) captures the traditional gender divisions of labour in rural China as

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3 This research was carried out between 2006 and 2008 in a coastal city in the southern Guangdong province of China. Following the policy of confidentiality, all the research participants are anonymous.
structured through the binary between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, as well as ‘light’ and ‘heavy’. She notes that ‘the Confucian ideal of women being confined to the “inside” sphere of family and home contributed to a division of labour such that domestic work was largely done by the women of the family, or in households of the gentry, by female servants’. She argues that these conceptual dichotomies of ‘inside’/ ‘outside’ must be taken into account to understand ‘the changes that have occurred in gender divisions of labour and the links between these changes and other aspects of gender relations’ (ibid. 19). In this context, men have been culturally located in gender relations as a father figure within the family that is associated with authority, power and ‘outside’ ‘heavy’ work, while women occupy the opposite domain. Gender identities for men and women have been shaped by their relational role identities, shaped by gender divisions of labour within traditional Chinese society. She adds a caveat, arguing later that the gender labour division is not visible in some places because Chinese culture advocates collective interest.

Men in the traditional Chinese family are seen as authority father figures, the master or the cornerstone of the family on whom women and other younger family members depend and under his protection. For example, in traditional Chinese gender relations within the family, women are seen as followers and dependent on their husbands. There is a Chinese saying, ‘Marry a cockerel and follow a cockerel, marry a dog and follow a dog---throw in one’s lot with one’s husband’ (嫁鸡随鸡，嫁狗随狗). This Chinese saying reveals traditional gender relations and gender order within Chinese marriage. However, urbanization and industrialization and an accompanying discourse of modernization with Chinese characteristics provide women with opportunities to enter the labour market. Modern experience through rural-urban migration provides opportunities for women to challenge the pre-existing gender division in terms of production. At the same time, it also challenges the pre-existing gender relations within rural areas within which men also face change and challenges in terms of masculinity in this process. The family has been one of the key analytical areas in gender and migration studies. The high rate of rural-urban migration does not only result in the mobility of the rural population and the relocation of rural families, but also the absence of fathers, sons as well as husbands. In other words, men’s traditional masculinities appear to be under threat. In this process, although peasant workers are absent from their rural household, their connections to their family are still strongly bonded and dynamically contributes to (re)shaping and maintaining their masculinities in the cities.
4. Chinese rural-urban migration, Tradition and Masculinities

Accordingly, there is a tension within Chinese rural-urban migration that male peasant workers are experiencing the challenge of modern urban society through migration while their gendered male role and obligation to the family are under threat. I found in my interviews that they actively accept modern values in their experience in urban settings but these new experiences and articulations operate under the surveillance of the hegemony of traditional ideology and in so doing, reinforces the importance of traditional values, for example in this case, traditional family values and ideology. Jacka (1997:139) adopts the idea from other studies on gender and migration in Asian countries in her research on Chinese females’ role in the context of rural-urban migration that male out-migration and participation in modernity may ‘cement the bonds of kinship and reinforce tradition’. Indeed, my study of male peasant workers may go so far as to suggest that migration has nurtured or strengthened men’s role in the family, thus reproducing male domination in the domestic sphere. However, I need to point out that male peasant workers are constantly (re)shaping their masculinities, either maintaining or constructing their masculinities in order to accommodate themselves to family obligations within the context of their lives in modern urban society. At the same time, meanings of masculinities have been changed through migration and the resulting reflection on gender ideology in the family. This reflection also has continuity in their urban work experience that I will discuss later in the paper.

5. Family, Masculinities and Rural-Urban Migrants

Migration might have been seen as a way to change their material lives. However, Chinese male peasant workers carry ‘old’ traditional values that were culturally embedded within the Chinese value system, while they are away from a more traditional rural context, located within a modernizing urban context. Modern society may have challenged an individual’s conceptualization of tradition and been an obstacle for them to achieve what they consider to be a gender norm. However, there is continuity within male peasant workers’ perceptions of traditional men’s roles with the encounter of a modern value system. Modern society and experience for the male peasant workers has challenged their ways of pursuing traditional values and ideology but has not undermined tradition. It is not simply a ‘hybrid’ of the traditional and the modern, but a recreation of tradition that is different from a conventional understanding. This paper argues that binary gender distinctions in terms of traditional gender roles in Chinese family still exist and probably will continue to exist for future generations. The recreation of tradition, in this case of male peasant workers and their family, is generated from the challenges of sustaining traditional gender roles and gender
relations within rural families and challenges the patriarchal system by recreating a new power relation between men and their rural families, while conducting new gender practices. In this case, the patriarchal masculinity of traditional Chinese culture has been challenged by the new power relations within modern Chinese society. This new power relation emerging from the recent experience of male peasant workers within modern society in fact ‘recreates’, or ‘reinvents’ tradition but does not place men in a privileged position that existed in the old traditional patriarchal system identified by feminists. Lao Tian (46 year old) and Ah Mei (30 year old) are brother and sister. They both work in the same garment factory. Lao Tian is single, living with his sister and brother in-law. When he was in his early 20s, Lao Tian started to work in the south, leaving his sick parents and younger sister at home. Because he is the only son of the family, Lao Tian has responsibility to take care of his parents and sister. He recalled his experience of working outside his hometown and at the same time worrying about his family in the rural area.

Lao Tian: It was difficult to live apart from your family. My parents were both sick. They couldn’t work to raise the family. I am the only son of the family. I had to work for the family. It was difficult at the beginning working outside without your family. I can only talk to them on the phone every week but I couldn’t do anything for them even though I knew they were sick. When you looked at people’s life here, the apartment they live in, the car they drive, you would tell yourself you had to work hard and give them a better life ...

Ah Mei: You did send money home and build the house...It was my brother introduced me to this job and my husband. He worked very hard to raise our family. If he was at home, he would have married and had children. But he missed the time to get married while he was working outside...But I am very grateful about what he did for me and our family. He takes care of everyone in our family.

The gendered responsibility becomes stronger for Lao Tian during his experience in the city, by comparing himself and other people’s lives in the city. Modern experience in the city as well as gender ideology acted as a trigger for Lao Tian’s gender role in the family. Migration in this case may become an opportunity to fulfil his traditional gender obligation at the same time as serving as a corner stone of the family for their collective interest. Guo Tianhai (32 year old) illustrates my argument about the negotiation of tradition and modernity in terms of the male gender role and responsibility with reference to having a baby to carry on the family name in the process of rural-urban migration. But in this case, tradition and modern reality has become an obstacle for his construction of male identity.
W: Do you want to have a baby?

Guo Tianhai: Yes, of course. We have been married for about 2 years. If I were at home, I would have been expected to get married and then have a baby. But I think it’d be better if you have a baby later than early... (W: Why?) Sometimes it might become a burden if you have a baby early... My relatives always say we should have a baby earlier that when you become old, your child can take care of you. But the reality doesn’t allow me to have a baby early. For example, you need to take your baby with you when you go to work. We also have to send money back to our parents because it is your duty. If your income becomes less, then you have difficulty to raise the baby. So it is better to have a baby later than earlier.

W: Why do your relatives ask you to have a baby earlier?

Guo Tianhai: ...I don’t know, they care about us, may be the issue of Chuan Zong Jie Dai (传宗接代: Carry on the family name). They might have being guessing I don’t have the ability to do so.

W: Does it bother you?

Guo Tianhai: Sometimes, you may care about what people are gossiping about you (they still don’t have a baby). Of course I don’t feel very well when they ask me. But you have to think about the difficulties that face you if you have a baby... We want a baby when the condition allows... I am lucky I am away from home, so I don’t need to listen to their order everyday... I hope they can see how hard I work for the family.

In traditional Chinese ideology, the worst offence against filial duty is not having any progeny (不孝有三, 无后为大) (Fei, 2006). Rural-urban migration prevents Guo Tianhai having a baby early because the material situation does not allow him. In this case, he does not fulfil a man’s responsibility as he may be questioned by his family about his ability of being a man as exemplified by becoming a father. In this process, Guo Tianhai needs to negotiate his obligation of taking care of his parents and having a baby and the material reality of not having a baby at present even though his masculinity as a man has been challenged by the rural family ideology. For Liu Hao (34 year old), he could not resist the family pressure to have a son.

Liu Hao: My first and the second kids are girls, and the last one is a boy. To be honest, I did not want to give birth to another two children after my first kid. You know man and woman are equal. It is not in the old society that you have to have a boy to make your life better. Now girls also can earn money for the family. But for my parents, I am their only son. It is my duty to have a son to carry on the family name. They always phoned me and asked me why I didn’t want another
child. I told them I couldn’t afford to have another child... everything is expensive including education in particular. They couldn’t understand me. They said when they were young, they also had several children; some families even had eight girls before they had a boy. They said they came through the difficulty of raising me and my sisters. All my family members urged me to have another child. But my second child was a girl again. I was so embarrassed in front of my family... My family asked me to give my second girl to the other family. But I said no matter how difficult it is, it is my duty to raise her up even though I have to collect rubbish for a living. In the end, I had a boy at last and fulfilled their will... I know nowadays, man and woman are equal, but parents always ask you and make you embarrassed (if you do not give birth to a boy). My father used very strong language that our family might end in my generation. It means my family is over. Ok, I fulfilled his will. It is my parents’ order.

W: How did you feel when you had your boy?

Liu Hao: I was very happy, to be honest. I held banquets here and in my hometown with friends and family members. Very happy, I fulfilled my parents’ will. But at the same time, I feel a burden on my shoulder to raise three children. But what can you do? They are all your flesh.

W: Have you ever thought about giving your daughters away like your family told you?

Liu Hao: No, I took my two girls with me to the city after their brother was born. I know my parents would treat them differently when their grandson was not with them. I don’t want them to be treated differently. So I brought all of them with me and my wife. I told my wife, no matter how difficult it is, or how many other jobs I have to do even to pick up rubbish to raise my family, I will do everything. I will do everything to give them a happy life like the other children in the cities.

In some cases, family responsibility such as carrying on a family name has become a burden for Chinese male peasant workers when they encounter the difficulty of living and working in the city. However, this traditional value in family relations and their bond with their family, in some cases, also undermines the patriarchal system within Chinese culture in terms of gender order. As I pointed out earlier, traditionally, women are supposed to follow their husbands once they are married. In other words, men’s role in the family is not to be dependant, they should take the lead for the welfare of their family while women and children are dependant on men. However, it seems that rural men tend to compromise themselves in the gender order for the purpose of uniting their families. Male peasant workers are experiencing a complex negotiation within these two material situations: rural (tradition) and urban (modernity), and their masculine
identities as a caring, responsible son, husband and father are produced within the conditions of this negotiation.

Michael Kimmel (1987) argues that gender is socially constructed within a historical context of gender relations, with definitions of masculinity responding relationally to changing definitions of femininity. The (re)construction of masculinities among Chinese male peasant workers is also influenced by the (re)construction of femininities of Chinese female migrant workers. For example, the empowerment of women in rural-urban migration might challenge the formation of masculinities for male peasant workers. Lao Tang is a 44 year old household cleaner. When he was talking about his first impression of Shantou, the city he now works in, he revealed his reason for coming to work here.

Lao Tang: I worked as a construction worker in Xinjiang and Shenzhen before I came here. I used to work at the construction site in town. I worked in the morning and came back at night ....I didn’t feel very well when I first came here. I did not have many friends here. And I didn’t have work to do when I first came. I was thinking of going back home. After half a year, I started to look for work, but it was difficult.

W: Why did you decide to move to Shantou?

Lao Tang: I came here for my wife and my daughter. I can earn more than a thousand Yuan a month in the other places if I leave my family for other places. My daughter is the first person who came here, then my wife. I am the last person who came here... They said it was easy making money here. And I think it would be better being together with your family. They said it is good to work here. I am getting old... and I don’t think I can do building work anymore soon.

W: But you couldn’t earn much money when you first came as you said?

Lao Tang: No, I couldn’t find a job here at the beginning, so I started to work with my wife and daughter...People think there’s no prospects to stay with your wife when I was at old home... but you have to work with your wife now because you have to earn money...

Lao Tang’s story raises two interesting points: one is that he gave up his well-paid job to move and live with his family in Shantou, in order to sustain his wife and daughter’s good jobs. He moved to them instead of a more traditional approach, of asking them to move with him. Second, he could not find a job in this city as a new arrival without any contacts. So he began to work as a domestic cleaner with his wife and daughter. Lao Tang has negotiated his masculinity through means of downward work mobility to live with his wife and daughter as well as accommodating himself within the opportunities for urban work. His life...
history about moving to the city suggests something about the unstable patriarchal system within contemporary China that the man is not the one who controls the fate of the family as in the older gender script. Patriarchy is less visible through the narratives of male peasant workers. He also continues to talk about how he accommodates himself within his urban work situation, working as a housecleaner with his wife and daughter, which I will return to later in next part of this paper.

Chen Wu, a 32 year old male peasant worker provides another example of a changing patriarchal structure. He got his job because of his wife and he earns less than her. However, it does not seem that his masculinity is challenged since he believes his sacrifice can make a positive change for his family.

Chen Wu: It is not a solution that you always live apart from your family...My wife persuaded me to come here. She didn’t want to lose her job. So I came over...living together is always better than being separated...It was difficult at the beginning. I didn’t have any laoxiang (mates from hometown) here to introduce me to a job. So I needed to look for a job on my own. I don’t have wenhua (qualifications). I am a peasant. It was very hard at the start... Then one day my wife said her factory needed a bao’an (security guard). She introduced me to that job...I have been doing the job since then.

W: Do you like working here?

Chen Wu: Nothing about like or don’t like. You need to live (to make money)...She (my wife) earned better money than me at that time. That’s why I came here so she can keep her job... I am ok doing this job, but I can’t say I like it or not like it. I don’t have wenhua. It is good that I don’t need to work in construction, too hard. I have nothing to complain about my work.

W: Is she the person who is in charge of the family?

Chen Wu: It doesn’t matter who is in charge. We have no money...any decision is discussed and made by both of us. Any decision is made for the family sake no matter it is made by my wife or me. But my wife always listens to me because I am the corner stone of the house (一家之主).

Traditional values within family relations that Chinese peasant workers carry with them in some cases have become a burden to them. But traditional values they inherited also may become a means for them to (re)construct their masculinities in the process of migration, which might have become less patriarchal than it was in the rural context. Rather than focus exclusively on traditional values in terms of gender role, gender order and gender relations within family, I also found their continuity in Chinese male peasant workers’
urban work situation with traditional values deployed within the family also constructing their masculinities at work.

6. Male Peasant Workers and Their ‘Family’ within the Urban Workplace

Morgan (1992) suggests that the workplace is the central site for the construction of male identity. My empirical data also suggests that the meaning of men and masculinities for male peasant workers is being (re)constructed and revealed within the urban workplace by means of deploying their traditional family values. There is a cultural ideology operating within this particular context, traditional family values that help construct masculinities in their urban workplaces. Meanwhile, they locate themselves within urban settings, involving modern technologies, norms and social stratification. The cultural ideology of modernization also plays a hegemonic role in the formation of migrating masculinities within work practices that Chinese male peasant workers carry out.

Song (2006:158) notes that the binary division of ‘man/woman’ emerges into Chinese culture alongside the pursuit of modernity. In contemporary Chinese society with the pursuit of modernization with Chinese characteristics, the modern workplace in cities also defines gendered jobs within which men and women are located. Returning to Lao Tang, he is working with his wife and daughter as a household cleaner, which is seen as a non-traditional male occupation, especially as male peasant workers, are often closely associated with certain ‘masculine’ jobs such as construction work. However, there are also a large number of male peasant workers occupied in light manual, service industries, such as factory workers or household cleaners with their family.

Lao Tang: It is relatively easier for women to find a household cleaning job. Men need to work in the house for a few times before they hire you. People hire you because they can ask you to climb high up to clean the windows. It is easy to fall down from the windows. It is too dangerous for women to do it. People don’t worry about you if you are a man. Besides, they ask you to move some heavy stuff.

W: Do you mind people seeing your job as a woman’s job?

Lao Tang: Both man and woman can do it. Here, if your wife is a household cleaner, the husband is as well. And man is stronger than woman. Whenever there is some heavy work to do, they ask my wife to bring me, to work together. Then I do my heavy work and she does her light one.

Bradley (1999) argues that it might be easier for women to work in traditional male dominated jobs than vice versa. My empirical work suggests that those male peasant workers in non-traditional masculine jobs actually change and
deconstruct the ‘feminized’ work into ‘masculine’ work by deploying their gender role within the family into their urban ‘feminized’ work. This is not because of their fear of feminization or stigmatization (Lupton, 2000), but there is a traditional ideology within the Chinese family that they frequently and unconsciously bring with them in their articulation of modern experience. Sometimes they will represent themselves as an important contributor to the modern society by revisiting their role as a man in the family that gender difference in the nature of work has tended to blurred.

Pan Fu is a 34 year old security guard for a local residential area called ‘LX Garden’. He has been doing his job for 5 years after completing his military duty and leaving the army (当兵复员). Although a security guard is conventionally seen as a more ‘masculine’ job, its low social status also degrades the nature of this job in terms of masculinity. Pan Fu has his own account of his job.

Pan Fu: I would like to be a policeman when I was young, but I don’t have qualifications. They want people graduated from formal police university. I was looking to work in security instead. Although some people say security is like a ‘gate watch dog’ (看门狗). But I am happy I can take care of those people who live in this area… I am like a gatekeeper of a big family, whenever someone wants to enter or go out of the garden, I am the person who is in charge of it. I have a big responsibility for taking care of this ‘family’. The job is different to police. But I enjoy it because we do the same thing.

Modernity in terms of education and technology prevents Chinese male peasant workers from accessing urban ‘masculine’ modern occupations. Therefore, most Chinese male peasants work in low skilled, labour demanding or ‘feminine’ occupations. However, my empirical data suggests that for Chinese male peasant workers, the workplace such as the factory is not just a place of work. It is articulated also as a second ‘family’ for them. Some of the male peasant workers I interviewed told me about their ‘new’ family relations with their workmates. They have built up intimate relations with their closest workmates, embedding traditional values of family relations into the workplace. At the same time, male peasant workers are articulating their male identity from what it used to be or what they learned in their rural families into their daily practice at work. Li Yong is a 20 year old young peasant worker. He informed me how he constructs his male identity at work:

Li Yong: …I remember last year when I was in a factory in Guangzhou, some people bullied a close friend of mine (because) he is little… You depend on your parents when you are home while you depend on your friends while you are away from home… I just helped him a bit to get rid of those people… It was that time that I felt I could protect people and felt like a big brother.
In his narration, Li Yong articulates what he believes as ‘depend on friends while away from home’ to demonstrate the continuity from social relation within the family to family relation within the workplace outside the home. Therefore, in his daily interaction within his urban workplace, he put his male role in the family as a protector into practice by identifying himself as a big brother within a ‘traditional family relationship’ that sees the oldest brother as an authority figure based on an age analogy extended from the father-son relationship of Confucianism (Zhao, 2007). In this process, his adoption of the gender role within the family as a man is also articulated within his relations with his workmates in the workplace.

7. Regenerating Masculinities in Chinese Migration

This paper has focused on the concept of tradition and modernity by exploring masculinities and migration through the narration of Chinese male peasant workers in terms of their experience and accounts of masculinities in the context of rural-urban migration. Migration is not simply an economic or political issue, it is also a gender issue within which they have to negotiate and construct their masculinities in negotiating their ‘new’ life as male peasant workers. I question whether traditional values and gender roles as a man in the family will disappear in a transitional period in modern China. This research finds that tradition plays an integral part in the (re)construction of masculinities and the practice of urban life and work.

Tradition and modernity are usually seen as oppositional terms in discussion of the conceptualization of social change within society. Tradition is often seen as a barrier in the pursuit of modernization. However, in the context of Chinese rural-urban migration, male peasant workers, constantly reflect on their ‘traditional’ gender role and ideology from their rural family to formulate their social behavior while at the same time seeking continuity in urban modern settings. Through the lens of masculinity, the urban (modern) experience does not loosen rural men’s obligation to the family. In a western context, tradition may conventionally be seen as a constraint to control people’s behaviour in modern society. However, in the experience of Chinese male peasant workers, tradition is an important resource in the construction of their male identity within urban China and their practices in their urban workplace, where their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979, 1989) may ‘restrict’ and ‘marginalize’ them in modern society, but traditional gender ideology as resources reflexively appears to enable them to accommodate themselves in modern urban settings.

However, in terms of gender relations, some might criticize this argument that if the paper on the one hand emphasises the importance of tradition to
understand the reflexive behaviour of male peasant workers in modern society, it might on the other hand reinforce the patriarchal system that privileges the position of men that again places women in a subordinated position. My empirical data suggests that the conjunction of modern and tradition creates a new expression of “traditional modern behaviour”. It is not simply a ‘synthesis’ of tradition and modern, but a recreation of tradition that has a different meaning and practice from the ‘old’ tradition. It may be the case that binary gender distinctions in terms of traditional gender roles in Chinese family still exist. ‘Traditional modern behaviour’ in the case of male peasant workers has taken place with two layers of meanings. Firstly, it is generated from the challenges of sustaining the traditional gender ideology within rural families through the men’s experience of migration to urban modern spaces. Secondly, the old patriarchal system is challenged by new power relations emerging from rural men’s new practices in relation to their families. This is reflexively extended to men’s gender practices in the modern workplace and generates new meanings of masculinity within modern workplaces. In this case, the patriarchal masculinity of traditional Chinese culture has also been challenged by the new power relations within modern Chinese society. This new power relation emerging from the experience of male peasant workers within modern society ‘recreates’, or ‘reinvents’ the tradition but not placing men in the privileged position that used to exist in the old traditional patriarchal system within Chinese culture.

Rural men might be changing in “slow motion” (Segal, 1992). This ‘change’ involves a tension of integrating traditional values within modern urban experiences. Tension or ‘conflict’ within the construction of masculinity might be a feature that leads them to interrogate the traditional norm of masculinity and (re)produce new meanings of masculinity. Traditional values and expectations do not give way to modern experience and practice. Rather, they have been reflexively reproduced through negotiation with modern experiences and practices.

8. Conclusion

This paper offers some reflections on men and masculinities within migration studies in a Chinese context. It has been argued that a broader definition of gender should be taken into account of Chinese gender and migration studies. Through the study of masculinities of Chinese male peasant workers, this paper also explored the relation of tradition and modernity and its impacts on social changes in contemporary Chinese society. The meaning of ideology in terms of gender role, gender order and gender relations within the family has been identified as changing by means of reflexively deploying the traditional Chinese gender ideology into male peasant workers’ modern experience in rural-urban
migration. It also opened a valuable discussion for future researchers on either gender studies or migration studies within a Chinese context to interrogate the role of tradition in late modernity and globalization. At the same time, it also suggests the need for a more comprehensive account of Chinese men in transnational contexts. Dirlik and Zhang (1997:4) maintain that, ‘under conditions of a global capitalism, Chinese states and populations are no longer merely the “objects” of forces emanating from Euro-America but are themselves significant contributors to the operations of capitalism; hence the seemingly contradictory representations of China and Chinese at once in conventional Orientalist (or self-Orientalist) terms as a location of the exotic other but also as the carriers of values expanding the frontiers of capitalism.’ Finally, although it is not appropriate to conceptualize Chinese transnational migrating masculinity as simply mirroring the characteristics operating within Chinese male rural-urban migration, I believe there is continuity due to the specific Chinese family values operating within these two contexts to be addressed in future research.

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10. Bibliography


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