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Leadership Programmes: Success, Self-improvement, and Relationship Management Among New Middle-class Chinese

Jiazhi Fengjiang [a] and Hans Steinmüller [b]

aMax Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany and Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; bLondon School of Economics and Political Science, UK

ABSTRACT
In the last decade, business and life coaching programmes have rapidly proliferated in the People's Republic of China. Such programmes promise radical self-transformations aiming at individual success and social responsibility. The methods of most coaching programmes popular in China today are characterised by strict discipline and emotional expressivity, which are enacted in personal bonds between participants and coaches. This article describes and analyses these processes of self-transformation for the case of the rapidly growing 'Leadership Programmes' (LP). We outline the social background and emergence of LP programmes, present the typical features of LP training and discuss the consequences of self-transformation as seen by participants and outsiders. Altogether, these leadership programmes constitute an important new platform where ethical subjectivities are created and negotiated among new middle-class Chinese; subjectivities that are supposed to be enterprising, responsible, and expressive.

KEYWORDS Middle class; subjectivity; business coaching; emotions; China

Introduction

In the last decade, a variety of self-help and business coaching programmes have spread all over China. One of the most successful brands, the 'Leadership Programme' offers courses in most provincial capitals: trainees pay a lot of money – up to 50,000 RMB per course – to participate in three stages, the last one 100 days long, during which they take part in increasingly demanding psychological exercises. They submit to strict discipline and extreme group pressure during those exercises, and

while emotional breakdowns are not rare, the large majority of participants are pas-sionate about changing their lives through LP: the main objectives are success, self-improvement, and relationship management, and LP offers radical methods to achieve these objectives. Philanthropic activities are an essential part of LP, and not just for the purpose of charity itself, but to practice team work using LP networks. LP is broadly advertised by word-of-mouth, and relies on strong personal bonds built up between its members, coaches, and trainees. While critics speak of a 'pyramid scheme' and a sect, the large majority of LP's members are adamant that their training is not spiritual or political, but simply about success through self-improvement.

The rapid social transformations that took place in China in the last three decades have opened the door to a flourishing of new kinds of lifestyles, identities, and subjec-tivities. Observers debate the course, causes, and consequences of individualisation and modernisation processes in Chinese society, but there is little doubt that huge changes have occurred: there are new forms of entrepreneurship and new forms of precarity; new power balances between individuals and collectives, and altogether new senses of self. While social inequalities have risen, in particular between the countryside and the city, there is now a growing urban middle class (Goodman 2014). Across society, but especially among the new middle classes, new subjectivities are taking shape: in an environment of heightened individual choice, Chinese people pursue diverse projects of self-creation and self-fashioning, and discourses and practices of self and kinship have become increasingly reflective and expressive. Ethnographic studies have emphasised the emergence of new discourses of sincerity – the 'true self' – and emotional expressiv-ity in China, e.g. in relationship to filial piety (Sun 2017). While the family remains the most important social unit, divorce rates (both in absolute and relative numbers) have more than tripled between 1997 and 2016.[1] In this environment, success and failure are increasingly related to individual action rather than social constraint, and correspond-ingly, new forms of self-help, business coaching, and counselling are thriving. At the same time, new forms of charity and philanthropy have emerged, sometimes linked to organised religion, but often built from the grassroots via online activism, local con-nections, or independent charities (Weller et al. 2017). While some of these changes are broadly similar to what has been called the rise of 'neoliberal governmentality', the term itself is not necessarily useful to describe Chinese realities, given the lasting importance of anti-liberal, relational, and hierarchical elements in self-governance (Kipnis 2007; Nonini 2008). In this environment, self-help and business coaching have become core platforms for the creation of new middle-class subjectivities.

'Leadership Programme' (LP) is one particular brand of training programmes that are spreading rapidly in contemporary China; training programmes that combine business coaching and group therapy with the explicit purpose of achieving personal and professional success. LP perfectly suits the perceived needs of individuals and society in China today: primarily aimed at individual success, self-improvement and relationship management, LP also galvanises participants into charitable action. With its objective of training successful, emotionally competent and socially respon-sible individuals, LP caters to the aspirations of many to create different kinds of self-hood; it is both self-help and helping others through charitable activism and

volunteering. At the core of LP's method are a number of organisational principles that increase individual responsibility, emotional expressivity and group pressure. LP and similar business and life coaching programmes are increasingly popular in in China today, and we believe that these programmes and their core organisational principles provide important insights into new middle-class[2] subjectivities in China today.

LP courses are targeted at ambitious and upwardly mobile individuals, who commonly experience the uncertainty of their newly arrived status. The courses are advertised for 'the elite' (*jingying*), and hence attract people who either see themselves as, or want to become members of 'the elite' of Chinese society. Many of them, in fact, have experienced failure, and enter LP at a 'low point' in their professional and personal lives. The trainees of LP programmes are usually middle-aged entrepreneurs and mid-level managers, often self-employed, or looking for a new job or profession. Trainees, especially those who successfully complete the three stages of the programme, commonly undergo a typical emotional journey: they enter LP at a low point, experiencing a psychological crisis related to insurmountable difficulties in their professional life and in their family relationships. LP training helps them dealing with their personal suffering and frustration: the challenges experienced in the training process propel them to reveal their repressed emotions and overcome them through emotional 'catharsis' (*xuanxie*). While many successful graduates witness a radical self-transformation, a minority has also broken up family relations and/or fallen in depression, which has led to some public criticism of the programme.

Primarily advertised via word-of-mouth, leadership programmes consist of a series of increasingly intensive courses and meetings, for which participants pay high fees. Generally, the programme consists of three different levels. Many participants do not pass to the highest levels and leave the programme prematurely, because of the extreme demands of discipline and engagement set by the coaches. Individual participants have to set themselves their own aims during the programmes, and then strive to help each other to achieve those aims, exercising group pressure by their mutual commitment. LP trainees and graduates also organise public events which follow a certain model of emotional pedagogy (described below) that aims to improve troubled relationships between students, parents, and teachers. The level of intimacy and engagement between members of LP is impressive by any standard, but in particular in contemporary Chinese society, where there are very high levels of mistrust between strangers according to most accounts (Yan 2009).

The leadership programmes we describe in this article help members of the new Chinese middle class to cultivate new forms of self to overcome personal crisis. Aiming at 'revolutions within' (Cruikshank 1993), these programmes are similar to movements of self-help and business coaching elsewhere, reflecting a global turn to subjectivity that draws resources from popular psychologies, New Age philosophies, and Protestant Christianties. China's Leadership Programmes are directly inspired by the self-help movements that have helped US-Americans to adapt their personalities and ambitions to changing social and economic environments for at least three decades (McGee 2007). Building on these movements in the US, Chinese self-help, however responds to very different circumstances, including the historical background

of Maoist self-government. The programmes we describe in this article resemble psychological education programmes in Russia (Matza 2012; 2014), financial self-help in South Africa (Bähre 2007), and prosperity gospels in Uganda (Boyd 2018) and in Indonesia (Hoesterey 2015): seeking forms of self-transformation that respond to particular local economic changes. All of these movements also force their participants to distance themselves from their previous selves and surroundings; unlike these counterparts, however, Chinese self-help does not provide an island of safety and mutual dependence between members (Bähre 2007), nor does it re-affirm relations of dependence (Boyd 2018). The inter-dependence of participants is both re-affirmed and rejected in Chinese self-help, with the ultimate aim of effecting a lasting transformation of individual selves.

The technologies of self that are enacted in these programmes are guided by global models, yet locally adapted to the Chinese context; they are part of the 'psycho-boom' (*xinlire*) that took place in the last three decades (Huang 2014; 2015). Members of the new middle classes increasingly seek psychological help from psychiatrists and councillors; the discipline of psychology itself has seen a huge growth in terms of practitioners and public recognition, and psychological discourses (e.g. about 'depression') have become part of everyday life in urban China.

Writing about the rise of psychological counselling in contemporary China, Li Zhang (2017, 2018) identifies a new form of 'therapeutic governance', in which the expert knowledge of psychological counselling emerges as an essential tool to create and manage subjects in government institutions, in schools, and in business enterprises (see also Yang 2013; 2015). The new kind of 'therapeutic self', however, is not simply a re-enactment of neoliberal self-improvement, but rather an 'assemblage' that includes particular Chinese forms of self-improvement, she argues. Counselling in China is not only – perhaps not even primarily – about the individual self, but includes the social and public life of the individual. This is true for LP as well: self-improvement is sought in conjunction with relationship management and public responsibility and the typical neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance is not at its core.

While the language and practice of leadership programmes share some affinity with psychology and counselling, there are also significant differences. The psychotherapeutic aspects of leadership programmes and business coaching are not connected to a diagnosis of mental illness and its treatment, as is psychiatry, clinical psychology, and counselling (Huang 2015; Kleinman *et al.* 2011; Yang 2013). Perhaps even more significantly, the leadership programmes that are the topic of this article are not actively promoted by the party state as a strategy of governance. In fact, it seems that different government levels are increasingly concerned about the growth of business coaching programmes, and a recent opinion piece in the People's Daily (the mouthpiece of the Communist party) has announced increasing regulation and oversight for these programmes (He 2017). The recruitment tools and moral narratives of entrepreneurship in business coaching and self-help are effectively very similar to pyramid schemes of marketing (*chuanxiao*), which are operating underground, but are also extremely popular: while illegal, they embody 'specters of the socialist past', and dreams of individual success (Jeffery 2002; Festa 2011). The similarities do not

go unnoticed, as we will see, but one main difference is that leadership programmes are (still) legal and are not based on hierarchical pyramid marketing. As self-organised grassroots organisations, most of them are registered as private enterprises, and they frequently cooperate with schools, enterprises, and sometimes local government offices to organise public events. Their grassroots nature, then, makes the leadership programmes an excellent object of research, not necessarily to assess the emergence of 'therapeutic governance' or 'civil society' in China, but rather to evaluate the transformations in moral subjectivities, including self-improvement and relationship management, among middle class Chinese.

From the tactics of recruitment, to the training programme itself, and the public events and charity campaigns of LP, one central feature of LP is that the transformations of the selves of participants is achieved through personal and small group bonds. Links of affection and respect, of indebtedness and gratitude, are created between members through the various phases of the programme. In seminar meetings and in particular in public events, emotional expressivity in personal relations is actively choreographed and taught in specific terminologies. As such, LP programmes practice what might be called 'emotion pedagogy' (Dunn 2016; Wilce and Fenigsen 2016) where self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and patterns of social interactions are taught as skills. But the primary objective is not self-management and self-reliance as in other emotion pedagogies, but a moral and public-minded self that is effective at discovering and realising 'inner potentials'. Only the right balance of self-care and caring for others, LP trainees insist, can lead to self-improvement and success.

Personal bonds are created in various forms in the Leadership Programmes, principally by making pairs and groups responsible for the failures of individuals. We will describe this principle in the various stages of Leadership Programmes, in particular in the pairing up of 'buddies' (sidang) during the training stages, and the esprit de corps of the LP graduation classes. Aside from the peer relationships between participants, the most important personal relationship is that between each single participant and his or her coach. This relationship is modelled on a parental relationship of emotional closeness and submission. At every point of the training programme, the coach will demand absolute obedience from the trainees; failure to obey is the most common cause of premature exit or non-graduation. Disobedience is sometimes punished through physical exercises such as push-ups and squat jumps. Blame and praise for individual action, both within and outside the coaching programme, are exacerbated by the personal attachment to peers and coach, and the emotional openness towards them.

The core elements for self-transformation in LP are collective discipline and a guided process of self-discovery, which are enacted in and through personal bonds. To describe and analyse these processes of self-transformation, we will in the first part outline the social background and emergence of LP programmes in the last decade. The second part presents the typical features of LP training: the basic stages of the programmes, the 'hand-in-hand campaigns' (shou la shou huodong), and the recruitment of new members. This leads over to the third part, which deals with the life 'after' LP and the consequences as seen by LP members and outsiders. Altogether, these leadership programmes constitute a fascinating new platform where middle-class

subjectivities are created and negotiated; subjectivities that are supposed to be enterprising, responsible, and expressive.

The Emergence of LP: The Outsiders' Story

LP (Leadership Programme) is a very popular brand of business coaching that has spread in the People's Republic of China in the last decade. Similar programmes are also called Team Action (TA), Integrity Network (IN), Coaching Skills (*jiaolian jishu*) and Life Dynamics (*shengming dongli*), but they all follow a similar structure: they consist of three stages, and only the graduates of the third and last stages are considered full 'members', whereas participants of the former stages are 'trainees'. While LP is the most popular of those programmes in mainland China today, the differences between programmes, and their origins are difficult to verify. There are allegedly over one thousand platforms that offer similar programmes across mainland China (He 2017). Often graduates of one programme founded new companies of their own in new places, and stopped using the names of their mother companies. In their self-descriptions, and on websites and social media, they tend to emphasise their leading role in the coaching business, and rarely mention their own links to earlier programmes. But in all likelihood, these coaching programmes in China were adopted from a US American coaching programme called 'Life Spring', which first entered Taiwan and Hong Kong, was then adapted in major cities such as Shenzhen, Beijing and Shanghai, and then spread all over China. According to Li (2007), in the 1960s, Alexander Everet founded a programme Mind Dynamics in the US, which combined the concepts of Edgar Cayce and Theosophy. *Mind Dynamics* evolved into Life Spring, which was extremely successful in the US in the 1980s. It was later introduced as Life Dynamics to Japan and Hong Kong in the early 1990s. By 1995, Hong Kong's Life Dynamics course had over 7000 trainees (Li 2007). According to our interlocutors who participated in LP courses in Shanghai, LP programmes in mainland China seems to be more intense, and encourage a higher degree of intimacy among participants, when compared to the similar courses in Hong Kong. Substantial differences notwithstanding, Life Spring in the US in the 1980s, Life Dynamics in Hong Kong in the 1990s, and LP in China today, share the core aim of self-improvement and core features of group psychology. As such, Life Spring and its successors combine diverse elements of the Human Potential Movement (Howard 1970; Spence 2007), Large Group Awareness Training (Finkelstein *et al.* 1982; Fisher *et al.* 1989, 2012) and the so-called 'Mass Marathon Training' (Cushman 1986).[3]

Some companies advertise LP as a form of 'coaching' (*jiaolian jishu*), that uses 'management skills' for the purpose of 'self-management', aimed at people who want to better themselves and develop their human potential through improving their attitudes and mind-set. Even if Life Spring is not mentioned, other US models and Western Psychology are invoked frequently.Many LP coaches refer to Timothy Galway – a former tennis coach who pioneered the coaching theory of 'the Inner Game' in the1970s as the god-father of the business coaching industry in China.[4] Trainees are told that the LP programme structure in China is based on scientific

research and pscychological experiments conducted in the labs of Stanford University in the US. Rather than merely teaching leadership skills, LP allows participants to discover unused potential for self-improvement and to change attitudes and mind-sets.[5] This 'coaching ethos', LP trainers claim, is fundamentally identical with US models such as the management psychology of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Stober 2006).

While LP does not advertise the content of its programmes, on the internet and on social media there lively online discussions about its benefits and drawbacks, and a few articles have appeared in mainstream media criticising the programmes (e.g. He 2017; Li 2007; Wu & Chen 2016; Zheng & Shen 2017). In the most critical reports, LP is compared to a sectarian group, which 'brainwashes' its members and changes their personality, a 'mental pyramid scheme'. Following the training programme, it is said, participants get divorced and leave their families; relatives and friends complain that trainees have become emotionally detached, self-centered, even disturbed. Trainees distinguish themselves from the non-initiates by the behavioural cues and the jargon of LP. They share the strong bonds of having gone through the 'life-changing experience' of LP training; and in this process they have revealed intimate personal secrets to each other. Family members, therefore, often are unable to communicate with the LP trainees. According to LP-speech graduates are supposed to 'impact on' their families and friends; but to the same people, the LP graduates appear manic and delusional.

Some of the criticisms of Life Spring in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s were similarly alarmist. The programme was, for instance, mentioned in the 1978 book *Snapping – America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change* (Conway & Siegelman 1978), in line with religious cults and sects. Psychoanalysts warned that Life Spring systematically undermined self-confidence, promoted regressive reasoning, and stimulated narcissistic defensive mechanisms, those being responsible for the assurance and sense of well-being participants achieved (Haaken & Adams 1983). Similar criticisms were made of Life Dynamics and Asia Works programmes in Hong Kong in the early 2000s (Lee 2000; Cult Education Institute 2002).

Such public accusations contrast starkly with the narratives of programme coaches and LP graduates. Programme coaches insist that their work in LP is an act of merit-making and that they often suffer economic losses. Their declared objective is to transform trainees into better persons, by building 'leadership skills', 'self-management ability' and better communication skills. By discovering their 'inner potentials', and by defining clear goals in life, LP participants will be able to improve their social relationships, including family relationships, despite the separation from their families during the LP training. Coaches and graduates emphasise that LP is not only aimed at personal success, but more importantly at improving one's relationships with and impact on others by strengthening one's 'inner powers' (Wu & Chen 2016).

Moderate critics would say that programmes such as LP simply provide solace and comfort, 'a small and concrete happiness' (*xiao que xing*) in a popular expression. The typical success stories promoted by LP are shared on WeChat, typically in a genre that

is popularly called 'soul chicken soup' (*xinling jitang*), that is, a sentimental and nourishing story. Calling such stories 'soul chicken soup' also emphasises (and sometimes belittles) the nourishing effect such programmes might have on the soul. Against such criticisms stand the immense benefits that LP promises to its graduates. In the next section, we describe those, and the basic steps of LP training.

The Basic Features of LP: The Insiders' Experience

Most LP members are recruited by word-of-mouth. There is some advertisement, especially on social media, but the large majority of LP members who start training have been introduced by a personal contact, and the recruitment of new trainees is part of every LP training. In this way, already from the beginning, potential recruits enter the LP community through close personal links. While LP members are not supposed to talk about exactly what happens during LP sessions, what they will emphasise to friends and acquaintances are the immense personal benefits of such a training. For instance, one of JZ's interlocutors, Wang Yan, was introduced by one of her very close friends to the course, and the same friend paid for her tuition fees in early 2012. She knew nothing about the programme nor the tuition fees, yet was curious about the term 'life' in the title of the course. Yan then introduced her younger brother Wang Yifeng into the course in late 2012. At stage three, she also paid tuition fees for another close friend who could not afford the expense. The principle reason to join LP is individual success: and this can take all kinds of forms, depending on the individual circumstances and ambitions of new members. A friend who had gone through the highest level of LP training often tried to convince H – a white foreigner studying Chinese society – that LP would help him to understand 'the deepest levels of Chinese culture', and he would finally be able to 'really understand Chinese people'. The friend also offered to pay for H's first courses, and emphasised he did this simply because he found H worthy of entering the programme. Once an invitation is accepted, a bond is created – the first connection in a series of intense personal relations with fellow LP members.

Many LP participants undergo a typical trajectory: they are in a personal or professional crisis when they are 'converted' to LP, which offers them an opportunity to completely change their life, and ultimately leads them to success. This 'conversion narrative' is very common among LP participants – 'No one will go to learn LP if he or she is satisfied with their life', Wang Yan says. A typical conversion story would be: a young man from a poor rural background, who struggled in his familial relations, came to work in the city (e.g. as a construction worker, brick carrier, porter, delivery man, electrician etc.), but failed to achieve much for many years, until he finally heard about LP. After the intensive training programme, his personality changed, and this transformation led him to a great success in his business enterprises, and fulfilled relationships with his relatives. Such a narrative makes perfect sense for the main target group of LP: middle-aged people who encountered low points in their partnerships, in family relationships, and in their careers, and are therefore particularly susceptible to LP's promise of individual success.

Structure of Programmes

Despite some local differences, the basic structure of LP programmes is similar throughout China. It is precisely this structure that makes LP programmes distinct from other existing training programmes in China. In the following we describe the common structure of leadership programmes, based on the accounts of two interlocutors who took LP programmes in Shanghai, corroborated by several other interlocutors in Zhejiang and Yunnan, and several published accounts (in particular Li 2007).

In brief, the three stages of LP aim at self-discovery, self-challenge, and leadership building, respectively. In stage one, participants are encouraged to identify their shortcomings through mutual criticism and discipline. This prepares them for stage two, in which they will disclose their innermost secrets to their coach, buddy, and other group members. The objective of stage two is to 'challenge oneself', and by telling one's secrets, getting rid of pain and frustration. In other words, it is a catharsis. Now participants will be ready for the 'leadership building' in stage three, which happens primarily through group discipline, team work, and mutual help. In this stage, individual member set themselves personal goals, and collaborate with their team members to reach these goals. Teams are held collectively responsible for the success and failure of each member.

In the course that Wang Yan took in 2012, there were 50 classmates in stage one; 25 continued to study in stage two, and 20 made it to stage three. Wang Yifeng started his course in the same year together with over 100 classmates; 30 went on to stage two, and only about 20 remain in stage three.

Stage one consists of three evening classes and one weekend class. When new trainees arrived for registration, they were greeted by LP graduate volunteers. These volunteers would remind students to wear their name cards, switch off their phones, keep away from their bags, and fill up the seats in the front rows. Then the volunteers went back to stand at the back of the room in a line. These volunteers were introduced as assistant coaches. There were 9 of them for a class of 40–50 trainees. Wang Yan remembered in particular the enforcement of discipline in this stage, for instance in relation to punctuality, but in particular to the numerous procedural rules of LP. Discipline, LP trainees learned, is necessary to 'keep one's promises'. These strictly enforced rules set by LP programmes are very different from participants' normal attitudes during meetings in the work place, for instance, where attendees frequently check their phones or chat during presentations. In the LP class, the tutors would accentuate self-discipline through repeating the rules and punishing rule-breakers. The punishment would be a face-to-face condemnation of the rule-breakers. In this framework, keeping to rules is equal to keeping one's promise, it is a moral matter of individual honest*y*. Thus those who were late to class were not allowed in and were asked to quit the class. The course enforced the trainees to challenge one's comfort zones and transform their old attitude and habits; instead of loosely abiding following promises, LP members would become reliable and trustworthy: people who always keep their promise.

In this stage, the coaches used many psychological techniques in varied activities that resemble group hypnotism, including asking trainees to stare at each other, hug each other, and fall in guided imaginations with eyes closed, with dimmed lights and soft background music, creating a space of emotional outburst and 'catharsis'. These activities are designed to elicit trainees' self-criticism, and trainees disclose previous attitudes of apathy, selfishness and insincerity. Then the coach would guide trainees in pursuit of sincerity and kindness. At those moments, trainees regularly burst into tears (see also Li 2007).[6] In the graduation ceremony of stage one when the trainees need to decide whether to quit or continue into the stage two, the company would choreograph a surprise meeting for the trainees. The friends who introduced each trainee to LP would appear with flowers and congratulate the new trainees to the completion of stage one. Typically, members hug each other, and are overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and gratitude.

Stage two consists of five days and four nights and requires on-site accommodation. In this stage, participants are paired up as 'buddies'. In Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng's training, trainees were randomly paired up in stage two; yet one can make their own choices in stage three. Unlike what is said in some online discussions about the LP, they were not required or encouraged to find a buddy of another gender. Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng described their buddies as their 'comrades in war'. The role of a buddy is to discipline one another in keeping to the LP set rules; to go through the training shoulder by shoulder; build mutual trust and comprehend each other's mistakes; accompany each other throughout the rest of life. Wang Yan's buddy in stage two was a tall man from the Northeast who looked like a 'gang member'. He ran a small investment company and often disobeyed rules communicated by the LP coach. So Wang Yan's main role as a buddy was to keep him on track for the class schedules, and class rules, as well as to guide him towards the 'right way' (*zhengdao*). The training was intense, and Wang Yan needed to dedicate a lot of time to his buddy.

Stage two is about challenging oneself and about catharsis. Wang Yan reasoned that since the trainees are usually middle-aged, in their thirties and forties, 'they have always been wearing masks in society and have accumulated a lot of painful experiences in their life'. Now, with the help of LP, they can 'dump the rubbish, rip off their performance masks, and face their truthful and bare selves'. This stage's training used more challenging psychological techniques of role-play, that usually put participants in subordinate positions where they were humiliated by others, or had to simulate challenges of life and death. For instance, in one exercise, the trainees were asked to stand in the shape of a horseshoe. One person had to go into the centre to be interrogated by the class-mates. Under the guidance of the coaches, the explicit aim of this exercise is to diminish the sense of pride and self-worth of the person in the centre. And even if trainees don't know each other well yet, they try hard to tailor the charges to the individual in the centre so as to embarrass and humiliate.[7]

Stage three lasts for 100 days. The stage three for the Shanghai programme was about team building and carrying out a 'hand-in-hand charity project' (*shou la shou huodong*). Members are selected to particular organizational positions in the project – Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng, for instance, both become Directors of their hand-

in-hand projects. Trainees were required to attend the meetings three weekends per month in Shanghai. Each of the members set up a target for themselves on any aspect of their life and work. This could be a specific amount of business revenues, a specific improvement on relationships (such as spend more time with wife, and educating children) etc. Six trainees were in a group led by one coach. The group members need to share their daily plan, weekly plan, and monthly plan with each other and with the coach. The coach would supervise the trainee's accompaniment of plans and targets. Each week, trainees need to make an appointment for a phone supervision meeting with the coach. The coach, in turn, has a weekly supervision meeting with the head coach to discuss weekly plans, achievements, and failures. On their 'free weekends' (that is, weekends when no compulsory meetings took place in Shanghai), the cohorts and coaches meet informally and ad hoc.

Hand-in-Hand Events

A 'hand-in-hand event' is generally organised by a cohort of LP trainees in the middle of the third stage of their training as a crucial rite of passage before their graduation. Trainees collaborate in teams to organize such an event, and use their social networks to find a school, an orphanage, or another large indoor space, to hold such an event. Previous LP graduates are invited to volunteer at the event, and current trainees spend a lot of time and effort in particular on fund-raising for the event. The preparation for such an event usually takes about two to three months.

The fund-raising effort is an essential part of LP training. The cohort first has to present an event budget. This budget is divided by the number of trainees. Each trainee is then given a minimum fundraising target to be met before a deadline (usually two months). In addition, LP sets the maximum amount a donor can donate at 100 RMB. The rationale is to pressure the trainees to step out of their comfort zone and improve their persuasion skills in a short period of time – but still, many trainees fail to meet the fundraising targets. As did Yifeng in his course: he said he could not fully dedicate himself to fundraising because he also had to spend a lot of time in his position as the 'event director' of the hand-in-hand project. Because he failed to reach his fund-raising target, Yifeng was 'rewarded' with face-to-face accusations from the other trainees. Having vented their anger, and blamed him for his 'failure', his peers nevertheless helped him to reach the original goal.

There are two different types of volunteers in a hand-in-hand event. One group of volunteers 'go on stage' to interact with students and parents directly, while another group is responsible for backstage logistics. LP trainees from the cohort who is responsible for hosting the event, together with LP graduates from previous cohorts, join the 'on-stage' group; other LP graduates and local volunteers form the latter group that helps with logistics. One LP trainee cohort usually has a size of 20–40. The members of each cohort then have to invite friends and former LP graduates to meet the required number of volunteers for such an event. It might be challenging to find volunteers for events in far-away places (some events take place in remote villages in the countryside); but LP graduates often willingly contribute and spare time,

effort and costs for fellow LP members – after all, helping each other in such ways is supposed to be one of the core value LP members share.

A typical event is targeted at school students and their parents. The aims are to repair 'problematic' parent–children relationship through LP pedagogies. A day's event consists of nine interactive sessions, each with its matching background music, which moves from emotional catharsis to positive emotional expressivity central to LP training. The day starts with a series of ice-breaking games to encourage participants build mutual trust and open up to the larger group, so as to be ready for what will follow. Once participants feel comfortable in the larger group, a new set of games start.

One of the key session of emotional catharsis is: one-to-one conversation. The music turns soft, while lights are dimmed lower. The tune has the flavour of calmness and aims to create a relaxed environment, an ambiance 'out of this world,' in the words of one instructor. In this session, the participants are paired up in three ways: parent–child, volunteer–child, volunteer–parent. The parents and students first start to talk about their frustrations, regrets, and wrong-doings they had not previously been able to express to others, and some start to sob already. The volunteer instructors then share their own stories, thus moving toward an emotional climax. While the participants are talking to each other, the host infuses his soft voice into the background music in facilitating the outburst of negative emotions.

The host invites the student's parent to the stage and encourage the students to express their feelings for their parents, facing their mothers and fathers directly. The student follow suit and say how grateful they are to their parents for everything they did; how they ignored the efforts of the parents; how they feel guilty for letting their parents down. Encouraged by the instructors, the students conclude by speaking of their love: 'Father, I love you!' and 'Mother, I love you!' This is when they burst to tears. The parent mostly express that they regret ignoring their child's needs, often criticising their child and never praised them and they will end with epxressions that they are in fact proud of their child, and they encourage the child to become a better person.

After these emotional outbursts 'healing sessions' follow. Through conversation and group games, strategies are devised for how to encourage mutual trust between strangers. In the seventh session – the Long Life Path – the participants return to their own relatives, and prepare for another emotional outburst. In this session, the parents are blindfolded with a ribbon, pretending to be visually impaired. Each parent is led by their child to walk through a designed path with many psychical obstacles. The children are only allowed to use their body language to guild their parents, pretending themselves as hearing and speech impaired. During the walking, the host started to talk emotionally 'when we are young, our parents held our hands, we trust on them. Now we are grown-ups. They have aged … '. While sentimental songs about paternal and maternal love are played at low volume, many parents and students cannot hold back their emotions and start to cry again.

The sound of steps, nudges, light cries, together with the sentimental voice of the host, mixed with affectionate music, and leads participants to the 'Dream Canvas': in this session, students are encouraged to paint their 'dreams' on a long white

canvas, which will be exhibited at the end of the event. In this context, those 'dreams' are about what kind of future people desire and what kind of person they want to become. There are parents expressing their wishes of their child becoming a person who bears social responsibilities and contribute to society. There are children expressing their wishes of their parents being healthy, beautiful and happy forever. There are also many expressions of individual dreams about the future.

In the final session the students are encouraged to give blue ribbons to the parents, teachers and volunteers to thank them. The host encourages the students to voice their gratitude by saying, for instance 'Mom, you have invested so much effort in me'. The parents, teachers and volunteers then return blue ribbons to the children and praise them. The parents and teachers are encouraged to express their praise to their children by saying, for instance 'My child, continue making efforts! I thank you'. The volunteers join in and say 'children, you will do better!'. Then they hug each other, and some students burst out in tears.

The choreography of emotions in such events is not entirely new. It echoes other projects of encouraging and 'training' emotional expressivity in China. There are Confucian traditions of 'practising' and inculcating emotions, emphasising the 'correct' expression of appropriate emotions in certain context, including, for instance, laughter (Steinmüller 2013). In the Maoist era, crying (or other forms of emotional expressivity, potentially all genuinely induced from one's heart) were very commonly displayed in public to show affections and gratitude to the Communist comrades and leaders. Maoist campaigns employed specific propaganda techniques to mobilise emotions, for instance by using victimisation discourses to create indignation, redemption discourses to generate guilt, and emancipation discourses to raise euphoria, according to the analysis of Yu Liu (2010).

Another model available to everyone are collective emotional expression in school and TV shows, in particular the CCTV Chinese New year show. All these different forms of emotional expressions play a role in the ways in which the 'emotion pedagogy' (Wilce and Fenigsen 2016) of LP is formed. LP pedagogies aims to channel both negative and positive emotions. In the different stages of LP training and Hand-in-Hand events, LP members learn techniques of 'emotional purging', that is, how to 'dump' negative emotions that hold them back and block their personal relations. Exercises of positive emotional expressions such as appreciation, trust, empathy, and gratitude serve as processes of healing and transformation. If part of these emotional expressions seems staged, its aim is clearly not the outward performance, but inner transformation. In the words of LP trainees themselves, LP is a method that aims at changing oneself from the inside.

The emotionality of LP training is only a means toward the core objective, which is the discovery and realisation of 'inner potentials' towards self-improvement. Every emotional outburst will be followed by a consolation that aims to restate the sincerity of the self that remains. As participants say themselves, these practices of self-transformation can help participants to get rid of the 'masks' they carry in their everyday life; by challenging their habits and routines, they can realise their true potential.

But after all, LP is just a method and doesn't guarantee individual success. The next section discusses the results in the lives of some participants.

Life After LP

LP graduates, in particular the classmates of the third stage, often stay in touch and meet for birthdays, weddings, and class reunions; they participate as volunteers in LP activities, and some of them go on to become LP coaches themselves. LP networks span all over China, and it is not unusual for LP members to spontaneously book a flight to participate in a class reunion or volunteer in a hand-in-hand activity. As might be expected, the reunions of LP class mates, are highly sentimental affairs: LP members always hug each other, speak directly about their own feelings and expect LP members to do the same.. Both Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng served as unpaid volunteer coaches and volunteers for hand-in-hand activities across China after their graduations. They have also participated in various gatherings of their LP cohorts. For them, these post-LP activities serve as occasions to reinforce what they have learnt during the LP courses and to feel again the spirit and the 'positive energy' of LP. Wang Yan explained

> we cannot always have the positive energy in our life. Can we? So we need these gatherings. Every time I go to the gatherings, I dumped all my negative emotions. When I came back from the gatherings, I am full of positive energy.

Even so, gatherings with alumni, volunteering, and further coaching courses can become time-consuming and may worsen the already strained family relations of LP graduates. That's exactly what happened both to Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng; and giving in to the pressure of their families, they go less often to LP gatherings now and have rejected a few requests to volunteer.

Given that LP started off as a business coaching programme, and many of its members are self-employed entrepreneurs, it might seem that expanding one's network would be a primary purpose. Former participants do indeed sometimes use these networks to foster business cooperation and in-group fund-raising, but they are quick to insist that this is secondary to the primary objective, which is self-improvement. Indeed, during LP training, it is prohibited for participants to engage in business cooperation, as is any romantic involvement between participants, in particular between 'buddies'. This might seem challenging, given the creation of very intimate bonds between individuals who often are undergoing enormous challenges in their personal and private lives. Even the purpose of simply finding new friends – which can be challenging for people in their middle age, such as most LP participants – is secondary to LP's core objectives, self-improvement and relationship management. However, in post-LP gatherings, LP graduates sometimes organise themselves to visit one member's company or factory as a way of mutual learning. We have also heard from our interlocutors about LP members investing in the business projects of their LP class-mates. LP alumni can become exactly the kind of strong-enough 'weak ties' that are essential for doing business in contemporary China (Chan 2009). But the

instrumentality of such connections is strongly denied by our interlocutors. In alumni meetings, they would frequently praise the success of others, and sometimes complain about their own failures: rather than immediate benefits via LP connections, what seemed a clear result of LP training was an intensification of such comparisons instead.

Many LP graduates are extremely enthusiastic about the effects that the programme had on their lives. The graduates we know are always happy to comment on problems of education, business and politics in China today, and they often suggested to us that precisely the core skills promoted by LP, such as responsibility, communication skills, and emotional expressivity, are lacking in China today. Several interlocutors told us stories about LP graduates recognising each other by their particular interpersonal skills: one interlocutor, for instance, was stranded at Bangkok airport, when the airport was closed for one day due to weather conditions. All Chinese passengers waiting came together, and a 'committee' emerged of people who took responsibility for organising the logistics (e.g. establishing a WeChat group through which information could be shared, communicating with the airport staff to find accommodation for everyone, helping with translation). According to our interlocutor, most of the members of this 'committee' had received LP training – it was not necessary that they declared this explicitly, because they recognized each other by the efficiency of their action and the language they used.

Both Wang Yan and Wang Yifeng frequently invoke some core concepts of LP training when they explain how LP made a difference in their lives. For instance, Wang Yan speaks about the sense of 'responsibility' and 'dedication' that drove her to be altruistic. She had been an active volunteer for a local not-for-profit organisation before she took the LP programme, but after LP training she helped establish a new independent charity. Together with Wang Yifeng and several other volunteers, she founded a not-for-profit organisation 'Seeds', which operates educational programmes and provide financial aid for left-behind children. She has also observed changes in her friends who have taken LP courses, who care more about others. Moreover, she frequently refers to notions such as 'appreciation', 'communication', and 'impact' – concepts she has learned about in LP training – and says that those ideas help her manage her familial relationship with her husband and her 16-year-old son and she found herself learn to appreciate and thus praise others more, rather than criticise and blame them.

Wang Yifeng also recognises a positive self-transformation. He summarises two states of life after LP that an LP graduate would normally go through. The first state is 'fanaticism' (*diankuang*): an emotional 'high' that allows people to indulge in their dreams, fully convinced that they can do everything; they are full of passion and energy, and demand the same from everyone else. Most LP graduates eventually transition toward the second state of 'consistency' (*wenzhong*). In this second phase, people step back, calm down and reflect on their attitudes and actions. Yifeng confessed that he had been in the first state for a long time because 'everyone is fanatic in such an atmosphere'. Eventually, he came to embrace 'consistency', became less expressive in interactions with non-LP initiates, and stopped using LP jargon. For him, the value of LP training is when one learns to convert it in practices in everyday life settings. Unlike those who directly apply the LP methodologies to their life and

work, Yifeng finds it important to deliberate and adapt LP knowledge appropriately in everyday settings.

Conclusion

The rise of LP programmes is only a minor phenomenon in a rapidly changing society, and a very contentious one. But it exemplifies some core transformations of moral subjectivities and forms of individualisation among the new middle-classes emerging in contemporary China. Life Spring and other business coaching programmes that later inspired LP had emerged in the 1970s in the US where they were most popular in the 1980s. Increasingly flexible labour markets and the decline of life time employment led people to seek a sense of 'community and purpose', and to take refuge in the 'enhanced communication and intensified experience' provided by such trainings (Finkelstein *et al.* 1982: 516). Elsewhere, the growth of 'self-help' and 'self-management' programmes has also been linked to particular transformations of labour and class (Cruikshank 1993; McGee 2007), often as a popular response to the anxieties created by economic liberalisation and neoliberal policies (Bähre 2007; Boyd 2018; Matza 2012).

In China today, the growth of business coaching also responds to a changing sociopolitical environment. Since the reforms of the 1980s, many people from rural backgrounds have entered urban labour markets or have tried their luck as entrepreneurs. A large number of peasant-turned workers and entrepreneurs are anxious to achieve social mobility. They see education and self-improvement as the primary means for realising their desire for upward social mobility or to sustain their newly achieved, yet volatile middle-class identity. Moreover, they actively seek new social connections and a sense of purpose, and this is exactly what volunteering and business coaching can offer.[8] The objectives marketed by the LP programmes and its counterpart coaching programmes appeals to their hopes and anxieties in the process of class formation in this particular historical-political moment.

LP, and business coaching in general, aims at the types of success and self-improvement that have become essential to middle-class subjectivity in China today. The particular form this process of self-transformation takes depends on local practices of self-inspection, emotional expressivity, and relationship management. Various analysts have described new forms of self-governance in China, in particular in relationship to emerging discourses of psychological therapy and mental health (Yang 2015; Zhang 2017, 2020). To some extent, such discourses replicate what has been described as the 'new form of inwardness' of Western modernity (Taylor 1992: 29); in which individuals thought of themselves as 'reflexive object[s] to be cultivated and improved through voluntary effort under expert guidance' (Giddens 1994, 59–60, cited in Wilce and Fenigsen 2016, 89). Yet while Western therapeutic discourses have a strong tendency to individualise and to put the weight of therapeutic success or failure on the patient, and his/her inner states, 'emotion pedagogies' elsewhere emphasise simply the (collective and superficial) correction of emotional expression (Wilce and Fenigsen 2016). Dunn (2016), for

instance, describes 'emotion pedagogies' in Japan, which teach how to appropriately express particular emotional states in particular situations. Trainees in the programmes Dunn describes are taught how to behave in particular situations, so as to 'discursively identify and express [their] inner feelings', which is seen as the defining feature of a 'healthy psychology' (Dunn 2016: 120). In education camps in Russia, elite children are instructed to criticise their partners so that those can learn 'how to respond to criticism'. Thomas Matza (2014) argues that the ultimate teaching objective of these camps is to cultivate 'modes of willing' and managing emotions that are conditions for success in neoliberal Russia.

The methods of self-fashioning and relationship management, and in particular the charity-oriented and volunteer-based public 'hand-in-hand activities' of LP also aim at 'emotional pedagogy': they teach and train participants in 'how to feel' emotions as skills. As such, they build on a particular set of historical models of emotional expressivity and self-cultivation, including Confucian ethics and Maoist mass campaigns. However, a core difference between LP pedagogies and the 'emotion pedagogies' described by Matza (2014), Dunn (2016) and Wilce and Fenigsen (2016), is that in LP the emphasis is not on teaching emotions per se; teaching methods are just a tool toward a larger purpose, which is to inculcate a method of self-improvement and relationship management. Its teaching is regularized and similar to formal schooling, but it is always focused on active group learning and strict discipline; instead of individual indoctrination the teaching method centres on relations of emotional and social mutuality.

The objective of LP training programmes is to further individual success through the collective reshaping of affective dispositions, forms of expressions, and patterns of social interactions. But while self-responsibility is constantly emphasised, and a transformation of self actively sought, this transformation is not 'individualising' – or rather, individualising only in the sense in which individuals have to fulfil a role – they are 'put on spot' so to say, as parents, children, or co-workers. The kind of self-fashioning and self-improvement that LP offers is explicitly collective and relational: it takes place in and through pairs and groups, and not through self-introspection or individual training. As we have shown, the relationships between participants and the coaches, and between participants themselves, are the arena through which the desired self-transformations are practiced. Individual and social responsibility are meant to be practiced by obeying orders, by challenging oneself and others and by emotionally expressivity.

The case of LP, then, shows one particular pathway to middle-class subjectivity within the larger trend of individualisation in China (cf. Yan 2010). LP training aims at a reflective attitude toward one's inner potentials and inner feelings, but it does so, explicitly, through peer pressure and staged performances. Family and state are supposed to care for individuals, yet they also control individuals: in China today, this combination of care and control is embodied in the term 'guan' (Zhu et al. 2018). The practices of self-improvement and relationship management practiced by LP members add another layer of meaning to 'guan', emphasizing aspects of appreciation, trust, and empathy. The pedagogies of mutual

criticism in early stages of LP training, for instance, is meant to teach participants to practice self-criticism and to appreciate others. This is also evident in Hand-in-Hand events encouraging mutual appreciation between parents and students – the fundamental recognition that seems to be lacking in many families today. LP training systematically uses the group dynamics between participants and coaches, including discipline, reward and punishment, to create attachment and motivation. The ultimate objective of this methodology, however, is individual success and the transformation of self.

Notes

1. According to the latest data released by Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2017), the number of divorces has risen from 1.199 million in 1997 to 4.158 million in 2016, and the crude divorce rate (number of divorces per 1000 population) has risen from 0.97‰ in 1997 to 3.0‰ in 2016. It should be noted that the divorce and remarriage rates has significant regional disparities (Zeng & Wu 2000; Wang & Zhou 2010).
2. We use 'middle class' as a shorthand to describe the majority of the participants and coaches of LP. While there are some government employees, teachers, and clerks, the large majority of LP participants are self-employed. Tuition fees, events and travels that are part of the coaching programmes make LP prohibitive to individuals with little financial means. In Goodman's terms (2014), LP members broadly are part of the 'entrepreneurial middle classes', not as well integrated and accommodated with the party state as the 'established middle classes'. If few members of LP acknowledge being 'middle class', what unites them are the 'middle-class aspirations' of material wealth and cultural distinction that Li Zhang (2010) has described. In this sense, our use of the term is similar to how Carola Lentz (2015) and Deborah James (2019) have used 'middle class' in African countries, that is, as an umbrella term for people who consider themselves neither poor nor elites, and who do the 'boundary work' typical of someone who wants to be recognised as part of a global middle class.
3. There are blog posts that identified a list of popular training programmes in Asia that can be characterised as Large Group Awareness Training, including Asiaworks, Christopher Howard Training, Re-evaluation Co-Counselling, Life Dynamics, LifeSpring, EST, Landmark Forum, Scientology (Chaen 2017; Cult Education Institute 2002).
4. Liang Libang is allegedly the first person who has imported the coaching skills from the US to mainland China in 1997 (Xu 2001; Liang 2001). Liang Libang subsequently published textbooks on coaching skills (Huang & Liang 2007) that are widely used in various coaching programmes including LP.
5. These were the core elements of 'business coaching' (*jiaolian*) as described in the opening ceremony of the summit 'Coaching China' that took place in 2015 in Beijing (CCTV 2015).
6. Even though coaches guide the trainees to appreciate such painful experiences as their 'life treasures', there are no strategies taught to cope with the stimulated trauma. Hence, there were news reports about trainees went to commit suicide after such outburst of traumatic memories. For instance, Li (2007) mentioned an LP trainee from Fujian ran to a train station in bare foot and committed suicide after the class in her report. Similarly, Lee (2000) reported suicidal attempts by a trainee of Life Dynamics courses in Hongkong.
7. In some programmes, trainees become increasingly exhausted, with courses starting early in the morning and finishing only late after mid-might (Li 2007). But the intensity varies, and some of our interlocutors said that most of the time they were allowed enough sleep and rest.
8. In her PhD dissertation, Jiazhi Fengjiang explores the aspirations and dilemmas of grassroots philanthropists in Zhejiang, which are broadly similar to many of the people who enter LP.

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ORCID

Jiazhi Fengjiang 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3703-2965
Hans Steinmüller 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5921-421X

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