

Chinese Adolescents' Meaning-focused Coping with Prolonged Parent-child Separation

Abstract

In China, 61 million children are left behind in rural areas suffering from prolonged parent-child separation when their parents migrate for work. Meaning-focused coping is known to play a positive role in adaptation, particularly during persistent adversity, but little is known about how adolescents make meaning during prolonged parent-child separation. This qualitative study investigated how adolescents utilize meaning-focused coping during such separation. Seventeen adolescents who had been left behind ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.1$ years, $SD = 1.03$ years) by migrant parents were recruited via purposive sampling. Eight subthemes emerged and were grouped into four themes: living with prolonged parent-child separation, ambivalent feelings, constructed meaning of parental migration, and meaning-making strategies. Despite detached parent-child relationships and weak family support, the adolescents made positive meaning of their parents' migration by focusing on the migration-related benefits and maintaining goal commitment. Participants' perceptions of left-behind life varied at different stages of their parental migration and their ability to make positive sense of migration increased with age. The role of culture was crucial in their meaning-making formulation. The results have application potential for psychosocial interventions targeting adolescents facing a prolonged left-behind period.

Keywords

resilience, meaning-focused coping, left-behind children, qualitative methods

Prolonged parent-child separation caused by parental migration has become a widespread phenomenon in many developing countries (Dillon & Walsh, 2012; Parreñas, 2005). The purpose of this study is to shed light on how Chinese adolescents perceive and make meaning of such a phenomenon. When migrant workers migrate for work, the children who remain behind in their hometowns are described as “left-behind children” (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). In China, rapid urbanization since the economic reforms of the 1980s has created a large flow of rural-urban migration (Zhang & Song, 2003). The country's number of migrant workers is estimated at 168 million, and these migrants have left behind 61 million children and adolescents in their rural hometowns (National

Bureau of Statistics of China, 2014). Over 47% of left-behind children,¹ who often live with their grandparents, are separated from both parents (Women's Federation of China, 2013).

China's *hukou* system (residential registration system) is considered a salient obstacle hindering migrant workers from bringing their children with them to urban areas because a rural *hukou* restricts a child's access to welfare and education provision in cities (Young, 2013). Additionally, raising children is a considerable challenge for migrant workers because of long working hours and the necessity of living in shared temporary accommodation (Li & Li, 2007). The majority of migrant parents in China work on the east coast, whereas their children remain in rural western China, which generally restricts them to a single reunion per year (Women's Federation of China, 2013). Consequently, prolonged parent-child separation has become a prominent phenomenon among Chinese children and adolescents.

Impacts of Parental Migration on Children's Well-being

The literature generally points to the negative impacts of separation from a biological parent on a child's well-being in both the short and long term (Amato & Keith, 1991). However, the effects of parent-child separation on adolescent development have been documented primarily in cases of family dissolution or parental death. Migration-induced separation, a substantively distinct form of family separation, has drawn research attention only recently (Graham & Jordan, 2011). Although the results of existing studies

¹ According to the Chinese government definition, "left-behind children" refers to children and adolescents under the age of 18 with at least one parent who has migrated.

on the effects of parental migration on the children who stay behind are inconsistent, the majority report adverse child development outcomes, for example, an increased risk of poor physical development (Wen & Lin, 2012). Left-behind children also are more likely to exhibit such behavioral problems as smoking and Internet addiction (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010). A further concern is that left-behind children are also at risk of poor mental health (Qin & Albin, 2010), with research showing them to display poorer psychological well-being than their peers living with both parents (Graham & Jordan, 2011).

Despite these studies identifying left-behind children as vulnerable, resilience approaches suggest that they may be able to develop positively despite adversity if protective factors outweigh risk factors (Ungar, 2008). Researchers have recently begun to investigate the protective factors for left-behind children. In terms of external resources, increased family income after migration has been shown to moderate the negative effects of migration on children's academic performance (Wen, Su, Li, & Lin, 2015), suggesting that a family's higher post-migration socioeconomic status may mitigate the potential negative effects of parental migration in certain aspects of development. Wen and Lin (2012) also found the negative effects of such migration on child well-being to be buffered by certain forms of social support, such as peer support, whereas Wu, Lu, and Kang (2014) reported perceived strong cohesion within a neighborhood to reduce its negative effects on child depression. These findings suggest that multiple social resources play potential protective functions for left-behind children. Research on the protective factors for left-behind children and adolescents is still in the

early stages, with more studies needed to help such potentially vulnerable youngsters attain resilience.

Theoretical Perspectives on Meaning-focused Coping

Meaning has been discussed from various theoretical perspectives. Existential psychology posits that meaning, as a spiritual dimension, is the primary force in our lives (Frankl, 1985). From the cognitive perspective, meaning provides a fundamental schema through which we understand the world and ourselves (Steger, 2012). In recent years, there has been growing interest in the role of meaning in the coping process (Park, 2010). Meaning-focused coping has been proposed as an additional cognitive-based coping strategy in addition to problem- and emotion-focused coping (Folkman, 1997). Meaning-focused coping describes efforts to draw on beliefs, values, and goals to generate positive meanings in the face of stress (Park & Folkman, 1997). Such coping is distinct from both problem-focused coping, which involves strategies to alter the situation causing distress, and emotion-focused coping, whose aim is to reduce the emotional distress arising from stress (Folkman, 1997). Strategies that facilitate meaning-focused coping include benefit-finding, adaptive goal-processing, the reordering of priorities, and infusing ordinary events with positive meaning (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007).

The literature has documented generally positive impacts of meaning-focused coping on adaptation, particularly in situations that are not amenable to resolution or in persistent adverse circumstances (Park, 2010). However, few studies in this area have explored the components and roles of such coping in the adolescent population. Reactions to adversity vary at different life stages depending on individuals' cognitive and emotional capacities (Kilmer, 2014). Adolescence is a critical life stage during which

individuals increase their variety of meta-cognitive strategies and become agents of meaning construction (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the process through which adolescents make meaning in the face of adversity.

Meaning differs across cultures (Patterson, 2005). Therefore, meaning-focused coping needs to be understood within the cultural context in which it takes place. Chinese culture considers sacrificing the self to promote the interests of the group to be meaningful (Shek, 2012). Hence, coping strategies that are less likely to disrupt group harmony, such as self-accommodation, may be more salient among the Chinese (Lonner, Wong, & Wong, 2007). In addition to using coping strategies conceptualized in the Western context, Chinese adolescents also adopt such culture-specific coping strategies as *Yi bu bian ying wan bian* (coping with changes by keeping calm and sticking to unchangeable ways), which lies in the concept of self-transcendence in Taoism, and *ren nai* (forbearance), which is rooted in the concept of self-cultivation in Confucianism (Yue, 2001). Chinese adolescents' endorsement of positive cultural beliefs has been shown to lead to greater psychological well-being (Shek, 2005). In addition, family functioning may also influence the construction of meaning in adolescents (Shek, 2012). The core value of Chinese parenting is *xiaoshun* (filiality) and *guan* (to govern), whereby children are expected to be obedient to and respectful of their parents (Chao, 1994). These values and norms may exert a strong influence on the way in which Chinese adolescents make meaning of migration-induced separation from their parents.

Given the need to explore the protective factors involved in adolescents' left-behind life and the gaps in the meaning-focused coping literature, it is imperative to

identify the meaning-focused coping that adolescents adopt in the circumstances of parental migration. The aims of the study reported herein were thus to 1) explore the meanings constructed by adolescents to understand the left-behind experience; 2) yield insights into how adolescents make meaning out of adversity; and 3) shed light on the roles played by the family and cultural context in Chinese adolescents' meaning-focused coping.

Method

Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experience of and meanings made of separation from migrant parents, an approach recommended by Folkman (2009) to obtain rich descriptions of meaning during the coping process. Given the subjective nature of meaning, the study employed the phenomenological approach because of its strengths in discovering the meaning created by individuals (Colaizzi, 1978). Furthermore, the emphasis in the phenomenological approach on the interactions between individual knowledge and cultural context facilitated reflections on the latter. The study followed the major principles outlined for conducting a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2012; Polkinghorne, 1989), namely, determining whether our research questions were suited to gathering an in-depth, exhaustive understanding from participants' perceptions, recognizing our assumptions about phenomenology, using the recommended sampling strategy for a phenomenological study, and following the steps of phenomenological data analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in four townships in the southwestern Chinese province of Sichuan, which is reported to have the country's largest number of left-behind children ($N = 6.92$ million) (Duan, Lv, Guo, & Wang, 2013). Purposive sampling was performed to recruit participants who were currently experiencing left-behind life. As a certain level of cognitive maturity is necessary to find meaning or identify benefits in adversity (Kilmer, 2014), this study targeted an adolescent population. The inclusion criteria included 1) being of secondary school age (equivalent to Grades 7-9) and 2) having been left behind by one or both parents who had migrated for work. Studies have found that the psychological well-being of left-behind children varies with different caregiving arrangements (Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Therefore, adolescents whose mother alone, father alone, and both parents had migrated were purposively recruited. Because the study's focus was parent-child separation caused by migration, adolescents whose parents had divorced or passed away were excluded.

Potential participants were identified from a list of adolescents living in the four townships provided by local social workers. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria were recruited during home visits, and written consent was obtained from the participants and their caregivers. We stopped recruitment when all variations in types of parental migration appeared in the data and the number of cases had achieved the recommended sample size for a phenomenological study (Polkinghorne, 1989). Before data collection, the study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Hong Kong.

The first author, who is a registered social worker, conducted all of the interviews. Before the interviews, the participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedure. Each interview lasted 40 to 60 minutes and included a mix of open-ended exploratory and semi-structured questions. During open-ended exploration, the participants were invited to share information on their family background, experiences of separation from their parent(s), and their daily routine. The semi-structured questions were informed by the theoretical framework of meaning-focused coping and adjusted based on feedback from participants. A number of aspects of left-behind life were covered, including 1) feelings about and the experience of left-behind life, 2) the impact and meaning of parental migration for the participant and his or her family, 3) coping strategies for dealing with the adverse situation arising from parental migration, 4) the beliefs and values underlying those coping strategies, 5) the participant's life goals and how parental migration had influenced those goals, and 6) the influence of contextual resources on his or her meanings, values, and goals.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the interview data then analyzed using NVivo11 and the method recommended by Creswell (2012) for phenomenological research. This method is Moussaka's (1994) modification of Colaizzi's (1978) protocol, the aim of which is to reveal the essence of what participants have experienced and how they have experienced it. First, phrases and sentences were open-coded as significant statements based on their relevance to the research questions; second, the meaning of each significant statement was extracted to obtain a meaning unit that reflected the essence of the participant's description; and, third, the meaning units

were synthesized into themes to obtain a consistent and systematic description that reflected the common experience of all interviewees (Colaizzi, 1978). During the process of creating sub-themes, key concepts of meaning-focused coping were utilized as a reference (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007; Park, 2010). In the final step, the sub-themes were formulated into themes.

Reflexivity and Validity

Bias is difficult to eliminate in social science research, and it is therefore important for researchers to be aware of their preoccupations through the practice of reflexivity (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). The authors had not experienced parent-child separation during their own childhoods. Hence, their perceptions of left-behind life were constructed primarily from the literature, which mainly documented the negative effects of migration on left-behind children's well-being. Therefore, open-ended questions and empathy skills were employed during the interviews to ensure that participants' descriptions reflected the true situation. We also followed the steps of data analysis recommended for phenomenological studies to minimize the potential effects of our presumptions on the data. Memo-writing was another strategy we adopted to reflect upon how our biases may have influenced our interpretation of data reflexivity (Shek, Tang, & Han, 2005). To ensure the validity of our findings, the two authors discussed the emergent meaning units and themes throughout the process of analysis until consensus was reached. To avoid the loss of any meaning from the dialogues, the transcripts were analyzed in Chinese, with the themes and representative quotes subsequently translated into English. All quotes were cross-checked by an expert who is fluent in both English and Chinese.

Results

Seventeen adolescents (nine boys, eight girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 14.1$ years, age range: 12-15 years) participated in this research (see Table 1). Twelve had been left behind by both parents, four by their father, and one by her mother. Of those who had seen both parents migrate, 11 were living with their grandparents and one with another relative at the time of the interviews. Nine of the participants had experienced left-behind life for more than 10 years. On average, the participants saw their parents once a year. Eight sub-themes emerged from 28 meaning units and were grouped into four themes (see Table 2). The first theme concerned participants' complex perceptions of different aspects of left-behind life. The second theme, "ambivalent feelings," reflected participants' attitude toward their migrant parents. Within the third theme, two sub-themes emerged to reflect positive meanings of parental migration constructed by the participants. The fourth theme pertained to the cognitive strategies the participants used to make meaning.

Living with Prolonged Parent-child Separation

"Getting used to it." One theme that emerged from participants' original descriptions of left-behind life was "getting used to it." One 15-year-old girl whose parents had been working away since she was an infant said, "I do not want to change the current situation. I have gotten used to it. After all, it has been like this for 15 years." As noted, prolonged parent-child separation was common among the participants, an experience that had left some of them emotionally numb about such separation. Their accommodation to the situation may have been a helpless reaction to prolonged parental absence. One boy said:

I don't know what my father does for work outside. I don't ask. I am not curious about this, as we only meet once every two or three years.... I feel his migration has no impact on me. I have gotten used to his absence already. (Case 5, male, age 14)

Some of the participants had accommodated themselves to left-behind life as they had grown up without their parents' company and thus lacked memories of living with them. One 15-year-old boy, both of whose parents had migrated, said: "We rarely meet each other, so I don't have too many memories of them [parents]. Gradually, I stopped missing them a lot and got used to their absence."

Migration was a common phenomenon in the research sites. Empathy from peers who had experienced a similar situation also facilitated some participants' adaptation to parental migration. For example, one 14-year-old girl explained, "When I am unhappy, I talk with my friend who is like me [whose parents had also migrated]. She can understand what happens in my home. We comfort each other and encourage each other."

Increasing tasks. Some participants reported stressful experiences concerning their academic performance. Migrant parents are often concerned with their children's education and have high expectations of their academic performance. However, they are unable to supervise their children from afar, and the grandparents with whom they live are often incapable of academic supervision or coaching. One boy said, "It does not matter whether I do my homework, as no one supervises me when they [parents] are not at home." Consequently, difficulties arising out of poor academic performance were a major source of stress for many participants:

Once I got a bad score on the exam, and I cried at the table. When I meet difficulties in studying, I feel that no one can help me, and I have few resources... My grandparents do not teach me these things. They are not good at expressing [themselves]. (Case 12, female, age 14).

Along with a lack of parental support, some participants reported a heavy load of house and farm work. One 14-year-old girl described her experience of housework: "I need to cook for myself and my brother sometimes. They [grandparents] lock up the knife when they are not around, so I have to use my hand to cut vegetables. Cooking is so difficult for me." In addition to housework, some participants were assigned the task of caring for siblings. One girl said:

I still become annoyed when I have to do something I haven't done before, when mom and dad are not around.... Recently when my little sister was hospitalized, my mom and dad did not return home; they just left it to me and my grandmother. I had never learnt anything about hospitals, and it was really annoying to have to do that stuff. (Case 1, female, age 15).

Many of the participants said they felt they received insufficient support from their caregivers, although they reported that their caregivers, often their grandparents, cared enough about them to fulfill their material demands. However, they felt that they did not get sufficient guidance and emotional support. In the face of stressors, grandparents were often not a priority source of support, as one 14-year-old boy explained: "It's difficult to communicate with her [grandmother], especially in words.... She never understands me because of the generation gap."

Ambivalent Feelings

Yearning for parents. The majority of participants experienced a strong yearning for their parents, particularly soon after their parents had migrated. That yearning varied by age. For example, one 12-year-old girl, whose parents had migrated seven years ago, cried when she recalled her separation from her parents:

When my parents had just left, I missed them very much. I asked my sister when my parents would come back. Sometimes my sister takes pictures of our parents to look at when we miss them.... Sometimes I write down words I want to tell them in my diary. (Case 4, female, age 12)

For many of the older participants, the yearning for parents had weakened over time. One 15-year-old girl said, "I missed my father very much just after he had left, but those feelings have gradually disappeared over the years." Decreased yearning for parents was often accompanied by increased attachment to peers when the participants were in middle adolescence. In some cases, peer support helped to reduce the painful feelings of parent-child separation:

I feel something is missing in the family when my parents are not at home. Life seems more joyful when they come back during the spring festival.... Just after they left [for the first time], I missed my parents and felt lonely. I do not have this feeling now, as I can play with my classmates. (Case 13, male, age 13)

Participants who felt that their grandparents or other caregivers were substitute parents who provided them with sufficient emotional support did not exhibit strong yearning for their parents. One boy expressed his longing to live with his parents, but said that support from his aunts helped to alleviate such longing:

They [parents] are not usually at home, coming back only during the spring festival.... [At first,] I didn't understand why they must migrate to earn money. I just wanted them to be with me.... [Now] separation from my parents is not so difficult for me [because] ... my aunts [are] like my parents. (Case 2, male, 13)

Maintaining frequent contact with parents also helped to relieve the pain of separation. One girl said she felt “annoyed and less happy” just after her mother had migrated, but that feelings had weakened because she kept in frequent contact with her mother: “My mom calls me very often, twice or three times a week. During the summer holiday, I can take a bus to visit her.” However, the majority of participants were unable to meet their parents frequently owing to the distance between their hometowns and parents’ workplaces.

Unreachable parents. When participants mentioned their parents, they often used the pronoun “they” instead of “Dad” or “Mom.” They appeared to feel little parent-child intimacy, although many of them said “I know my parents love me” and that they felt cared for by their parents through the remittances they sent back home. One 14-year-old girl said, “I have a good relationship with my parents, but we are not close.”

Prolonged parent-child separation had made some of the participants feel emotionally estranged from their parents:

I do not remember when my parents migrated. My grandparents tell me that my parents migrated for work when I was eight-years-old.... I can tell my grandma what I am thinking directly, but not my mother. I do not express my feelings to them [parents] often. I am not growing up with them, so I feel that I am not very close to them. (Case 12, female, age 14).

Building an emotional connection with parents was particularly difficult for those participants who had been separated from their parents since infancy or early childhood. One girl whose parents had been working away from home since she was a toddler complained about the absence of care and love from her parents: "When I think of my parents, I feel bitter. I feel I have never been loved by them. They are so wrong. They do not understand me at all." One 13-year-old boy said, "I am scared of my dad, and I am afraid to talk with him." Even those participants who had developed emotional closeness with their migrant parents found it difficult to maintain that closeness from afar. Many of the participants had a reunion with their parents only once a year. Although technology facilitates long-distance communication through regular phone contact, the busy work schedules of migrant parents renders such communication inadequate:

They [parents] just tell me they are out there busy with work, tell me they work overtime every night, even past 12 am.... We mostly talk about my studies, nothing much else. I know they are just too busy, I can't talk too long because they have to go to work. (Case 2, male, age 13).

"Keep healthy" and "study hard" were the two main themes of participants' phone conversations with their parents. Some described such communication as far from satisfactory in meeting their emotional needs: "They [parents] tell me to take care of myself on the phone, but they are only saying it. They do not do anything. I feel that they do not care about me in practice and do not understand my feelings."

Constructed Meaning of Parental Migration

Shared family obligation. Many of the participants expressed acceptance and understanding of their parents' migration cognitively even while feeling that it was

undesirable emotionally. They had been told by both their parents and stay-behind caregivers that migration would improve the family's economic status both immediately and in the long run by supporting their education. Participants generally believed that migration was not a decision that their parents had made out of self-interest, but was a choice that benefited the whole family. One 12-year-old girl described her understanding of migration: "I know that they [parents] left for our family, not for themselves, not to have fun outside [the home].... My parents are working very hard to allow me to focus on studying and provide a better life for my granny."

The ability to make positive sense of migration increased with age. Some of the participants noted that they had gradually recognized the necessity of migration as they grew up, understanding that their parents had "had to migrate" once they learned of the limited job opportunities in rural China. One 15-year-old boy explained: "They [parents] said that they could not earn enough money at home, and so they migrated. I did not understand this until I started to realize the difficult condition my family was in when I was in junior school." In general, the participants appreciated the endeavors their parents were making to improve the family's economic condition and displayed empathy for the hardship their parents experienced as migrant laborers. Some of them realized that leaving them behind in their rural hometowns was a decision their parents had been powerless to avoid after witnessing their parents' poor living condition in the city. One girl expressed her sorrow over her father's working environment:

I went to visit my father during the summer holiday. He is working in a small factory. The room he lives in is very small. There is no fan there, and [I felt] very

hot. It's a furniture-making factory very far from downtown. The dust is everywhere. (Case 11, female, age 15).

The constructed meaning of migration had important implications for participants' adaptation to parent-child separation. When they had the sense that their parents had migrated in search of economic opportunities and a better life for every family member, their separation-related suffering was reduced:

I used to think that other [people's] parents all stayed at home, except for mine, and I would feel disappointed, but not anymore.... Now that I know they left to make [our] home better, I feel a bit relieved. (Case 1, female, age 15).

Benefits of parental migration. Adversity does not always lead to negative outcomes, and identifying the benefits of adversity is possible through meaning-making strategies (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2007). The participants created positive meanings of parental migration by identifying its benefits, including better educational opportunities and personal growth. Remittances from migrant parents improved their living conditions, for example, by allowing the family to build a new house and the participants to purchase a cell phone and receive more pocket money. Such improvements helped the participants to value the positive changes effected by parental migration. More importantly, remittances equated to improved educational prospects. One 15-year-old boy explained: "They [parents] provide enough economic support for my studies. If they were at home, I might not have enough money to go to college [even if I gained] admission." Similarly, a younger boy (age 13) who had transferred from his village school to a school in a nearby county after his parents had migrated said, "They left [the village] to earn money, making

my life and everything here better [so that] I can have better education quality at the county [level].”

Although the participants reported a range of adversities arising from their parents' migration, many also felt that such adversities had promoted their personal growth. Some perceived the challenges of left-behind life as opportunities for independence, and participants tended to utilize self-reliance strategies to solve their problems. One 15-year-old girl described the changes she had undergone after her father migrated for work: “When my father lived with us, he protected me a lot. I depended on him very much. After he left, I learned a lot by myself, which can help me to make a living outside [the village] in the future.” Many participants also perceived left-behind life as a “good exercise” that taught them diligence:

I think the migration of my parents has made me strong. I feel that I am stronger than my classmate who lives with both parents. Also, I have become diligent at home, as I help my grandparents to do the housework. (Case 12, female, age 14).

Meaning-making Strategies

Resilience-related Beliefs. Beliefs about adversity were found to influence the participants' appraisal of parental migration and their attitudes toward the difficulties arising from left-behind life. Participants' beliefs in resilience combined with culture-specific beliefs about adversity, leading them to endorse such Chinese proverbs as “Hardship brings social stature” (*Chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren*) and “Failure is the mother of success (*Shi bai nai cheng gong zhi mu*).” These values helped participants to normalize the adverse situation arising out of parental migration and even to identify its benefits.

Many participants reported the belief that “problems are solvable,” which gave them the confidence to overcome challenges. Such a belief is related to the Confucian belief that people can solve problems through their own power and effort (Zhang & Veenhoven, 2008). One 15-year-old boy said, “If we are brave enough to confront stressful situations, to solve problems, [they are] not a big deal. I believe that if I work hard, I can overcome [adversity].” Furthermore, persistence in adverse circumstances is strongly encouraged in Confucianism, and constituted the core belief upon which many of the participants drew to cope with adversity. For example, one 14-year-old girl said, “People should not give up. If I really want to do something, I should persist in doing it no matter whether I will be successful or not.”

Some participants endorsed the old Chinese saying “Let nature take its course” (*Shun qi zi ran*), as well as “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it” (*Chuan dao qiao tou zi ran zhi*). One boy shared this belief about adversity: “Good fortune and disaster are determined by fate; if misfortune is impending, then it cannot be avoided (*Shi fu bu shi huo, shi huo duo bu guo*). If it has happened, I will take responsibility for facing it.” These values are related to the teachings of Taoism: people should follow the laws of nature and be flexible when facing adversity (Zhang & Veenhoven, 2008). Such values may have assisted the participants in accepting parental migration and managing the resulting adversity in a positive way.

Goal commitment. Goals provide a sense of meaning and purpose while motivating individuals to sustain the effort needed to achieve them in the face of stress (Park & Folkman, 1997). The positive sense of parental migration that some participants expressed reflected their underlying goals, which had important implications for their

coping. Although parental migration exacerbated the academic pressure they felt, it also served as a driving force to study hard:

They [parents] migrated so that I could go to school and we could have a better life, so I set goals for myself.... If my stress level is not too high, I express my emotions and then pay attention to my goals. (Case 12, female, age 14).

“Going to college” was the goal most frequently mentioned by the participants, a goal they were often encouraged to achieve by their migrant parents. The attainment of such a goal would represent the worth of the sacrifice the parents had made in the eyes of parent and child alike. The goal of going to college also sustained the participants’ efforts to overcome difficulties, particularly in the face of academic stressors. More importantly, they believed that its achievement would improve the family’s social mobility, which provided further motivation:

I want to go to college, for myself and for my parents. My parents tell me to study hard. They want me to be educated, not like them. I remind myself of this goal when I have difficulties with my studies.... After going to college and then finding a good job, I can give them [parents] a better life. (Case 3, female, age 12).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that adolescents can imbue parental migration with positive meaning by adopting various meaning-making strategies despite the adverse situations they confront. The majority of the participating adolescents had been separated from their parents for more than 10 years, suggesting that migration-induced parent-child separation in China often begins in an early life stage. Parent-child attachment in early childhood has a long-term effect on individual attachment to others in later life stages

(Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000). When the participants experienced stressors arising from parental migration, they perceived insufficient family support. Adolescents who lack a capable caregiver to help them cope with stress are at risk of diminished attachment security (Allen, McElhane, Kuperminc, & Jodl, 2004). The quality of the attachment to a caregiver can influence adolescents' ability to negotiate current and future development tasks (Wilkinson & Walford, 2001). Furthermore, our findings show that participants' developmental stage interacted with the duration of parental migration to influence how they experienced and perceived parent-child separation. Most felt decreasing yearning for their parents as they passed from childhood to adolescence. Such a shift may be associated with the normative pattern of decreased attachment to parents and increased attachment to peers during adolescence or reflect participants' increasing cognitive capacities to cope with parental migration (Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995). In light of these considerations, the impacts of parental migration on children's development need to be further examined in the context of developmental stage and duration of the separation.

Despite experiencing adversities, many of the participants exhibited a strong desire to imbue parental migration with positive meaning. The dominant stereotype is that such migration increases children's fatalism and that left-behind children lack the power to change their fate (Bi & Oyserman, 2015). Our results indicate that left-behind children have the potential to view parental migration positively, particularly during adolescence when they are readier to use cognitive strategies and prone to search for meaning in their lives. They show that adolescents perceive themselves as stakeholders in migration and as benefiting from it. Social norms may help to explain why some Chinese

adolescents value parental migration. The “culture of migration” provides a hopeful narrative, and the prevalent practice of kinship caregiving in collectivist cultures facilitates migration (Falicov, 2007; Mazzucato & Schans, 2011). Also, migrants tend to be strongly motivated by a desire for upward economic and social mobility, a motivation they pass on to their offspring (Hagelskamp, Suárez-Orozco, & Hughes, 2010). Such drive helps adolescents to generate positive meaning, and may also help them to cope with the disadvantageous situation created by their parents' migration.

Understanding the multiple components of meaning-focused coping in adolescents' left-behind lives has both theoretical and practical significance. Adolescents' cognitive strategies may play a powerful mediating role between stress and adaptation (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). The findings of this study enrich our understanding of the variety of cognitive coping strategies that adolescents adopt, such as utilizing resilience-related beliefs and the goals explicit in the meaning-making process. Further research advances in this area will come from studies that examine the effects of meaning-making strategies on adolescents' adaptation in a variety of adverse circumstances. The implication of such research is that preventive interventions can increase an adolescent's capacity to engage in positive meaning-making in the face of adversity by enhancing his or her competency to acquire resilience-related beliefs and establish meaningful life goals. When parents are far away, schools can serve as a protective network to facilitate the instilling of such beliefs and the consolidation of goal commitment.

Our findings also show that adolescents' meaning construction is embedded in their cultural context. Walsh (2006) suggested that culture influences the meaning that

people make of adversity. Chinese culture emphasizes family interests over individual interests, and the Confucian paradigm perceives an individual as a relational being within the family system (Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011). Hence, everyone has an obligation to contribute to the greater good of the family. These cultural factors may explain why adolescents experience multiple challenges during left-behind life, but are still able to create positive meanings: they perceive migration to be in the best interests of the family. Further, Confucianism emphasizes education regardless of social class and encourages self-cultivation (Bond, 1996). Such cultural schema may explain the participating adolescents' readiness to sacrifice the parent-child gathering for better educational opportunities. Furthermore, as Ungar (2008) suggested, culture creates resources that people utilize to overcome adversity in a meaningful way. This study shows that the endorsement of Chinese proverbs instills positive beliefs about adversity in adolescents. The diverse cultural components of adolescent meaning-making should be taken into account in future research. However, overemphasis on family obligations may cause the family and even the society to take adolescents' sacrifices for granted, and thus fail to provide them with adequate support. Also, specific Chinese cultural values such as *Keji* (conquering one's individuality) and emotional control may encourage adolescents to place stronger emphasis on facing challenges than on their own needs (Bond, 1996).

Although the qualitative methodology adopted in this study revealed insights into Chinese adolescents' perceptions of left-behind life and the components of their meaning-focused coping, the study had a number of limitations. First, given the nature of qualitative research, the mechanism underlying meaning-focused coping and adaption was not examined, although the components of such coping described herein can inspire

further research examining the functions of meaning-focused coping. Second, the sample excluded left-behind participants whose parents had divorced. Researchers have found that migration can increase the risk of divorce, particularly when the wife alone migrates (Caarls & Mazzucato, 2015). Parental divorce may be more likely in the case of adolescents with a migrant mother, thus placing them in a more vulnerable situation than their counterparts who are merely left behind. Thus, future research should explore the experiences of left-behind adolescents of differing family status. Third, a lack of member checks through follow-up interviews (Colaizzi, 1978) owing to feasibility constraints constitutes another limitation of this research, although emergent themes were discussed within the research team several times to ensure validity. Despite these limitations, the in-depth understanding of how adolescents make meaning of parental migration afforded by this study sheds light on possible interventions for encouraging positive meaning construction concerning parental migration and promoting migration-related adaptation. Its findings also advance our understanding of adolescent meaning-making strategies in the face of adversity.

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Table 1

Demographic Information on Participants

Case	Gender	Age	Status of parents	Migrant parent(s)' Occupation	Caregiver	Duration of being left-behind
1	Female	15	Both parents migrate	Factory workers	Grandparents	6 years
2	Male	13	Both parents migrate	Factory workers	Aunts	12 years
3	Female	12	Both parents migrate	Construction workers	Grandparents	7 years
4	Female	13	Mother migrates	Waitress	Father and grandparents	2 years
5	Male	14	Father migrates	No stable job	Mother and grandmother	10 years
6	Male	15	Both parents migrate	Father: construction worker Mother: waitress	Grandmother	5 years
7	Male	15	Father migrates	Construction workers	Mother	5 years
8	Male	15	Father migrates	Plantation worker	Mother and grandparents	5 years
9	Male	15	Both parents migrate	Father: construction worker Mother: waitress	Grandmother	10 years
10	Female	15	Both parents migrate	Construction workers	Grandmother	14 years
11	Female	15	Father migrates	Factory worker	Mother	5 years
12	Female	14	Both parents migrate	Factory worker	Grandparents	13 years
13	Male	13	Both parents migrate	Construction workers	Grandparents	9 years
14	Female	13	Both parents migrate	Construction workers	Grandparents	10 years
15	Male	13	Both parents migrate	Waiters	Grandmother	14 years
16	Male	15	Both parents migrate	Tricycle workers	Grandparents	13 years
17	Female	14	Both parents migrate	Factory workers	Grandfather	13 years

Table 2

Emergent Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Living with prolonged parent-child separation	“Getting used to it” Increasing tasks
Ambivalent feelings	Yearnings for parents Unreachable parents
Constructed meaning of parental migration	Shared family obligation Benefits of parental migration
Meaning-making strategies	Resilience-related beliefs Goal commitment