THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# Hopes Matter: Adolescents' Coping and Identity Searching for Maternal Absence in Rural China

By

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**Abstract**

The present MA thesis study focuses on rural Chinese adolescents being raised by single fathers without a mother regularly present in the home. Using in-depth qualitative data collected from 8 rural teenagers in Mangshui, Yunnan, Southwestern China, the study examines how adolescents in rural China experience maternal absence and cope with that experience. It also inquires about how maternal absence impacts a specific developmental task, the identity searching, of these young people. The author argues that rural adolescents experience a considerable amount of stress because of emotional disconnection with biological mothers; the social stigma generated by the mother-absent family structures; paternal high expectations for them to improve family situations and shake off the social stigma; and a lack of safe space within the households to address experienced stress. At the same time, rural adolescents receive general emotional support from significant others. They also gain emotional support from the life philosophy introduced by social media and the school curriculum to specifically address issues of maternal absence. Based on the life philosophy, rural adolescents perceive themselves as powerless to change their current situation and focus on what is possible in the future. They imagine desirable images of themselves in a future state and use these images as effective coping strategies to redirect attention, modulate emotion, preserve hopes, and take action. Suffering from maternal absence, young people are clear about what they like to be and dislike to be in the future. These explicit renderings of assumed roles in adulthood, as a result, help them navigate not only life challenges but also identity crisis in adolescence.

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## Introduction

Left-behind children and parental migration in rural China have long been the focus of international scholars. Since Chinese economic reform in the 1980s, political and economic landscapes in China have undergone a dramatic transformation because of the introduction of capitalism and marketization. For decades, the Chinese government has prioritized urbanization and converted considerable natural and human resources in rural China into commodities, bankrupting rural China. The uneven distribution of resources, later termed the urban-rural divide, has stimulated an unprecedented rural-to-urban labor migration and brought tremendous changes in rural family functioning (Zhang et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2021). The China Women's Federation (2013) has reported that this labor out-migration had generated 61 million left-behind children in rural communities. Children usually are left with grandparents and relatives as primary caregivers, while one or both parents migrate to cities seeking employment (Jingzhong and Lu, 2011). Scholars define children who stay behind in rural communities with other caregivers for more than six months as "left-behind children" and those migrant parents as "work-away parents" (Liang et al., 2017; Chen and Jiang, 2019; Fu and Zhu, 2020). Psychological adaptations of left-behind children has emerged as an important academic focus as child depressive symptoms become increasingly prevalent in rural China (Zhao et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Hu, 2018; Shu, 2021; Xu et al., 2019). In particular, scholars have suggested that long-term parental absence can damage the parent-child attachment patterns (Liu et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2021). The insufficient family care and insecure attachment then stimulate both cognitive and noncognitive problems in left-behind children, such as a lack of social control, inadequate social skills, aggressiveness, low self-esteem, and health issues (Gao, Tadesse, and Khalid, 2022).

While researchers have chronically spotlighted left-behind children whose parents or fathers are absent, less effort has been put into examining a special kind of disrupted family system where mothers move out. Drawing on data aggregated from 27 surveys conducted in rural areas of ten China's provinces from 2009 to 2013, Zhou et al. (2015) indicate that 15.7% of children in rural China were from both-parents-migrant families, 23.9% from father-migrant families, and 5.7% from mother-migrant families. Considering the significant role of a mother as the primary caregiver and a child's attachment figure, maternal absence in Chinese rural households, although less common, may exercise heavier influences on children. According to the China Women's Federation (2013), children from mother-migrant families suffer the highest dropout rate at 5.12%, whereas those for children from father-migrant and parents-migrant families remain lower at 3.13% and 3.11%. A limited amount of literature that has examined differential impacts of father migration versus mother migration in rural China demonstrates that children from migrant-mother households are more disadvantaged in terms of educational and emotional outcomes than those from migrant-father families (Wen and Lin, 2012; Zhao et al., 2014; Murphy, Zhou, and Tao, 2016; Hu, 2018; Xu et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Zhao et al. 2019; Li and Sun, 2020; Shi et al., 2021). For example, compared with both-parent, father-only, and nonparent migrant families, adolescents from mother-only migrant families report the highest levels of depressive symptoms and loneliness as well as the lowest levels of life satisfaction and subjective happiness (Zhao et al. 2019). Wen and Lin (2012) also characterize these children as the most disadvantaged group in terms of family monitoring, cohesion, and support, as they are less likely to report positive health behavior and school engagement. Academic performance is also undermined. Children with migrant mothers rank 23.30% lower on the math test than children with two at-home parents, whereas children with migrant fathers

rank only 8.37% lower (Zhao et al., 2014). Except for one that employs mixed methods and validates quantitative results with qualitative findings (Hu, 2018), all studies adopt a large-scale quantitative approach to collective survey data on child behavioral and social-emotional outcomes.

The family functioning of mother-absent households is another topic that may impact child development and a few scholars have paid attention to it. In China and Southeast Asia, the share of migrant workers who are mothers is increasing (Yue et al., 2016). Some scholars have suggested a positive and highly gendered association between maternal labor out-migration and marital dissolution in rural China (Du, 2010; Hu, 2018). Specifically, the traditional patriarchal family structure, which situates women inside the family as caregivers and men outside as breadwinners, is disrupted in rural households with maternal absence (Fan, 2008). The increasing economic independence of female migrants compared to their stay-behind husbands further rewrites the power balance, threatens the masculine identity of their husbands as the primary breadwinners, and strains the marital relationship (Fan, 2008). Literature on maternal absence in Southeast Asia offers a clear conceptual framework to describe the left-behind family dynamics as well as its possible impacts on child development. Asian traditional gender ideologies that still align domesticity with femininity may disapprove of the domestic labor division of mother-migrant families and exacerbate the emotional strains of mothers and children (Parrenas, 2001). The social agreement on the gendered nature of caregiving may also exercise negative impacts on children's well-being if they internalize negative self-conceptualizations due to living in the "wrong kind" of family (Parrenas, 2010; Jordan and Graham, 2012). In general, the mother-absent family dynamics could be especially disturbing when it goes against predominant cultural expectations that assign caregiving to females and mark maternal proximity as a source of

emotional nurturance (Jordan and Graham, 2012). So far, there are few studies on China that have provided empirical testing of these concepts.

What is missing from the existing body of literature is how children in rural China experience and respond to maternal absence and the subsequent unconventional family structures. Existing research has focused exclusively on problematic developmental and emotional outcomes among left-behind children. This deficit-focused research design under-investigates children's resilience and sources of support, instead viewing them as passive victims of life adversities, when children may be able to take advantage of available support and develop resilience to cope with risks and actualized challenges in their lives. For example, a study about left-behind children in Southeast Asia informs us of a positive association between longer durations of maternal absence and higher resilience. Compared with children from other migrant families, children who have spent a larger proportion of their lifetime living in mother-migrant households are more likely to be recorded as generally happy, suggesting that time is a protective factor (Jordan and Graham, 2012). Nevertheless, the study also fails to delve into the specific mechanisms in terms of how these left-behind children develop resilience over time and achieve generally happy states.

Among human's all life stages, adolescence is a sensitive period that is full of possibility and vulnerability. It is a time when extensive changes occur in physiological and biochemical systems and behavior (Hamburg, 1989). Adolescents experience an uncertainty about adult roles and what constitutes an effective preparation for life onwards (Erikson cited in Muuss, 1996). Identity searching— "the establishment and reestablishment of sameness with previous experiences and a conscious attempt to make the future a part of one's personal life plan" (Muuss, 1996, p. 53)—therefore unfolds as a major developmental task and challenge of young

people (McCormick, Kuo, and Masten, 2011). Although young people begin to individuate from their parents in adolescence, family still plays a major role in their lives. For example, parent-adolescent conflicts and different types of parenting styles may have significant impacts on youngsters' psychological and character development (Steinberg and Morris, 2001). As Eccles and his colleagues (1997) also state, caregivers may lay the foundation for positive developmental outcomes if they skillfully balance adolescents' craving for independence with their need to rely on caregivers for concrete and emotional support.

To the best of my knowledge, no empirical studies have focused on how rural Chinese adolescents develop coping strategies for maternal absence. Few studies allow adolescents to speak for themselves. To fill the research gap, I hereby propose three research questions based on the above discussions.

- First, how do rural Chinese adolescents experience maternal absence?
- Second, how does the environment support rural Chinese adolescents to cope with maternal absence?
- Third, how does maternal absence impact the identity searching of rural Chinese adolescents who experience maternal absence?

I investigate the central questions using in-depth interviews with adolescents being raised by their fathers without a mother regularly present in the household in Mangshui, Yunnan, southwestern China, where I worked as a full-time teacher in the local middle school from 2019 to 2021. During my stay, I visited many single fathers and frequently observed the emotional distress, loneliness, and rule-breaking behaviors of their children in school. The vulnerability and resilience of these young students often go unrecognized by local teachers and me. The chosen qualitative approach aims to allow rural youth to express their thoughts, actions, and experiences

freely, provide nuanced analysis, and offer a complementary narrative to the body of expensive quantitative research.

**Theorizing Adolescents' Systems of Experiences in Rural China**

In considering my central questions, I rely heavily on the framework provided by the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) as it pays special attention to youth's coping processes and identity formation (Spencer, 1995, 2006, 2015). The PVEST perspective builds on previous theories in developmental and clinical psychology, including phenomenology (individual's perspective) proposed by Rogers (Schultz cited in Spencer, 2006), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), and Erikson's and Marcia's annotations on identity development (Muuss, 1996). In particular, Spencer theorizes PVEST based on the ecological perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993), which emphasizes that young people's development is affected by features in differentiated levels of contexts, from the proximal, including immediate face-to-face settings like family relationships, to the most distal, consisting of broader societal contexts such as classes and cultures. The PVEST perspective elaborates on a more general ecological perspective by highlighting individual perceptual processes to underscore the central role of self processes and identity in responding to ecological conditions. It specifically considers the actual experience of the young person and brings researchers' attention to issues of particular relevance to marginalized youth.

According to Spencer (2006), PVEST is a cyclic, recursive model that consists of five basic components linked with bidirectional processes, throughout which one's identity and coping strategies emerge. In order, the five components include *net vulnerability*, *net stress*, *reactive coping processes*, *emergent identities*, and *stage-specific coping outcomes* (Spencer,

2006, 2015). In developmental contexts, different individual and environmental elements may serve as risk or protective factors, including but not limited to social-economic status, biological traits, and the individual's history of productive or unproductive coping at a prior period. *Net vulnerability* refers to a net balance between risk factors and accessible protective factors for a person in a specific developmental stage. The actualization of risk and protective factors in the person's life is described as *net stress*. This balance between challenges experienced and support accessible particularly affects the person's well-being. The third component, *reactive coping processes*, is when the person interprets actualized experiences of challenges and support, determines how to respond to them, and develops reactive problem-solving strategies. Both adaptive and maladaptive reactive coping could be produced. As the person deploys reactive coping consistently over time, self-appraisal takes part, and responses that yield self-perceived favorable results are repeated. This consistency of reactive coping patterns powerfully impacts the individual's psychosocial processes and yields *emergent identities* over time. *Emergent identities* refer to how the person views himself or herself in and between the various contexts of development (i.e., family, school, peer group, and neighborhood). *Life-stage specific coping outcomes* define the person's stable coping outcomes generated by a stable identity at the specific developmental period. A bidirectional relationship can be observed here: identities emerge from the person's stable method of responding, and the person's decision-making and behavioral patterns at the next stage are produced based on the current *emergent identities*. The unfolding coping processes, consequent coping outcomes, and emergent identities at the current stage serve as the primary source of personal *net vulnerability* in the next cycle.

In these cyclic processes, PVEST conceptualizes resilience as an identity: "an achievement-oriented sense of self attained by the individual to overcome obstacle (risks) by

drawing on available resources (protective factors)" (Spencer et al., 2006, p. 635). This resilience-focused perspective, therefore, views identity as coping. It allows researchers to portray marginalized youth as active respondents to challenges by examining youth's coping processes and senses of selves developed during these processes. In addition, PVEST's reliance on Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective enables researchers to carefully consider risks and protective factors existing in youth's proximal and distal contexts that lead to specific vulnerability and resilience.

Identity development is as much a social process as it is a psychological process (Spencer et al. 2004). When the PVEST perspective emphasizes youth's self processes and identity formation, it also acknowledges social characteristics of an identity that may confer privilege or marginality to a young person. The young person's social identity, therefore, may function as risks or protective factors in multiple levels of contexts and significantly shape his or her perception of self. As a framework that provides conceptual inclusiveness to studies on marginalized youth (i.e., African American males) in a western context, PVEST includes social stigma, which results from inferences about race and gender, as an important component of youth's vulnerability. Social stigma, or unsubstantiated stereotypes, may produce additional risk, create extreme emotional discomfort, and compromise youth's self processes (Spencer, 2006). Although marginalized youth in rural China have not been previously considered with respect to this approach, social stigma may exist and influence youth's self-perception and coping processes in the context of maternal absence.

As mentioned previously, the domestic labor division of mother-absent families may transgress Asian traditional gender ideologies and situate children in an uncomfortable space. I introduce the concept of stigma here to further elaborate on the PVEST perspective by

identifying the spoiled identities that may be critical with respect to my study participants. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualize stigma with reference to the relationships between five interrelated concepts, including labeled differences, stereotypes, separation from the normal, and status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001). Stigma only comes into existence when all the five components cooccur. For the process to start, people need to distinguish and label human differences first. The dominant cultural traditions then associate labeled persons with unwelcome characteristics, which can be further developed into negative stereotypes. Those who are labeled are therefore placed in distinct social categories and prevented from acting as generic social actors. As a result, a certain degree of separation of the stigmatized from the normal is achieved. At last, status loss and discrimination occur because of unequal accessibilities to social, economic, and political power between the normals and the stigmatized. In general, the convergence of all five components allows "the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination" (Link and Phelan, 2001, p. 367) and makes stigma unfold.

Based on all the above, PVEST provides a theoretical pathway from risks and protective factors in developmental contexts to identity formation through analyzing personal meaning making and coping strategies. The concept of stigma is incorporated into the PVEST model to further consider youth's vulnerability and its possible impact on self processes. As a result, my research design based on the PVEST perspective discards the presumption of adolescents as passive victims but rather treats them as active agents that are able to evaluate environmental factors, confront challenges and access support, make sense of their own experiences, and efficiently respond to adversities.

## Methodology

### *Research Site*

Mangshui is a small rural township located on the China-Myanmar border in Yunnan province, 105 kilometers southeast of the prefecture-level city of Baoshan. The township has a total area of 311 square kilometers with Songzi Mountain to the west, Lancang River (the upper half of Mekong River in Southeast Asia) to the north, and more mountains to the east and south. There are two streets in town, with a total area of 1.1 square kilometers. Restaurants, supermarkets, tea shops, a bus station, and a gas station can be founded. The highest peak in Mangshui has an altitude of 2876 meters and the lowest point in the valley has an altitude of 1240 meters (The People's Government of Mangshui, 2021). Due to the highly varied geological features, various types of climates exist, including but not limited to hot-valley climates and cold-mountain climates. People from villages in the lower valley with hot weather mostly rely on fruit plantations for their livelihood, whereas villagers from cold mountains usually focus on tea plantations and walnut farming. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2020), the population of Mangshui was 27468 in 2019, 0.8% of which were ethnic minorities. A traditional residence where an extended family lives usually includes a courtyard enclosed by the two-story main house and three side houses. The first floor of the main house functions as a shrine to worship ancestors' souls and deities. The second floor of the main house and three side houses may serve as living rooms, bedrooms, and a kitchen according to the family's preferences and needs. One may occasionally find a holding pen for livestock beneath one of the side houses. Family-owned agricultural lands are not far from the residence. In fact, a lot of local families still relies on the self-sufficient small-scale economy that combines animal husbandry, agriculture,

and handicraft industry. With economic and social transformations that spread from coastal and urban China, a few shrewd local residents have taken advantage of the local tea plantation and initiated a domestic tea-trade network. Other residents tend to work as migrant workers in other townships, Baoshan city, or coastal provinces when seasonal agricultural activities are over. There is an increasing wealth disparity between ordinary peasant families and local entrepreneurs. Maternal absence and parental labor out-migration mostly occur in ordinary peasant families.

Mangshui has nine villages in total, and each has its own primary school. There are also a primary school and a middle school in town. Local children can either go to primary schools in their villages or go to the one in town that is believed to offer better education. All primary-school graduates need to enroll in a middle school to finish their nine-year compulsory education. Most of them go to the middle school in town, whereas a small proportion of students with wealthier parents or higher academic performance may choose middle schools in the county seat and, rarely, Baoshan city. All high schools are located in the county seat and Baoshan city.

*Data Collection*

To investigate how adolescents in Mangshui experience being raised without a mother regularly present in the home, I adopted a qualitative approach that enabled young students to express their thoughts and share their experiences freely. In this regard, focus group and one-to-one interviews could be effective. According to Langevang (2007), young people tend to find meaning through conversations with peers and frame group discussions closer to everyday situations, while at the same time also providing insights for more general issues and subjectivities. On the other hand, one-to-one interviews offer an opportunity for those who prefer

to share their opinions individually. As a result, it would be ideal to conduct both focus group and one-to-one interviews in the present study to secure adolescents' ideas and experiences as comprehensively as possible. Nevertheless, due to the time constraints for thesis data collection and the international travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, I was not able to travel back to China and conduct interviews in the field. My choice was limited to one-to-one interviews due to the software design of WeChat virtual meeting, which is widely accessible by phone by rural adolescents when their access to computers is not guaranteed.

All research procedures, including those related to recruitment and informed consent, were approved by the Crown Family School Institutional Review Board. Study participants were recruited from the local middle school, where I had previously worked, based on my personal connections with students, teachers, and community members. The inclusion criterion for enrollment in this study was any student from the local middle school who is raised by their fathers without a mother regularly present. I only excluded students who did not want to be included. During the recruitment process, snowball sampling was used. Parental consents and child assents were both attained by collecting electronic signatures on Wenjuanxing, a Chinese online survey software, because many students were Android users and were not able to fill in their electronic signatures on Qualtrics. The links to consent forms were sent to parents and interviewees via WeChat.

Driven by the research questions and the PVEST framework, I designed an interview guide including 20 questions that covered adolescents' experience of maternal absence, their understanding of that experience, their coping with that experience, and their considerations of the future. The semi-structured form aimed to allow interviewees to bring up their experiences, thoughts, and actions in various contexts (i.e., family, school, community, social media) flexibly.

The first question asked about students' school life and was intended to establish an emotional connection between the interviewee and the interviewer and create a relaxed talking environment. The 2nd to 4th questions were designed to initiate the topic of maternal absence. They inquired about the interviewee's typical day at home, relationships with at-home family members (i.e., father, grandparents, siblings, other relatives), and relationship with the absent mother. The next four questions requested the interviewee to share his or her experience of actualized challenges in the context of maternal absence, as well as his or her interpretations of that experience. Specifically, the fifth question asked, "how do you think your family experience differs from those of your peers?" The interviewer naturally inquired about the interviewee's possible experience of stigma in this part of the conversation. Questions six to eight asked about the reasons why the mother has left, how the interviewee thinks of these reasons, and if these explanations impact the interviewee's self-image. The first 8 questions of the interview guide intended to acquire the youth's account of net stress in the context of maternal absence, and how they evaluate environmental factors, confront challenges, and make meaning.

The 9th to 14th questions then focused on youth's emotional well-being, coping strategies, and accessible support. Questions nine to twelve probed into the interviewee's emotional well-being and coping strategies by asking about times when they feel happy, sad, anxious, and insecure. The 13th to 14th questions asked about youth's accessible and hoped-for supports. This part of the interview guide was designed to determine how youth's experience of actualized challenges and support impact their well-being and how youth decide to cope with that experience.

The 15th to 18th questions investigated youth's vision of the possible future. Three questions included "where do you see yourself in five years?", "if there is no barrier in your life,

what do you want to be?", and "tell me about your goal." Specifical follow-up questions regarding reasons for choosing particular goals, concrete plans to achieve those goals, or anticipated obstacles were improvised based on the information attained during the interview. Two miscellaneous questions regarding youth's attitude to marriage and education were also asked. This part of the conversation sought to understand how rural youth think of the future and how maternal absence impacts youth's identity searching.

Throughout, the interviewing process remained open and flexible. As the interviewer, I modified the phrasing and order of the questions depending on the adolescents' different experiences, thoughts, and actions. I also strived to go with the natural flow and allow adolescents to become leading actors in our conversations. Refer to Appendix for the present study's interview questions.

All of the interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. The data collection process lasted for two months from April 2022 to June 2022.

*Sample*

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 adolescents aged 14-16 in local peasant families whose mothers were not in the home to raise them. All of the adolescents are either final-year (9th grade) students or 8th grade students in compulsory education. Three of the twelve participants halted the interviews and dropped out of the research later because of emotional disturbance triggered by hurtful memories in relation to maternal absence. One student's data was discarded after it was learned during the interview that the student had experienced continuous, even slight, maternal attention. Thus, qualitative data collected from 8 students were used in the final analysis. The demographic information of 8 participants is

displayed in Table 1 below, including name, age, gender, household composition, and biological mothers' status. All names provided in this paper are pseudonyms.

**Table 1**
Adolescent participants

| Names | Age | Gender | Household Composition | Biological Mothers' Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shu | 14:0 | Female | Father<br>Stepmother<br>Grandmother | Absent since 5 |
| Bo | 14: 4 | Female | Father<br>Grandmother | Absent since 9 |
| Yan | 15:7 | Female | Father | Absent since 9 |
| Ping | 16:3 | Female | Father<br>Grandparents | Absent since 13 |
| Yin | 14: 5 | Male | Father | Absent since birth |
| Lin | 15:5 | Male | Father<br>Grandparents | Absent since 13 |
| Chao | 15:2 | Male | Father<br>Grandparents | Passed away since 1 |
| Yong | 15:11 | Male | Father | Absent since birth |

*Data Analysis*

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated from Mandarin or Yunnan dialect into English by me. During the data analysis, I used summative coding as the first-cycle coding to analyze the transcripts in order to identify categories and trends within the data. This specific coding method was introduced to me by Sharon Hicks-Bartlett during her Qualitative Coding course offered by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. In order to start, I read through all the transcripts and wrote down notes to gain a more holistic understanding of rural adolescents' stories. Based on these notes, I built a tentative category list to categorize adolescents' experiences, thoughts, and actions. Twelve categories that describe adolescents' current experiences include *class*, *gender*, *education*, *social stigma*, *self-*

*perception*, *social awareness*, *self-regulation*, *social skills*, *family*, *romantic relationship*, *peers*, and *teachers*. Five categories that identify adolescents' hopes and plans for the future include *academics*, *career*, *marriage*, *hoped-for support*, and *other plans*. I applied all seventeen categories to my transcripts and highlighted contents relevant to each category with a different color. During the first cycle of coding, I discovered that social media and a school course called *Morality and Law* emerge as prominent sources of rural youth's support. Therefore, I add two categories, including *social media* and *Morality and Law*. After summative coding, I created a sticky note (i.e., memos attached to the categories) to define each category and specify whether the category provides evidence for youth's experiences of stress and support, their coping, or their identity searching. For example, categories like *class*, *gender*, *education*, and *social stigma* specify stressful experiences of young people. *Self-perception* and *social awareness* indicate their understandings of themselves and the world. *Family* includes both sources of stress and support. *Romantic relationship*, *peers*, and *teachers* demonstrate youth's sources of support. *Self-regulation*, *social skills*, *academics*, *career*, *marriage*, and *hoped-for support* are coping strategies. *Other plans* includes irrelevant materials.

In the second cycle of coding, I added emotion coding and value coding to the data to generate a more in-depth and nuanced analysis (Saldana, 2015). I used value coding (i.e., values, attitudes, beliefs) to examine young people's perspectives and worldviews, which may be impacted by Chinese culture, institutions, schools, families, and their unique experiences of maternal absence. The value coding may also lay a foundation for analyzing how maternal absence impacts the identity searching of young people by exploring their values, attitudes, and beliefs. In addition, emotions were outstanding throughout the transcripts, which provided insights into rural youth's emotional well-being. Emotion coding, in general, allowed me to track

not only which emotion occurred with which specific period and experience but also coping strategies that follow. Throughout, I created a category of *good quotes*, which was intended to retrieve quotes conveniently for citations in the final analysis. All of the coding processes were carried out in MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. The PVEST framework and participants' narratives were organically incorporated into the analysis to create a natural flow.

*Limitations*

There are some limitations to note with respect to the analysis that follows. First of all, the project includes a small sample of youth. Participants in my study share various experiences based on family socio-economic statuses, residence in a single township, and attendance at the same school. This geographic focus on one rural township in southwestern China is insufficient to summarize what is happening in rural family functioning and adolescent development across provinces in China. Considering cultural differences and geographical diversities caused by the vast territory, cross-regional research is needed to come up with a more comprehensive account of rural family systems and child development in China.

However, despite this homogeneity, the youth varied considerably with respect to their academic performances at school and their family arrangements. As indicated in Table 1, the biological mothers became absent in the households at participants' different ages thus different developmental stages, a fact that can produce various types and degrees of impacts on participants' life developments. In addition, participants enjoy unique experiences with their peers, romantic partners, school teachers, and family members in negotiation with challenges encountered. No one universal narrative or singular story is sufficient to construct adolescents' thoughts, actions, and experiences. Nevertheless, there are still common threads that are woven

through the qualitative data, and they become my main arguments in this paper. A larger sample that allows me to go into greater depth regarding gender, household composition, and biological mother's status is needed for more nuanced assessments.

Lastly, the pandemic and the need to rely on digital methods seriously limited my access into the local community. In this project, I was not able to talk with other family members, teachers, or community members due to the time limit and physical distance. Focus-group interviews and field observations that can provide a variety of perspectives were also not conducted. In order to provide a comprehensive scaffold for examining adolescents with maternal absence, further research is required when the situation permits.

*Positionality*

The context of research, as well as the position of the researcher within the context, is crucial to any research agenda. It shapes the research question, structures the research design, and locates the outcomes (Swider, 2015). As a Chinese student born into a middle-class urban family, I worked as a volunteer teacher and lived in rural China for two years right after my college education in the U.S. As a teacher, I had to interact with a group of rural students who were so different from people I used to know and, in fact, were quite beyond my imagination. My method to manage the classroom order and conduct teaching did not work effectively because rural students were used to obeying an absolute authority and I failed to establish my image as one. My struggles with schooling and teaching focused my attention on rule-breaking behaviors and defiant attitudes of local students. It was not until my time at the University of Chicago that I really began to reflect on youth's stories behind emotional distress and rule-

breaking behaviors. This reflection brought my research interest back to rural China, specifically young people with complicated stories behind emotional difficulties.

Positionality refers to how relationships and interactions are influenced by age, gender, race, nationality, and class (Swider, 2015). My identity as a former teacher of the current study's participants allowed me to establish a sense of trust with the interviewees and probe our conversations into greater depth. Although I strived my best to let adolescent participants become the leading actors and express their experiences and thoughts freely in the interviews, my identity as their former teacher may impact how they direct the conversations. In the context of Mangshui, teachers represent academic achievers and are known to value high academic performance. Therefore, adolescent participants may be inclined to show their devotion to studying to portray themselves as well-behaved students in front of me. In addition, students who view me as a kind of authority may not completely reveal their most sensitive and intimate stories if they are worried about being judged and discriminated against by a teacher. Throughout the data collection, I remained a high-achieving teacher who is pursuing higher education for my study participants. My positionality may consistently shape my interactions with adolescent participants as well as how they decided to answer my questions and lead the conversations.

In order to remain objective and eliminate as much bias as possible, I wrote memos to record my feelings and thoughts that occurred during the interviewing process after each interview.

**Results and Discussion**

Although the present study relies heavily on the PVEST perspective, it is hard to demonstrate the stress level and self processes of my target population with quantitative

measurements in a qualitative study like this. Therefore, I strive to provide a detailed description of actualized challenges and support in rural youth's lives, youth's states of well-being impacted by the stress level, and their reactive coping. I further incorporate the theoretical concept of possible selves to elaborate on the identity processes and consider these identity processes as a form of coping.

The results and discussion are presented in four sections. I begin with an examination of youth's emotional distress in the context of maternal absence. Reactive coping from the PVEST perspective is incorporated in this section to interpret specific emotional distress as youth's immediate responses to solving problems. I then discuss how maternal absence as well as educational inequality between urban and rural regions create social stigma and stress for rural youth. Although the theme of educational inequality in the data does not address one of the research questions, it was pervasive in the narratives of my study participants. The impact of maternal absence seems greatest when it accumulates with the stigma of academic underperformance. The first two sections answer my first research question. The third section talks about available support for young people and how they utilize support to reactively cope with maternal absence. This section answers my second research question and prepares for my further analysis of identity searching in the fourth section. The last section brings up possible selves, visions of selves in a future state, as an important coping strategy and specific identity process to suggest a potential identity achievement and a successful coping for adolescents. This section answers my third research question. Although each of my four sections answers to a different research question, youth's experience of stress and support, coping process, and identity process are linked to each other in reality and in their own narratives.

*Research Question 1. Sources of Stress for Rural Adolescents: Maternal Absence and Emotional Distress*

Maternal absence as a fact itself can create considerable emotional distress for rural youth. Considering the significant role of a mother as the primary caregiver and a child's attachment figure, it is quite natural that children tend to struggle with sad and angry feelings, as well as cravings for emotional connections, when their mothers are beyond reach. In addition, the mother-absent family dynamics could be especially disturbing when it goes against predominant cultural expectations that assign caregiving to females (Jordan and Graham, 2012). In the present study, maternal absence symbolizes some kinds of family conflicts or paternal failures that are too sensitive to be mentioned and talked about by adolescents in their own households. The lack of safe space in the home to address youth's concerns about maternal absence causes confusion and exacerbates their experienced stress.

The young people exhibit varying degrees of anger, sadness, wishing for nurturance, and confusion when asked about biological mothers during the interviews. Yong, whose mother has been away since his birth, becomes quite emotional and explicitly states that the thought of his biological mother makes him angry. According to Yong, "I feel like we are better off [without the biological mother]. [If she is still around,] I may feel uncomfortable." Yong's anger toward the absent mother and his description of the mother-absent family as more comfortable may work as justifications for the unconventional family situation and a reactive coping to alleviate himself from consistent yearning and disappointment.

Ping, a 16-year-old girl, interprets her mother's choice of leaving the family as maternal abandonment and shows emotional attachment to her mother. The biological mother left Ping three years ago and gave birth to a male half-sibling with declared congenital defects. Ping has

concluded that her mother is incapable of raising the son. Although upset, she is determined to help and provide her half-brother with a good education in the future.

> My mother gave birth to a little brother. It never occurred to me that my mother would have a baby again. I feel like she has another baby, she would not have me anymore. It's just so sad. I would rather not talk about it… If I stay in [vocational] school, I can find a job after graduation. I bitterly [earn] some money and pay for the kid's tuition.

For some adolescents, wishing for nurturance and anger both exist. Shu and Yan both exhibit ambivalent thoughts and feelings regarding their mothers. When I ask if she wants to see her mother again, Shu states that,

> How do I say it? I want to see her, but I don't want to see her. After all, she left me when I was very small. She has not come back for seven or eight years, so I don't want to see her. But it has already been seven or eight years, so I do want to see her.

In Yan's case, she felt furious with her biological mother at the beginning but grows to miss her more as time goes by. It is important to note that Yin, Chao, and Yong whose mothers have been absent since infancy rarely express grieving and hopes for emotional connections in their narratives. For Chao, "I have nothing to say about my mother. I just thank her for giving me life." One possible explanation is that children who endure longer durations of maternal absence may develop higher resilience and achieve happier states, as Jordan and Graham (2012) indicate. However, the fact that Yin, Chao, and Yong are all males may also suggest that the lack of grieving and yearning is just a result of gender socialization in the local community. As Yin puts it, "As a boy, you must be confident and take yourself seriously."

An observed mother-father conflict that may directly lead to maternal absence can do more harm to rural youth's emotional well-being. For example, Ping requests me not to ask about her mother in the middle of the interview, "Can you please don't mention my mother? I feel very upset because when my mother tried to get a divorce, my father did not agree. Then she

drank pesticide [and tried to kill herself]." Ping's example shows a child's witness of an extreme family conflict. In most cases, adolescents are not clear about how their families become mother-absent. Yin considers it unfair for him to be born into such a family. In the later part of the quote, he further goes on to talk about how he is forbidden to ask about the reason for maternal absence and mother-father relationship in the home.

> People like us all have a hard time with our parents and families. I cannot figure out why my parents are [separate] like this, while everyone else's family is [complete] like that … It is just not fair. Why? And I honestly don't know what happened. My father will say mind your own business if I ask him. I feel like if I know, I may become very emotional, and it just does no good to my study. I just live my life and stay focused.

As a matter of fact, none of the adolescents received explanations from their family members in terms of why their mothers chose to leave the family. They have had to collect clues from covert conversations among at-home family members and elders' attitudes to make their own conclusions. Whether explicitly or implicitly, many participants describe maternal absence as their mothers' willingness to abandon them for financial improvement or romance. As Bo states, "My father was not spending time with her [the biological mother]. He also couldn't give her a lot of money. She must have dreamed of a very wealthy family, and my family was not. The financial pressure must be huge, and then divorce happened."

The lack of safe space to address youth's confusion at home is interpreted by them as a way to protect their emotional well-being. Like Yin, youth believe that being unable to gain a clear explanation or actively avoiding this sensitive topic can help them conquer the emotional distress and move on with their lives. It is quite common among my study participants that they seldom share their experiences of maternal absence with anyone. According to Lin, the topic of maternal absence may have negative impacts on the emotional well-being of his peers.

> I won't tell others because my emotions may have some effects on them. Others may start to feel the same way as I do. Or my words and emotions may remind them of things that have happened to themselves. In that case, I would just make others feel sad.

In addition to affecting youth's emotional stability, maternal absence represents some sensitive issues of family conflicts and paternal failures that may damage elders' moods and pride. The strict hierarchy within Chinese families, therefore, may prevent youth from sharing their experiences with each other. In general, it was quite challenging to invite rural adolescents to talk about their mothers freely during the interviews. In the present study, the young people understand the lack of safe space at home to address confusion as a way for them to stay focused and move on with life. Their further decision to actively avoid talking about emotional distress in the community becomes an important reactive coping process based on their evaluation of self-capacities and social constraints. By doing so, they temporarily bypass the unsolved problems, divert their attention away, and effectively alleviate emotional distress.

*Research Question 1. Sources of Stress for Rural Adolescents: Social Stigma of Academic Underachievement and Maternal Absence*

Young people not only experience their mothers' absence through a sense of loss, anger, and confusion, but also encounter social judgment and stigma from the surrounding community. The unconventional family condition of maternal absence can transgress Asian traditional gender ideologies and surrender rural youth to harsh judgments and social stigma. Academic underachievement is another factor that further marginalizes stigmatized youth, although youth believe that academic success is an opportunity to overcome the stigma of maternal absence.

In rural China, the patrilineal kinship system has far-reaching implications for family life (Li, 2004), as it establishes a strict hierarchy within the family. Abide by the traditional

Confucian principle of "Rule guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife" (Gallin, 1994), the young are expected to be subordinate to the old and the wives to the husbands. The rural patriarchal norms therefore emphasize the submissive roles of women as wives, mothers, and caretakers and situate men outside of families as breadwinners (Fan, 2008; Zhou et al., 2017). Following this presumption, men are free to leave households and meander in urban cities in the name of supporting their families. In contrast, women are bound to the household running, childbearing, and childraising in rural villages. Living in a rural community where traditional gender ideologies still prevail, young people perceive their families as somehow different from the normal ones. They believe that the only difference between their and other families is that their mothers are not with their fathers and are not at home to take care of them.

In addition to the perceived differentness, an image of a rebellious mother who violates the traditional assumptions of femininity can also produce a strong stigma. Bo's mother left her when she was in 3rd grade. It is made clear in the interview that her mother's multiple marriages and childbearing have surrendered Bo to malicious rumors in the local community. In this case, both the mother-absent family condition and the mother's disobedience to patriarchal conventions provoke social judgments and pass the stigma down to Bo. Specifically, Bo has experienced discrimination and status loss in face-to-face interactions with villagers when villagers were informed of her involvement in a romantic relationship at school: "When I was in primary school, if I involved in a relationship, people in our village would say it to my face that I was as irredeemable as my mother. I brought my family disgrace." Sometimes she was even stigmatized by her own grandmother: "My grandmother loses her temper when I don't listen to her … She will say that you are just as irredeemable as your mother. Just like your mother. Just

like your mother." These experiences have been especially hurtful to a teenager who is expecting psychosocial reciprocity for identity searching in a specific developmental period of adolescence. Bo was diagnosed with depression in primary school and describes her emotional distress induced by the stigma as follows:

> When villagers get together and play cards, they will say the daughter of [Bo's father] is not able to bring pride to her family. Just like her mother, she will also give birth to five children! Every time when I hear this, I will miss my mother then I cry. But I will not let my father know. If my mother is around, I wouldn't have to go through all this.

According to adolescent participants in the present study, there is an effective tool for them to regain social status and reduce the social stigma of maternal absence: academic achievement. Although the mother-absent family conditions were a fixed reality, hard work and academic test scores are still under youth's control. Academic performance and educational aspirations were pervasive in the narratives of the young people. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task for rural adolescents to excel academically. Some adolescents invest an incredible amount of efforts in schoolwork in exchange for potential high test scores, whereas others view academic accomplishment as an unreachable end. It is important to note that social stigma can also come into existence when students fail to achieve high test scores. The stigma of academic underperformance further exacerbates the impact of maternal absence.

In the current study, five participants are final-year students and three are 8$^{th}$ grade students in compulsory education. Since 1986, the Compulsory Education Law has required every Chinese child who reaches the age of six to enroll in and stay through compulsory education that covers six years of primary school and 3 years of middle school (Yang and Guo, 2020). The policy-sponsored compulsory education is free of charge. After the first nine years, students have to compete for limited slots in high school by taking the high school entrance

examination. Admission into high school offers a possibility for college education and career advancement, although high school tuition can be expensive, equaling a quarter or a third of the annual income of an ordinary peasant family. Alternatively, one can apply to vocational schools, whose admission is guaranteed and there is no tuition fee for families. The vocational schools offer faster career routes and directly channel students into working-class positions, such as mechanics, cooking, hairstyling, logistics, hotel services, and automobile repairs (Ling, 2015). Students who choose vocational schools, therefore, constitute a new generation of manual and low-skilled service workers (Hansen and Woronov, 2013). Even worse opportunities are provided to students who never enter or drop out of vocational schools and inherit peasant positions back in villages.

Middle-school graduates and their families rely on themselves to navigate future life options and meet financial needs if they decide to pursue further education in high school and college. For decades, the urban-rural divide and household registration system have socially and spatially excluded rural residents from urban educational resources (Gao, Tadesse, Khalid, 2022). Children from middle- or upper-class families in urban cities and county seats possess more social, cultural, and economic capitals to guarantee higher educational aspirations and advantageous career development. In contrast, children from peasant families in rural China can only bet on their hard work and academic performance that may advance them into high schools and colleges. Otherwise, they may lose opportunities to move up the social ladder and be trapped in perceived lower-class positions, because neither their families nor the government can help.

Not surprising, the high school entrance examination that puts an end to nine-year compulsory education is viewed as the first crossroad of life by all participants in the present

study. Chao's utterances in the interview demonstrate the significance of the high school entrance examination and how he thinks it may impact his life options in the future.

> Preparing for the high school entrance examination is particularly stressful for me because it is the first crossroad you encounter in your life. One misstep leads to another. I don't want to take the wrong step. I think the worst thing that can happen to me is that I fail the examination and have to carry around bricks [as a construction worker] for my life.

Chao is one of the three students (i.e. Chao, Yong, Yan) who are preparing for the high school entrance examination and considers vocational schools as merely a channel into low-skilled working-class jobs. Yan demonstrates similar opinions:

> I think ending up in either high school or vocational school has a big impact on your future. Some of my friends go to vocational school and become factory workers in other provinces. They do repetitive work on assembly lines every day! They also have to work night shifts. It is just painful.

Among the other five participants, two (i.e. Ping and Lin) have already been recruited by vocational schools in advance, two (i.e. Shu and Yin) are 8th grade students that are still willing to give a try for high school, and one (i.e. Bo) is an 8th grade student who believes that she is destined to end up in vocational schools because of academic underperformance. Whether aiming for vocational schools or high schools, all adolescents wish to find less-tiring jobs with stable salaries, so they no longer need to carry out exhausting agricultural activities and manufacturing work like their fathers and grandparents. Yin shares his experience of working with his father in the field and states that,

> My father and I went to the field and harvested the wheat [with sickles]. There were bugs on the wheat, or awns, I don't know. It stung and gave me pimples. But my father was strong, and he would hang in there. I felt like I don't wish to be a peasant in the future. It was just too tiring. I want to free my father from his work too.

This social upward mobility, if gained, can endow youth with not only less sweaty working environments but also financial abilities to support their aging fathers and grandparents in the future.

Young people believe that those who fail to achieve good grades and gain vertical mobility are disdained and disfavored in the local community. Yin provides evidence for this claim: "Teachers value test scores so much. For example, if you mess up a test for the first time, they will encourage you to try harder and perform well next time. If you mess up again, they won't give you another chance and start to look down on you." According to Yan, her English teacher at school was angry with students who fell asleep in class and predicted that those who did not work hard would become beggars and be abandoned by society when others may receive college diplomas. Chao describes a similar socialization experience, "Since I was a little child, my grandparents and people surrounding me have told me that only failure end up in vocational school. They think focusing on education is the best path I can take." Even Ping who perceives high school as an unreachable end insists on staying in vocational schools: "If I drop out [of the vocational school], I may regret it in the future. I may just end up devastated and useless."

Among these quotes, a common thread emerges. Low academic performance, admittance to vocational schools, or inability to study in general stimulates social stigma. In such a rural community that yearns for upward mobility through education, academic incompetence is an unfavorable characteristic that betrays people's hopes. Young people who fail to achieve in school are therefore singled out and labeled. According to Yan, they are characterized as "idlers who go astray." Admittance to vocational schools is conceived as a fit for those who "get kicked out" (Yan) and only "a second choice" (Chao) for high-school admirers. In this scenario, those who possess lower grades and lower educational aspirations are socially separated from others

who identify with the community's approval of higher education. The stigmatized will be further separated spatially after they get into vocational schools. Academic under-achievers are unable to act like unmarked social actors and have to confront discrimination in face-to-face interactions at school and in the community.

In a rural community that experiences systematic inequalities due to the urban-rural divide, people value vertical mobility more than anything. As a result, at-home family members, particularly single fathers, all possess high expectations for their children to excel academically, gain upward mobility, and improve the family's social status. Some even wish their children to win the family's pride back. For example, Yin is saddled with paternal expectations of good grades, upward mobility, as well as reputation brought along. He describes the father's preference for his life options after compulsory education as follows:

> I have talked with my father about the vocational school. Anyway, my father thinks it will bring more disgrace to my family if I go to vocational school. People in our village will look down on us. Because of what happened to my family, he wishes me to get into high school and bring our pride back. I just feel like he really cares about reputation.

In the present study, seven of eight adolescents' fathers wish their children to get into high school and secure better employment in the future. Five of eight adolescents report that their teachers pay attention to their family backgrounds and encourage them to change their families' socio-economic statuses through academic hard work. For example, the teacher who teaches *Morality and Law* at school pays special attention to Yin's family background and tells him to "study hard, make some money, and change the family situation." In this context, stigma is believed to be alleviated as long as vertical mobility is attained.

Most of the time, rural students rely on their most helpful and reliable resource, their ability to work hard, to attain outstanding academic performance. Yan describes her daily

schedule at school for me, "Every day, we get up at 6:40 a.m. and go to bed after 11:50 p.m. because that's when the last evening class ends … There is a lot of homework every day. I feel like there is never an end." While academic success offers hope to shake off the social stigma of maternal absence, individual learning capacity is not completely under the control of the young people. Some adolescents view attaining good grades and upward mobility as uncertain. Yin promises his father to study well and become a big boss in the future. In the later part of the interview, he instead states that "I just wish for an ordinary life with a stable salary… because I cannot know how much money I will make in the future. It is uncertain!" Bo describes high test scores as a nearly impossible task to achieve: "I can manage interpersonal relationships at school. I can reflect on what teachers say about my family. I can handle it all, except academic performance." In this case, Bo's academic underperformance only exacerbates her already marginalized status and the impact of maternal absence becomes stronger.

> When I was in primary school, I once had the lowest test score among my classmates. Villagers laughed in my face. Every time when I tried to talk with them, they laughed at me … I don't let my father know. His eyes will turn red if I tell him. He might feel so angry that he would argue with people in our village.

In general, adolescents who experience maternal absence in rural China suffer from multiple risks due to class inequalities and traditional gender ideologies. In particular, maternal absence surrenders adolescents to social stigma as the mother functions as an indispensable role in child raising and household running. In addition, the urban-rural divide distributes education, employment, and social welfare resources unevenly across urban and rural regions and bestows rural residents with little support to start off. In the present study, rural youth are exposed to more risks and their experiences more stressful.

It is important to note that the ongoing cultural influence may largely contribute to rural youth's great emphasis on education. Historically, education has been considered fundamental to

the survival and stability of the Chinese nation (Gu, 2004). Traditional Chinese culture also attaches great importance to education as a means of enhancing a person's worth and career. After the Cultural Revolution, China reestablished the national educational system and the College Entrance Examination (CCE). Since then, the CCE has been the only criterion for college admission and represented a meritocratic ideal of equal opportunities in China (Ross and Wang, 2010). Students from rural China are able to be admitted into top universities as long as they gain high test scores in the CCE. In consequence, the young people's craving for upward mobility through education in the current study may be culturally distinct.

*Research Question 2. Coping with Stress: Support Accessible to Rural Adolescents*

Adolescent participants report receiving important emotional support from at-home family members, romantic partners, close friends, and occasionally school teachers, but very little of these supports are directly addressed to their stressful experiences of maternal absence. Support that specifically addresses issues of maternal absence comes from social media and *Morality and Law*, a school course offered by the Chinese official curriculum.

Among the mother-absent households, left-behind fathers not only are responsible to provide a livelihood for the family, but also function as primary attachment figures to carry out caregiving for their children. In some cases, paternal grandparents take on responsibilities of child raising when single fathers are too busy with work. Except for the unwillingness to answer adolescents' concerns about mother-father relationships, single fathers try their best to provide emotional and financial support to their children. They care about their children's school life and give out the best advice they have in terms of how to deal with peer relationships. For example, Lin describes his father as "the sun in the sky" and this sun lights him up. He once had a fight

with his classmate and decided to never forgive this classmate of him. Lin's father then taught Lin how to manage interpersonal relationships at school,

> You guys are classmates and are going to see each other constantly. It is like rainy days. If you feel bad when it rains, you will always be in a bad mood when it rains in the future. If you change your opinion of rainy days and view them as normal, your mood will be different.

Yan also exhibits emotional attachment to her father. Every weekend when Yan comes home from school, she stays close to her father and calls him no matter what she does. In addition to emotional support, fathers try to be financially supportive. For example, Bo's father recently spent 6000 RMB (889 USD), almost his annual income, on an insurance just to ensure his daughter's livelihood in case anything unexpected happens to him. In a mountainous region like Mangshui, it is not uncommon that local residents lose their lives in tragic car accidents. Every single father exploits the most valuable resource he has, his manual labor, to save for his child's education. Yan's father works seven days a week as a construction worker in the township when seasonal agricultural activities are over. Lin's father works as a migrant worker in other townships during the weekdays and comes home for the weekends to be with his son. These single fathers sacrifice a great deal to be responsible fathers and lay the ground for the next generation's promising future.

What comes with devotion are paternal high expectations. When young people are not entirely confident in their learning abilities, fathers' good wishes for their kids to have brighter futures and to alleviate the social stigma serve as sources of stress rather than support. Fathers' sacrifices and contributions to their children keep students from sharing their feelings of uncertainty and anxiety with their fathers. For example, Yan is afraid of not meeting her father's expectation and thereby is inclined to talk with her best friend at school: "He [Yan's father] and I have different thoughts. I don't like to tell him what happens at school." In addition, youth rarely

mention school teachers as an available source of support probably due to the existing stigma of underachievement. Or the power relations between students and teachers prevent youth from sharing their intimate feelings. The rural community also seldom offers supportive youth programs to address adolescents' learning barriers and emotional distress. As a result, the young people rely on each other for psychosocial reciprocity. Friendship and romantic relationship become the two primary destinations when they seek emotional support for academic pressure and daily troubles. During adolescence, friendships become increasingly important to young people. High-quality friendships, in which friends engage in reciprocity and mutual positive reinforcement, tend to abate the inverse correlation between negative parenting and externalizing problems (Collins and Roisman, 2006). Scholars have also suggested that both an extensive peer network and a romantic relationship can endow adolescents with a sense of intimacy and social support that provide opportunities to share thoughts and feeling (Connolly and Johnson, 1996; Taradash et al., 2001). In the present study, adolescents treat romantic partners and close friends as important sources of emotional nurturance. They are able to receive warm encouragement from these intimates, who are too aware of adolescent participants' family backgrounds to inquire about the reason for emotional crises. An attentive romantic partner or same-sex friend can be an excellent support. Bo and Ping both describe their boyfriends as responsible, attentive, gentle, and considerate boys who can understand their moods just based on eye contact. Yan also states that "every time when I was sad, she [Yan's best friend] would give me a hug. She didn't even ask what was wrong. She just comforted me very patiently." Some friends use special strategies. For example, Chao's friends tend to distract his attention and invite him to the basketball field when he experiences emotional distress.

Although fathers, romantic partners, and close friends function as providers of some emotional support, the young people also feel that they must handle emotional distress and solve problems by themselves. Some adolescents even consider that involvement in a romantic relationship prevents them from focusing on their studies and is just a waste of time. As Chao states, "I feel like dating at our age is not a right choice to make because it takes time to make a romantic relationship work. But we are in 9th grade now, and time is too precious to be wasted." As a result, how do the young people further cope with a complex whole of actualized challenges caused by maternal absence? Two important resources need to be mentioned here, including social media and *Morality and Law*. In the current study, adolescents consider themselves powerless to interfere with what has already happened to their families. Social media and *Morality and Law* tell them to cope with the past and present by focusing on what can be possible in the future. Chao emphasizes that it is important to let go of the past because clinging to the issue of maternal absence only causes sadness. For the sake of their emotional well-being, they need to move on with life. Bo mentions Kwai, a Chinese short-form video hosting social media like TikTok, as an important source of life wisdom that helps youth look forward.

> It is Kwai that shares these life wisdoms with us. People on Kwai say that you always have to move forward, for a better future, for a better life. You cannot make no progress. You cannot stay put. If you look forward, you will find that there are many life paths and there are many new people. You need to try your life out, instead of putting all eggs in one basket.

*Morality and Law* also offers official guidance to rural youth in terms of how one should perceive oneself and the world. For example, the course informs rural teenagers of how adolescence functions as a special developmental stage. In particular, it declares that teenagers are socially immature and requests young students to think of what kind of persons they are right now as well as what they want to be in the future. It also asks: what are your goals? How can you

achieve them? In addition to assisting adolescents with exploring their sense of selves, *Morality and Law* widens the horizon of young people who have lived in mountains for their whole lives by introducing diverse world cultures and philosophies.

In the previous section, I discuss that youth understand the lack of safe space at home to talk about their mothers as a way for them to move on with life. Social media and *Morality and Law* reinforce youth's belief in the future. The young people interpret their current inability to change family situations as a motivation to look forward, study hard, and achieve better futures. Based on these perceptual processes, they reactively cope with maternal absence by working on their own abilities.

*Research Question 3. Possible Selves in Coping Processes and Identity Searching*

It is impressive how messages passed down from social media and the official curriculum reinforce the developmental task of identity searching in adolescence and push my study participants to look forward and really think about their futures. As a matter of fact, they may achieve what they want to be and avoid the same tragedy to happen again in their futures if they strive hard enough. In the present study, the biggest support available for the young people is their hopes for the future. Rural youth are highly dedicated to what can be possible in the future. In this section, I introduce the theoretical concept of possible selves. I also discuss how a variety of possible selves become an essential part of self processes, on the basis of youth's evaluation of actualized challenges and accessible support in lives. As a future-oriented aspect of identity, possible selves function as a coping and assist youth to navigate contextual adversities and adolescent identity crisis.

In the psychological literature, the hypothetical images of what the self is going to be in the future are described as possible selves. Possible selves are the future-oriented aspects of self-concept, including both the positive selves that a person wishes to become and negative selves that a person is afraid of becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Osyerman and James, 2009). Individuals can possess multiple positive and negative possible selves. As a type of social constructions, possible selves are formulated based on individuals' social roles and identities, values and aspirations, and behavioral patterns of and expectations from significant others (Osyerman and Fryberg, 2006; Osyerman and James, 2009). As a result, possible selves frequently develop in realms relevant to current life tasks such as being a student, a family member, a parent, or a husband or wife (Cross and Markus, 1994). These desired or feared visions of the self in a future state assist individuals to evaluate their current selves and navigate identity searching. They also serve to motivate individuals to behave in coherent ways that lead to accomplishment of hoped-for possible selves and avoidance of feared possible selves. In other words, possible selves have the capability to serve as an effective self-regulator in many important life tasks, including but not limited to academic achievement, employment choice, or avoidance of risky behaviors. Different factors increase possible selves' effectiveness in regulating youth's behaviors, such as futures that feel salient, an observable discrepancy between one's current and future selves, an optimal degree of controllability and certainty of wished future states, as well as a delicate balance between positive and feared possible selves (Osyerman and James, 2009).

In the current study, rural adolescents formulate possible selves based on the current life task of being middle-school students, as well as their experiences of actualized challenges and support in the context of maternal absence. In contrast to the current socio-economic status, the

young people wish to move up the social ladder, secure less-tiring jobs, and settle down in urban counties or cities. They hope to achieve these desirable future states through current hard work in the middle school and further study in high schools or vocational schools. On the other hand, they all hope to consummate happy marriages and own stable families in the future. Many of them draw clear visions of child raising and ideal parenting in their future marriages. In general, academic, career-oriented, and marriage- and parenting-related possible selves are omnipresent among my study participants.

After the high school entrance examination, adolescents are to be channeled into either high schools or vocational schools based on their test scores. Except for three young people who have already aimed for vocational schools, youth feel uncertain about the future and worry about the possibility of ending up in vocational schools due to the fierce competition. They need to think about what majors they wish to declare in vocational schools in case they fail the examination. Therefore, five high-school admirers have conceived hoped-for academic possible selves in relation to high school admission and advantageous career development in the future. At the same time, they construct feared possible selves in relation to vocational schools based on imagined consequences of not meeting their goals. For example, Yan portrays a set of balanced possible selves with positive self-identifying goals and unwanted future states resulting from not fulfilling those goals:

> If I can't get into high school, I might work as a migrant worker in other provinces, far away from my family. It will be all [factory work and] assembly line. If I get into high school, then I will be occupied with my study. I want to work hard and fight for my dream every day.

This academic hoped-for self, as a matter of fact, is filled with Yan's hope to improve the family's situation and provide a decent living for her father in the future. Yan's father particularly wishes his daughter a pleasant working environment that allows her to finish her

work while drinking coffee. Yan also understands that the only thing she can do for herself and her father as a student is to study hard enough and seize an opportunity for future social climbing. On the other hand, the feared vision of future self as a migrant worker endows Yan with strong motivation to achieve academic success and avoid unfavorable consequences:

> Leaving your hometown, unable to see your family, and living in a completely strange environment [as a migrant worker]. It is just terrifying. You know no one. It is tiring to adjust. I don't know if I can deal with all this. Study! I don't think it is possible for me to work as a migrant worker like my friends in other provinces.

Yin also provides an example of hoped-for academic and career-oriented selves as coping to address emotional distress and issues of the social stigma. He intends to study hard and gain high test scores so that he can stand on the higher end of the power relations to look down on others. As stated before, he also promises his father to strive hard and make a lot of money, although this desirable state of future is quite uncertain:

> My father wishes me to join the military after college. Maybe you can make more money as an officer. I just tell my father that I don't want to join the military because it has some prerequisites. I am not tall enough. I promise him that I will make a lot of money even if I am not in the military.

Adolescents who consider high school as an unreachable end pursue vocational education instead. Different from high-school admirers, they formulate a set of possible selves that are strongly career-oriented in order to support their families in a closer future. Bo decides that she will go to a technical secondary school, a form of vocational schools in China, and major in cooking. She describes a thorough blueprint for her future.

> I wish to work in restaurants and rent an apartment in the county seat. I will find a job with a salary that is neither low nor high and rent an apartment that is neither too good nor too bad. If my grandmother is still alive by then, I will get my grandmother and father both out of the village.

Bo's eagerness to move out of the community with her family members may be interpreted as a hope to shake off the social stigma. For Ping who decides to help her absent mother out, the

career-oriented future feels so salient that she has made up her mind to stay on track, including figuring out concrete plans of how to stay through vocational school and hunt for jobs after graduation. She plans to major in Information Engineering in order to secure a better job as well as a higher salary in the future. Specifically, Ping mentions her cousin-in-law in Guangdong, a Chinese coastal province, as a possible job hunter for her. Students aiming for faster careers do not show strong feared possible selves because admission into vocational school is guaranteed. In conclusion, these academic and career-oriented images of selves in a future state convey a message to adolescents that they hopefully are able to make things right for their own future, even if the current family situations are out of their control.

After all the plans, Ping acknowledges that it is nearly impossible for her to go to college, obtain a middle-class occupation, and realize a big leap across classes. Like what her father does to her, Ping pins her hope on her future children. It is quite common that adolescents not only possess self-identifying goals, but also display a high educational aspiration for their imagined children. A set of possible selves that describes what kind of marriages the young people want to pursue and what type of parents they want to become therefore emerges. These marriage- and parenting-related possible selves also arise from youth's current experiences of actualized challenges brought by maternal absence. By focusing on what kind of parents they want to be in the future, the young people try their best to divert their attention away from issues of maternal absence, maintain their emotional stability, and remain hopeful for better futures. Specifically, they all wish to consummate happy marriages and become responsible parents for their future kids. For example, Ping imagines a perfect family where parents live together and never fight. She states in the interview, "I will not allow my kid to suffer what I suffered. I will give my child

a wonderful life and a good education. Don't be like us. I will become a good mother. My children, my grandchildren, great-grandchildren, they will have a good education.

Other adolescent participants also express similar possible selves in relation to marriage and childraising. Yan declares her hope to secure a job before getting married so that a similar tragedy will not happen to her child. Bo desires to become a mother who can grant her child dignity: "Even if my child cannot achieve academic success, she [/he] shall have dignity." In addition, Bo's desired possible self will marry a "responsible, attentive, gentle, and considerate" man at the age of 24 or 25. She shall apply a "unique parenting style and present it with great patience" as a qualified mother. Adolescent boys also hope for financial stability, happiness, and love in their future marriages. For example, Yong decides to work hard for better housing and living standards that may contribute to a good marriage. Yin states that "I hope my future family is not like this [the current family]. It will be a happy family, where parents live together, give birth to a child, and give her [/him] a good education." Chao also declares his wish to have a daughter and prepare a good pre-school education for his daughter in the future. Lin believes that marriage means two people bearing a child and loving each other until hair turns gray.

The whole process of identity searching is also a process of coping. Rural youth perceive their hopes for the future as their biggest support and utilize these hopes as effective strategies to cope with maternal absence. When the young people focus on the future to reactively cope with maternal absence, they successfully redirect attention, modulate emotion, preserve hopes, and take action. Therefore, these reactive coping patterns that yield self-perceived favorable results are repeated over time. Possible selves then emerge as a future-oriented aspect of identity after youth consistently pay attention to what is possible in the future. In turn, their emergent identities, which are possible selves in the present study, continue to yield stable coping

outcomes and motivate the young people to achieve desirable future states of selves and avoid undesirable consequences.

How does maternal absence impact adolescent identity searching? In addition to the complex coping and identity formation processes stated above, youth's experiences of maternal absence make them clear about what they like and dislike to be in their future lives. These depictions of what they wish to become in adulthood serve as specific answers to adolescent role exploration and identity searching.

**Conclusion**

In this study, I focus on rural Chinese adolescents who are raised by their fathers without a mother regularly present in the household. I explore how the young people experience actualized challenges and support in the context of maternal absence, how they cope with this experience, and how this experience has impacted their identity searching in adolescence. The existing literature on child development in migrant-mother families has revealed that children living in these families suffer from negative developmental outcomes, such as lower levels of happiness, school engagement, positive health behaviors, and academic performance due to broken attachments, less family monitoring, and less support.

Consistent with what previous studies have concluded, the present study's results show that rural Chinese adolescents experience a considerable amount of stress and emotional distress in the context of maternal absence. The stressful experience comes from emotional disconnection with biological mothers, the mother-absent family condition that goes against traditional gender ideologies, academic pressure, and possibly the stage-specific developmental task of identity searching. Although rural Chinese adolescents encounter conspicuous challenges, they have

received inadequate support from their environments. Contrary to what previous studies have shown and what I initially predicted, the results do not suggest a very strong association between broken attachments and experienced stress. Instead, rural Chinese adolescents experience a major proportion of stress because of the social stigma of maternal absence, as well as the academic pressure to improve school performance, attain social upward mobility, and shake off the social stigma. This might be because some adolescents experience longer durations of maternal absence, develop higher resilience, and are able to demonstrate less attachment to biological mothers. Specifically, they reactively cope with maternal absence by expressing anger to their mothers and justifying their current family conditions. Another possible explanation is that half of my study participants who are adolescent boys may have experienced gender socialization in the local community and thereby decline to express emotional needs. In the present study, rural Chinese adolescents cope with the present by focusing on what is possible in the future. They form academic, career-oriented, and marriage- and parenting-related possible selves and rely on academic hard work to achieve desirable future states. These findings could be culturally specific. The traditional Chinese culture has historically emphasized the important role of education in a person's moral development and career advancement. The College Entrance Examination (CCE) after the Cultural Revolution has also theoretically regranted rural students opportunities to enter China's top universities with high test scores. As a result, rural Chinese adolescents focus on improving their academic performance for potential vertical mobility that may help them regain social status and alleviate the social stigma in the future.

Although the results could be culturally specific, they present one finding that is generalizable: young people are able to evaluate actualized challenges and accessible support, make meaning of their experiences, and carry out efficient decision making and problem solving

in response to life adversities. The ongoing cultural influences (i.e., a great cultural emphasis on education) and social stigma may shape youth's understanding of the selves and the world, but young people also carry out their perceptual processes based on their evaluation of available support in the context. They then implement decision making and problem solving (i.e., avoidance of topics of maternal absence, a focus on what is possible in the future) to reactively cope with life adversities. After favorable reactive coping patterns are repeated, they develop emergent identities (i.e., possible selves) and produce stable coping outcomes. In this study, I adopt the PVEST perspective to examine the development of rural Chinese youth, who have not been previously considered with respect to this approach, and offer a piece of cross-cultural evidence for young people's ability to use identities as coping. In future research, it will be important to include rural Chinese adolescents from different provinces to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the underlying mechanism between rural family functioning and adolescent development in China. It would also be interesting to explore how hopes and focuses on the future may help marginalized youth overcome the adolescent identity crisis in diverse cultures.

The phenomenon of maternal absence may occur predominantly in countries that undergo social-economic development and labor out-migration. My study on rural Chinese adolescents being raised without a mother not only inform the readers of this specific population in China but also provide comparative data for child development in places like Southeast Asia and South America that also experience parental migration. Developmental resilience is a global concern. There is a necessity for more understanding of risk and protective procedures, as well as how to prepare for exposures to natural disasters, terror, displacement, abandonment, and other dangerous situations for child development (Masten, 2014). This research contributes to our

understanding of the developmental resilience of global youth and allows the young people to speak for themselves. It can also help to raise public awareness, inform social policies, and design supportive youth programs for marginalized youth in China and around the globe.

**Appendix**

Interview questions:

*School*

1. I always wish to know you better outside my classroom. Please tell me about your school life.

*Home and Family*

2. Sounds like you have an interesting school life. How about back home? Tell me about a typical day when you're at home.
3. I did visit your home and family members once/twice, but unfortunately, were unable to know more about your family life. Please tell me about your family.
4. Tell me about your mother.
5. How do you think your family experience differs from those of your peers?
6. Growing up, why did you think you mother left?
7. Now you are at the age of 14, how have you come to process those stories?
8. Some studies indicate that adolescents who grow up without maternal presence display higher levels of depressive symptoms and loneliness and more problem behaviors, what do you say about these studies?

*Emotional Wellbeing*

9. I really appreciate your strength and openness. Please tell me what kinds of experiences make you happy.
10. Now tell me about what make you sad.
    Follow-up: how do you cope with it?
11. Please tell me the things that make you anxious.
    Follow-up: how do you cope with it?
12. Please tell me the kinds of things that make you feel insecure.
    Follow-up: how do you cope with it?

*Support*

13. We have talked a lot about your family and friends, and how you dealt with emotional challenges. In an ideal world, how would you like to be supported when you are experiencing emotional challenges?
14. What kinds of support do you actually receive in your life?

*Resilience/future*

15. Where do you see yourself in five years?
16. If there is no barrier in your life, what do you want to be?
17. Tell me more about your goal.
18. What is your attitude toward marriage?
19. How do you think of your education?

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