



Research Article

Making the College Transition in China-Rural First-Generation College Students and Their Parents

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Abstract: College transition is a phase that every college student must face; however, not everyone experiences it smoothly. With the growing number of First-Generation College Students (FGCS) in rural China, this qualitative study examines how these students and their parents make their college transition. Guided by Schlossberg's Transition Theory, we analyzed students' write-ups that recorded mealtime conversations of 103 rural families in China on three themes: Self, Support and Strategies. It is found that most FGCS felt frustrated because of the lack of concrete strategies to cope with the college transition and choose their study major. While parents functioned as the important emotional support for FGCS to continue their study, these parents also experienced struggles themselves, including a lack of knowledge and experience about the higher education system, and being unprepared to separate from their children who are leaving for college. With this knowledge, recommendations are provided to better support rural FGCS and their parents to go through college transition, such as launching university orientation week, preparing reader-friendly infographic leaflets, and setting up more FGCS funding in China.

Keywords: first-generation college students, parents, rural China, college transition, meal-time conversation

1. Introduction

Traditionally, undergraduate students in China were mostly from urban areas, and their parents were intellectuals or political elites (Bao, 2013). With the rapid expansion of higher education in China nowadays, there are more First-Generation College Students (FGCS) ['FGCS' refers to a group of students who are the first in their family to receive college education. The definitions of FGCS evolved from parents who did not attend college to parents who did not complete college (e.g. Kilgo et al., 2018; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). For the purpose of maintaining consistency, this study considered a college student as FGCS if neither parent completed college education] from rural areas. Tsinghua University has conducted a longitudinal national-based study since 2009 to assist the country's higher education quality monitoring and evaluation. Through distributing and analyzing the annual China College Students Survey (link: <https://ccss.applysquare.com/index>), the research team found that from 2011 to 2018, over 70 percent of university students are FGCS, and 69.74% of them have rural roots. In light of this, their research team has recently announced that China's higher education has entered the "universal" stage (Li, 2020), approving its current capacity for large segments of the populations to enter the higher education. Despite the booming number of Chinese FGCS, only a handful of related

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studies were found, and they were mainly focused on the financial perspective (e.g. Bao & Chen, 2015; Zhou, 2011), lacking research that thoroughly examines the study experience and college transition of this group of students, let alone those with a rural background.

The shifting student demographics results from China's national poverty reduction program. The program has finally entered its third stage in the last decade, emphasizing the poverty alleviation in rural households (Wang et al., 2015). People living in rural areas used to suffer deprivations in education (Li et al., 2022); therefore, with an increasing number of rural children receiving opportunities to go to school, many of them become the first in their families to enter college. Rural FGCS [To avoid possible confusion regarding the definition of "rural students" (Manly et al., 2022), in this study, the term rural FGCS encompassed any student whose home resided in non-urban area and neither parent completed college education] has now become the growing edge of university enrollments in China, and this trend will likely continue in the coming years. It is crucial to look at how rural FGCS navigate college in order to make it easier for these students to transit to college. A recent study in the US found that parents and families of FGCS also experience transition when their children enter college (Harper et al., 2020); on that account, this study also investigated how rural FGCS and their parents experience college transition in China.

Foreseeing a continued escalation of rural FGCS in China, this study purposely examines how rural FGCS and their parents experience college transition and how their transition may impact one another. In this study, 'FGCS' refers to a group of students who are the first in their family to receive college education. The definitions of FGCS evolved from parents who did not attend college to parents who did not complete college (e.g. Kilgo et al., 2018; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). For the purpose of maintaining consistency, this study considered a college student as FGCS if neither parent completed college education.

To avoid possible confusion regarding the definition of "rural students" (Manly et al., 2022), in this study, the term rural FGCS encompassed any student whose home resided in non-urban area and neither parent completed college education. Based on the findings, the study would provide some recommendations to support these rural FGCS and their parents during the transition. Universities should have designed policies, strategies, processes, and actions to facilitate students' transition and ensure the success of all students (Moriña, 2017). However, there are now doubts if such goals can be fulfilled as the needs of this large group of rural FGCS have not been thoroughly identified or addressed. In light of this, two research questions are proposed.

- (1) What do rural FGCS and their parents experience during college transition?
- (2) How can the college transition of rural FGCS and their parents be facilitated?

2. Literature

2.1 (Rural) First-generation college students

It has been frequently reported that FGCS encounter more obstacles that compromise their academic success (Stebbleton & Soria, 2013) and experience more difficulties in their college transition than non-FGCS (Jenkins et al., 2009). To elaborate, Gibbons and Borders (2010) revealed that while non-FGCS are mostly concerned about school stress as the barrier in their higher education study, FGCS have a much longer list to worry about, including lack of college-educated role models, lack of preparation, discrimination, and finances etc. Compared with non-FGCS, FGCS encounter more difficulties in college transition as they have lower academic persistence (e.g. Means et al., 2016; Padgett et al., 2012), less knowledge regarding the college process (e.g. Ward et al., 2012), and inadequate academic preparation (e.g. Atherton, 2014; Chen & Simone, 2016). As a result, studies consistently found that FGCS were more likely to drop out in the first year of study and have lower first-semester grades than non-FGCS (e.g. DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Ishitani, 2006).

While Western research on FGCS widely exists, Jones et al.'s (2022) literature review identified the problem of "overgeneralization of FGCS characteristics" (p. 182) in past studies, as most of them did not classify FGCS based on geographical settings (e.g. urban, suburban and rural) and ignored the fact that these settings could pose different challenges to FGCS. Nowadays, in the US, FGCS are overrepresented by students from marginalized ethnic groups or low-income backgrounds that live in geographically more dispersed territories (Tate et al., 2015), with less than 19% from rural areas (Koricich et al., 2018); while in China, FGCS are largely represented (around 70%) by those who

come from the local rural areas (Li, 2020) [To be classified as rural areas in China, the average population density is approximately 1,300 people/km² (Yao et al., 2020). In this study, only FGCS who provided home address that fits the rural density would be recruited], where people are poor, and public goods are usually insufficient (Ting et al., 2022). The demographics of FGCS are different across time and space. Hence, to avoid overgeneralization of results, this study targeted rural Chinese FGCS.

The literature often suggests FGCS as low academic achievers. Less is known whether the same situation applies to different types of FGCS. It was not until recently that a study examined and compared the college transition and study trajectories of 18 rural and 15 urban FGCS in the US (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). In their study, urban FGCS benefited from career exploration opportunities in their high schools and were preconditioned to see their home communities/cities as sources of social capital. At the same time, rural FGCS only have a few hometown mentors to rely on and feel the urge to form new ties in college and fit themselves there. Eventually, these rural and urban FGCS often diverged in their trajectories despite pursuing similar college majors at the beginning. Sims and Ferrare's (2021) study illustrated the discrepancies in college trajectories among FGCS from different geographical settings. This highlights the importance of not looking at FGCS as an umbrella term and brings out the possibility that not only college trajectories are disparate among different types of FGCS, but also college transition.

2.2 (Rural) First-generation college students and their parents

Although different sources of support contribute to students' successful college transition (Garriott & Nisle, 2018), this study specifically sheds light on parental support as the main difference between FGCS and non-FGCS lies within the parent. Scholars compared their perceived quality of parent-student communication about college, and lower levels of parental informational support were reported by FGCS (Sy et al., 2011). On the contrary, parents of non-FGCS tend to pass on knowledge along with personal advice and emotional support to facilitate their children's college transition; subsequently, non-FGCS reported their conversations with parents are more helpful and have higher quality than FGCS (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). Yet, we argue not to underestimate the support given by parents of FGCS. Nichols and Islas (2016) found that non-FGCS perceived their parents as "instrumental" rather than "emotional" resources about college, as these parents can provide solid advice to their children based on their personal college experiences. Although parents of FGCS are not as "instrumental", they provide emotional support to students in their time of need during the college transition. Previous studies found that the major reason for FGCS to attend college was their parents' support (Saenz, 2007). Parents are the source of motivation and inspiration for FGCS to persist in college (Nichols & Islas, 2016). McCulloh's (2016; 2022) studies also confirmed good relationships with parents made rural FGCS retention possible.

While ample studies have focused on the outcome or effects of parental support on FGCS, there is a lack of discussion on the struggles faced by their parents. Harper et al.'s (2020) study, which examined how parents of FGCS experienced their own college transition to the US, revealed that the college transition for parents is no easier than the FGCS. In their study, parents who were experiencing collegegoers for the first time are primarily involved in navigating a changing relationship with their children. These parents usually feel anxious and stressed as they should draw emotional and even financial support to overcome obstacles in supporting the college transition of their children. Since no similar study was conducted in the Chinese setting, this study examined the college transition of rural FGCS and their parents in China.

2.3 Study context

Like other Euro-American countries (e.g. Burnett, 2017; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018) and the UK (Hutchens et al., 2011), China has set up scholarship programs to provide financial support for FGCS in hopes of promoting the equality of educational opportunity. However, Zhou (2011) reported that China has spent less than 3.4% of its GDP for public education funding (while most developed countries allocated an average of 4.9% of GDP), indicating that local undergraduates in China need to bear 55% of the tuition fee to receive a higher education. Bao and Chen (2015) highlighted that the total amount of funding received by rural FGCS is still far below their needs, with only 36% of demand satisfaction. According to the China National Center for Student Financial Aid (2019), China has significantly increased the financial support for public education recently (more than 4.28% of GDP); yet, the money is mostly spent on supporting kindergarten to secondary school education. Many rural FGCS in China still need to borrow student loans

and work extra part-time jobs to support their study, consequently failing their college performance (Huang et al., 2016).

2.4 Theoretical framework

It is necessary to deepen our understanding of how rural FGCS in China make sense of their college transition experience and what support is needed to go through such a transition. The theoretical framework for this study was informed by Schlossberg's Transition Theory, which examines what constitutes a transition, different forms of transitions, the transition process and factors that influence transition (Evans et al., 2009). To navigate the college transition of FGCS, the Transition Theory provide three phases (Schlossberg, 2007; 2011) - *moving in*, *moving through* and *moving out*. Killam et al. (2017) further explained that in applying the Transition Theory in understanding college student transition, *moving in* is the planning period, which refers to all the new things that occur to the student (e.g. anxiety to studying in a new campus, learning to select what to study); *moving through* represents a time in transition for achieving the new identity and goals (e.g. maintaining grades, balancing school, family and friends); *moving out* is the process of completing a solid transition (e.g. no longer feel the stress and disturbance in adapting the changes).

According to Goodman et al. (2006), a transition is defined as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (p.13). Going to the college from rural high school is a type of anticipated transition that occurs predictably, yet it unavoidably produces stress that impacts the individuals. Support is critical during the time of college transition. To be able to identify effective actions that can be taken to support individuals in transition, the Transition Theory presented four major sets of factors (The 4S's) that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition (Goodman et al., 2006), including Situation (the situation at the time of the transition), Self (a person's identity, ego, self-efficacy), Support (social support and relationships) and Strategies (ways of coping with the transition). Borrowing the framework of the Transition Theory, this study examines how the interplay of internal and external factors contributes to the challenges and persistency of FGCS during the college transition, thereby providing a context for understanding the experiences of Chinese rural FGCS and their parents. Since all the participants in this study shared a similar Situation, which is experiencing an anticipated college transition after graduation, this study focuses on the analysis of the remaining factors: Self, Support, and Strategies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

College transition brings struggles for both rural FGCS and their parents. Considering that speaking of these struggles can be uncomfortable, unsettling, or anxiety-provoking, this study did not directly interview the parents or students to avoid unnecessary emotional vulnerability. Instead, the Chinese rural FGCS are invited to write down a college-related mealtime conversation that they had with their parents. As stated by Yu et al. (2015), "everyday family meals relate to the establishment and strengthening of a collective sense of the Chinese family" (p. 505). Family mealtime conversation is especially important among Chinese as it provides a good setting, in which adolescents and their parents can talk about family/personal issues/events (Smith et al., 2020). Since it is not a common practice for Chinese to talk about their thoughts and feelings with others, family meals facilitate stability and a sense of unity among the family members.

Family mealtime conversation is "one of the few moments that bring all family members daily together, and is characterized by substantial freedom in relation to the issues that can be tackled favours the verbal interactions among family members" (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013, p. 207). As such, it is not uncommon for researchers to conduct dialectical analysis of mealtime conversations to explore family interactions and dynamics (e.g. Bova, 2021; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015). Unlike earlier studies that set cameras to record mealtime conversations at home, the current study did not do the same because of (1) privacy concerns (Bi et al., 2017); (2) the prevention of "acting for the camera" (Waring, 2020, p. 117); and (3) the manipulation reduction (participants cannot control what topics would be discussed under a natural mealtime setting). Instead, this study invites rural Chinese FGCS to recall and write down a college-related mealtime conversation they had with their parents, and then write down how they perceive and interpret the conversation.

The participants were instructed to report a complete college-related mealtime conversation (the selected conversation must include the respondents and at least one of their parents). The write-up needed to include objective information like “What did you and your parents say at that time?”, “How did you/they respond?”. Afterwards, the participants were further invited to write down their subjective thoughts, feelings and reflections regarding the reported mealtime conversation. Since illiteracy is widespread in rural Chinese areas, FGCS were responsible for completing the report. They were encouraged to go over the written conversation with their parents before the submission and jot down their parents’ thoughts and feelings toward the reported mealtime conversation (if any). The report could be written in either Chinese or English to reduce any potential language difficulties. In general, the participants submitted 1 to 2 pages of detailed write-up. The institution of the second author was granted the ethical approval.

3.2 Participants

Invitation letters were prepared and sent to universities in Jiangxi, a southeast Chinese province. With four universities accepting the invitation, the researchers sent mass emails to their newly enrolled freshmen, highlighting that only rural Chinese FGCS are eligible for this study. A total of 103 Chinese undergraduate students (82 females and 21 males, all from different humanities majors) were recruited at the beginning of the semester. To ensure that the participants were rural FGCS, they were required to provide their family home address and the name of their high school for crosschecking.

3.3 Data analysis

Content analysis was conducted using the coding paradigm of qualitative content analysis developed by Elo and Kyngas (2008). Deductive coding is used when previous knowledge is available; therefore, the researchers in this study adopted the three factors in Transition Theory as a foundation to understand how rural FGCS and their parents experienced the college transition (As shown in Table 1). The coding process was completed until no new codes or categories were further identified. An external reviewer was invited to review the coding and content development process to strengthen the validity of the findings, and a good inter-rater agreement was achieved (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.862).

Table 1. An overview of the deductive analysis process

Themes	Definitions	Extracted Statements (rural FGCS)	Extracted Statements (parents of rural FGCS)
Self	a person’s identity, personal and demographic characteristics	<i>“I hated the profession of teacher...I chose this profession to fulfill their (my parents’) dream.”</i>	<i>“Your father and I will support your study no matter how unaffordable the tuition is... We do not want others to look down on you like they did to us...”</i>
Support	social support and relationships	<i>“I have been homesick since I went to college. I always call home to share random stuff with them, as simple as that makes me feel closer to my parents.”</i>	<i>“It is the first time you left home to other places. ...When we are not around, you must learn to take good care of yourself... Call home no matter what difficulties you encounter; you have our backing.”</i>
Strategies	coping responses, ways of managing the situation	<i>“I feel confused in college. I don’t want and don’t know how to continue my study... I am still struggling and I feel useless. To avoid disappointing my parents, I still have to read books, take classes, and try my best to do everything well no matter how confused I am.”</i>	<i>“Make the most of every minute at school to study, do not get distracted by other things.”</i>

4. Results

Based on the 103 received reports, three themes were analysed, (1) Self; (2) Support and (3) Strategies. The section below presents direct quotes from the write-ups to illustrate each theme. Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of the rural FGCS and their parents.

4.1 Self

Self refers to the appraisal of one's demographic characteristics (e.g. socioeconomic status) and psychological resources (e.g. values, resiliency) during the transition. The college transition begins when students choose their college majors, which is also one of the most frequently occurring mealtime conversations reported by the participants. Most rural FGCS did not receive professional academic advice from their parents. A student shared the frustration that most participants had:

Not that I did not want to consult my parents when I selected my college major, but their education levels were not high: my father and mother only graduated from junior high school and elementary school, respectively. They do not understand much and keep asking me laymen questions. I tried to explain. But eventually, I felt annoyed and gave up explaining. (Code 96)

A lower socioeconomic status is prevalent in rural Chinese areas. Since most of these parents experienced poverty in life, their suggestions in relation to choosing college majors usually revealed practical considerations such as job stability, future earning potential, and career path. For example, Jane's father said (Code 31), "My daughter, Inner Mongolia has hired almost all the qualified kindergarten teachers in the last few years. Study this subject, I bet they will hire you right away when you graduate". The researchers barely came across parents who asked their children to choose college majors according to their academic interests. Mary's mealtime conversation also served as an exemplary quote:

Mother proposed: "How about majoring in a foreign language? It may be easier for you to find a job after graduation."

Father refuted: "How about pharmacology? You can help your mum in the future."

I looked at them blankly and shook my head: "I don't know, I will study what you guys want me to." (Code 89)

Without a college degree, most rural parents worked as blue-collar workers to earn a living. With regard to Self, they had a strong belief that education can make life better. These parents valued the opportunity for their children to receive tertiary education and such belief strengthened their resilience during the college transition. Jessie's mother emphasized, "Your father and I will support your study no matter how unaffordable the tuition is... we do not want others to disrespect you like they did to us... We want you to have a brighter future and better life" (Code 62).

As for Chinese rural FGCS, most of them major in subjects that could fulfil their parents' expectations, even if the subjects did not align with their interests. As shared by Josie (Code 87), "I hated the profession of teacher, but my parents believe it is an easy job that has good stability. My father left the village to work in first-tier cities, he knew it is competitive outside. Therefore, they wanted me to have a stable life, so I chose this profession to fulfill their dream" and Kelly (Code 11) "I know my father wanted me to be a kindergarten teacher because of the job stability. But this is not what I want. I want to choose what interests me. I applied what they wanted me to study because I did not want to argue with them".

Many FGCS choose majors based on their parents' will, irrespective of their personal goals, interests or ability. Most of them prioritized their parents over themselves when choosing a college major. Their identity as young adults at this stage of life and being the son/daughter of their parents made them less likely to speak for themselves during the college transition.

4.2 Support

Support refers to any intimate relationships that provides social support to an individual. To align with the focus of this study, only the relationships between rural Chinese FGCS and their parents are analysed. As the participants grew up and lived with their parents in rural areas, living away from the family was a first-time experience for 97% of rural FGCS in this study. Attending colleges in urban areas means that the long commuting hours hinder the frequency of these students returning home, and most of them can only visit their parents during long holidays. Despite the distance,

parents functioned as the important emotional support, as most rural FGCS felt homesick while adjusting to a new life far away from home. As shared by Jessica, *“I have been homesick since I went to college. I always call home to share random stuff with them, as simple as that makes me feel closer to my parents”* (Code 40); and Kitty, *“Leaving home for college in Jiangxi is my first-time leaving home that far. Every day at school, I look forward to the winter vacation and am very eager to go back. The farther away from home, the more I miss my parents”* (Code 104).

Social support is equally important to parents during the transition, as the data revealed that these parents experienced a sense of grief/loss when the first college goer left home. Victoria’s mum said to her once, *“Now when I cook, I often think about whether you have eaten and what food are you eating. I want to cook your favourite dishes, but you are no longer here”* (Code 35). Below is an exemplary conversation between Doris, her mum and her mum’s friend.

Mum’s friend: “How’s school, Doris? Never leaving home this far, huh?”

Me: “It’s fine, I am starting to adapt to it.”

Mother: “Sigh. I never thought my daughter would study so far away. The first few days when she left for college, I couldn’t sleep as I was worried about her. Now I call her every night and shed tears myself.”

This conversation has surprised Doris, as stated in her reflection, *“I never thought my mother would say these as she was never good at expressing her love to me. Back then, when I was at home, she always said I was annoying and made her mad. After hearing these words, I understand more about the way she loves me”* (Code 49).

Being the one leaving home or having a close family member leaving home were both difficult college transitions. This could be more difficult for those who got left because parents were living in the same house/routine with the reality that their children were not present, so the sense of loss was significant. Comparatively, children’s difficulty in dealing with this part of transition would be less heightened, as they were busily occupied and distracted by the new college environment. FGCS’ parents understood that their children were only leaving home temporarily for college, yet, many worried that they would leave home for good. As shown in Yannie’s conversation (Code 66).

Mother: “Don’t find a boyfriend at college.”

Me: “Why mum?” [A moment of silence].

Father: “Your mother is worried that if you marry the boy you met at college, she will not know how to travel a long way to the city. It would be difficult for her to visit you, and you can’t return home very often.”

Even though FGCS’ parents are very proud to have the first member of the family to enter a university, they are not mentally prepared for the separation. Without the college experience, they barely know what their children are going through and do not know how to support them. They highly depended on their children to introduce the higher education context and the outside world to them, as illustrated below:

Because I need to attend college, I was the first person in my family to leave the province. Whenever I came back home and shared the outside world with my parents, they listened attentively... Now I understand that parents need us to introduce the outside world to them because they have never seen or experienced those things in their lifetime. (Kath, Code 61)

4.3 Strategies

Strategies refer to the coping responses a person adopts during the transition to modify the situation and control the problem. Academic performance is one of the major concerns that both parents and children share during the college transition. Without college experiences, these parents tended to link academic success solely and directly to individual hard work, so they always encouraged their children to prioritize their studies and avoid any distractions that may affect their grades. According to Jessie’s father: *“Is it because you didn’t work hard, your school performance is not good? Quit your part-time job if it affects your study. You will regret it later if you let money affect your study”* (Code 62); Christy’s father: *“I disagree with being in a relationship at the university, you better focus only on studying”* (Code 13); and Britney’s mum: *“Make the most of every minute at school to study, and do not always think of having fun. You should study hard, and make sure you understand what is in the textbook. Don’t just aim to pass the tests. When you study, be at your best”* (Code 29). These parents generally believed that diligence was the only strategy to achieve the college academic success.

Although these rural FGCS wanted to succeed in college, they did not know ‘how’. Many of them were still trying to get used to a new school, finding college goals and struggling with time management. They lacked concrete strategies to cope with the situation and felt frustrated during the college transition. Tiffany shared, *“I think my college life was*

not very good as I know I did not learn much at school. My life here was very similar to my life in high school, but I do much relaxed as I no longer need to sit for the public exam. Now I have more free time but do not know what to do with it” (Codes 10); Jack also shares similar thoughts: “Now that I am going to college, I feel so confused and do not want to study at all. I do not think I can continue my study here. All other undergraduates have clear goals in mind, but I do not. I am still struggling...I feel useless, stressed and helpless, there are so many talented people here. What can I do to stand out?” (Code 53).

5. Discussion

5.1 Self and educational choice

This study found most participants chose college majors based on parental expectations. FGCS frequently lack knowledge about how to select a major and tend to seek information related to college selection and application from authority figures such as counselors/advisors and teachers from their high schools (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018), as these people were being perceived as a major source of trusted information by FGCS (Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). Nevertheless, this study discovers that Chinese rural FGCS lack such a source of people to provide professional career-planning consultation or shape their “educational aspirations” (Tieken, 2016, p. 206). Chinese rural FGCS did not have proper career advisors before or after they entered college. Being young adults at this stage of life, they are likely to listen to their closest authority figure, parents, in making a decision. Thus, most were still too young to have a clear self-image or were unfamiliar with their characteristics. Therefore, aligned with a previous study (Macias, 2013), FGCS are less likely to be satisfied with their college majors during the college transition, as many of them did not have a comprehensive idea of what they signed up for.

While US parents are less supportive of financing the college education of their first-generation college children (Choy, 2001), the rural Chinese FGCS parents in this study see paying for their children’s college tuition as a parental responsibility. Although college tuition fees are expensive, these parents demonstrated their determination to support their children financially, even if it means they need to work extra hours or borrow money from others. These reflect their commitment to providing a better future for their child and to resiliency in overcoming the financial burden during the college transition. Their self was further reflected in the educational choice they recommended to their child. Based on demographic characteristics, people who live in rural areas usually have a lower socioeconomic status. Thus, they emphasise the job stability and income more than personal academic interest when suggesting what subject to study for their child.

5.2 Supporting emotional needs during separation

Abramson (2019)’s study found that FGCS have higher levels of homesickness compared with non-FGCS, and Ma et al.’s (2015) study demonstrated that children reared in rural areas are generally more family-oriented and closer to their parents. Our study also shows that rural FGCS felt intensely homesick during college transition due to having been separated from family members; emotional support from family units was a benefit for rural Chinese FGCS to go through the college transition. This result aligned with previous studies (Saenz, 2007; Nichols & Islas, 2016), in which parents have been the emotional anchor to motivate their children to persist in college. While this study has reconfirmed the importance of having parents provides social support for their child, separation is a psychological burden faced not only by rural Chinese FGCS but also by their parents during the college transition.

Having experienced life together with their children for about twenty years, some parents in this study experienced the symptoms of the empty nest syndrome, which is a feeling of sadness, depression, and loneliness when children depart from home (Long & Martin, 2000). Ample studies investigated such a syndrome among the elderly in rural areas of China (e.g. Cao & Lu, 2021; Wang et al., 2017); however, few would extend the investigation to non-elderly. It is observed that parents in this study suffered from this syndrome during their child’s college transition, which may lead to lower life satisfaction and increased susceptibility to mental problems (Liu & Guo, 2008). The situation worsens as parents staying in rural areas of China have less access to information and knowledge about the college, and they barely know what their children are experiencing in college. Despite the fact that they are very supportive of their children

studying college, this result aligned with a study, which found that FGCS' parents lacked the knowledge to connect deeper with their children (Irlbeck et al., 2014).

5.3 Strategies for college academic success

College transition becomes less difficult if individuals can cope effectively using multiple methods and demonstrate flexibility (Evans et al., 2009). However, without first-hand college experience, parents of rural Chinese FGCS fail to understand that “success” in college can be more than grades, such as holistic education and generic skills development through different in-class and out-of-class activities (e.g. Cheng et al., 2018; Cheng & Chan, 2020). These parents are prone to believe academic success can be obtained if their children prioritize study over everything. They are attributing academic success only to diligence and ignore other crucial factors such as teacher quality and student-teacher relationship (Cachia et al., 2018; Naude et al., 2016). This makes it difficult for the parents to understand the academic difficulties of their child during the college transition.

Despite the academic struggles, these rural FGCS shared the determination to graduate in the hopes of supporting their parents for a more comfortable life in the future. As stated by Jack: “... *No matter how hard it is in the future, I will try my best to graduate; so I can earn more money and give back to my parents; help them live a more comfortable retirement*” (Code 53). Jessie also shared, “*I cannot let anything affect my study. If I do not study well, my parents would be very disappointed. They carry the burden of college costs for my education, thus, there is no reason for me not to work hard at school*” (Code 62). Rural FGCS want to achieve academic success because they see themselves as the new hope in the family. Under the effect of the one-child policy in China, these FGCS are the “only hope” (Fong, 2002, p. 107) to improve the family's quality of life. They experienced high expectations from the family to be socially and financially successful (Fong, 2004). This aligned with a study conducted by Lee (2011), which described FGCS as the “agents of change” within the community, as the academic success in higher education is more likely to bring economic benefits to the family. However, some FGCS felt confused and disoriented because of not knowing ‘how’ to achieve such a goal. They experienced self-doubt, frustration, and aimlessness during the college transition, making it difficult for them to be the “agents of change” they wished to be.

Given the use of the Transition Theory to guide the data analysis, this study's results highlight internal and external factors that influence how rural Chinese FGCS and their parents experience different types of college transition, such as making educational choices and dealing with separation. Albeit important, parental support is not the sole solution as their parents are also undergoing psychological distress during the college transition. Without external help, these Chinese rural FGCS may not always be the agents of change. A lot needs to be done by the higher education sector to help both rural Chinese FGCS and their parents to make it through the transition.

6. Implications for practice

This study revealed that parents of rural Chinese FGCS strongly influence their children. Rural FGCS are likely to study subjects that their parents suggest. Hence, it is important to educate parents to provide parental autonomy support for their children. Furthermore, to ensure that the advice given by these parents is informative and solid, conversations between rural FGCS and their parents need to be more “instrumental” (Nichols & Isla, 2016). To help parents construct a more comprehensive picture of college, universities should organize workshops introducing the higher education system to them; and present information in the form of infographic leaflets for easier understanding. Off-campus parental counselling service is also important as these parents are coping with the empty nest syndrome.

College transition is a catalyst that makes rural FGCS realize how physically and emotionally unprepared they are for the postsecondary education. FGCS from rural China did not receive much life-planning education and career guidance before they entered college. It is necessary to increase school-community partnerships as Alleman and Holly (2013) found that both formal and informal partnerships between rural high schools and the local communities can provide more points of contact for students to extend their educational opportunities outside classrooms, especially when their parents and teachers are unavailable. In addition, universities should provide rural FGCS with more support to make the most of their college life. For instance, organizing orientation sessions that guide rural FGCS on how to make subject choices on par with their academic interest, abilities, and aspirations; delivering academic advising

services regarding practical time management and goal setting skills to obtain academic success; and launching an orientation week before the semester officially starts, so that rural FGCS have time to explore and get familiar with the university without the academic burden.

Finally, some rural FGCS had to engage in part-time jobs because of financial constraints. Students should not be deprived of educational opportunities because of money. Given the inadequate financial support provided to these students by the Chinese government (e.g. Bao & Chen, 2015; Zhou, 2011), this study also recommends universities in Chinese mainland set up more funds for rural FGCS to enhance their higher education experience.

7. Limitations and future research

This study is not without its limitations. Considering that the data originated from the students and not directly from the parents, the students may have bias toward their parents' views. Despite the fact that we encouraged the rural FGCS to go over the written conversation with their parents before submitting the write-up, this may potentially affect the reliability of the data. Future studies may collect data directly from these two groups of people to provide a more comprehensive picture. In addition, participants were only invited to share one significant conversation in the write-ups. It is unsure how well the rural FGCS recalled the conversation; thus other important conversations worth sharing might have been missed. Furthermore, this study only examined three themes in detail; to a large extent, it simplified the experience of rural FGCS and their parents in China. The identified recurrence in this study did not, in any way, represent that only these experiences would occur during their college transition. Yet, the analysis does facilitate a better understanding of rural Chinese FGCS and their parents' college transition. Future research can shed more light on these two groups of people, especially in the Chinese context, and conduct a longitudinal study that can scaffold parental adjustment during the college students' transition.

8. Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this qualitative study provided a basis for research on FGCS and their parents in the context of rural China. The importance of this study is two-fold. Past Western studies mostly focused only on the college transition of FGCS, ignoring the college transition experienced by the parents and how it may affect their children. Therefore, under three different themes, this study first examined how rural FGCS and their parents made through the college transition. Second, it provided several recommendations to better support both rural FGCS and their parents in China, including school tours/orientation talks for parents, increasing life planning education/student development workshops, and setting up funding to enhance the learning quality of rural FGCS at college. Future research can shed more light on the psychological needs of the FGCS parents, especially examining the potential empty nest syndrome, which may affect the parents' mental health and levels of life satisfaction.

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Conflict of interest

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