

# **Ageing in the context of accompanying migration: A leisure stress coping perspective**

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## **Ageing in the context of accompanying migration: A leisure stress coping perspective**

Abstract: The migration of older adults is receiving increasing academic attention. Existing research, however, gives little attention to accompanying migrants who migrate for the purpose of intergenerational caring, which is particularly typical in China, and its impact on older adult immigrants' well-being. Based on the leisure stress coping model, this study **explores** the leisure stress coping mechanisms of accompanying migrants in the Chinese cultural context. Data were collected through 42 in-depth interviews with Chinese accompanying migrants. The findings revealed that accompanying migrants perceived three dimensions of stress: adaptation stress, obligation stress, and role stress. Under the influence of leisure coping beliefs, migrants adopted coping strategies **including** seeking support, shifting focus, and self-adjustment. Consequently, the stress-coping process **was** realized through leisure activities such as exercise, social events, and sightseeing. Theoretical and practical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: Accompanying migrants; stress coping; leisure activities; ageing; Chinese

## Introduction

China is a rapidly ageing society, with the scale and speed of ageing ranking first in the world (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Meanwhile, the number of China's older adult migrants is rising rapidly, with a total of more than 18 million, and is expected to continue to grow (National Health Commission of People's Republic of China, 2018). However, the outlook for the quality of life and mental health of Chinese older adults remains unclear (Hou et al., 2019). The shift in living space brought about by migration can generate psychological, cultural, behavioural pressure and discomfort for older adults (Choi, 1996). Hence, the combination of the two major trends of ageing and mobility can have a significant impact on people's lives, economic systems and social development.

In China, a considerable portion of the retired migrant population migrates to reunite with their children, take care of their grandchildren and provide domestic support for the family. This group is known as "accompanying migrants". For Chinese older adults, living with their children or in close geographical locations is essential to ensure that they receive daily care, as well as financial and emotional support, and it is also the key to their happiness (Zhang et al., 2018). However, as China has increased the number of children that married couples are legally permitted to have from one to three in recent years in an effort to avoid population decline, Chinese older adults have come to bear greater intergenerational caring responsibility, transitioning from being care recipients to care givers. It is critical to explore the impact and mechanism of accompanying migration on older adults' well-being in the context of Chinese culture.

Migration-related stress among Chinese migrants has been widely studied (Marilyn & Fang, 2011). Acculturation and post-migration stress are considered to be detrimental to migrants' physical and mental health (Jiang et al., 2023). In the field of residence mobility, scholars have proposed the stress and coping model, which considers moving as a long-term stress event that causes people to make various cognitive and behavioural efforts to cope (Stokols et al., 1983). For more than 20 years, leisure scholars have suggested that leisure could help people cope with stress (Iso-Ahola & Weissinger, 1990). Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) proposed that leisure served as a buffer against the adverse effects of stress on physical and mental health. Other studies have shown that leisure can reduce stress reactivity (Carruthers & Hood, 2004), help people recover from stress and restore social and physical resources (Pressman et al., 2009), provide enriched meaning in life (Iwasaki et al., 2015), enhance positive emotions, and increase happiness (Lin et al., 2020).

Most previous studies have generally focused on the acculturative stress experienced by Chinese international migrants (Dou & Liu, 2017), and the topic of domestic migration, especially rural-to-urban migration remains fairly unexplored. Few scholars have sought to explore the stress experienced by domestic older adult immigrants, and even fewer have delved into their leisure (Rydzik et al., 2012). Considering the multiple types of retirement migration around the world and the uniqueness of the Chinese culture and social background, this study will enhance the overall knowledge of migrants' stress and leisure coping approaches in the context of Eastern culture. Furthermore, the extant research has focused on the psychosocial functions of leisure coping (e.g., leisure beliefs and leisure strategies). There is a lack of research on the role of leisure activity participation (e.g., activity type).

Building on the hierarchical model of leisure stress coping (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000), the current study aims to systematically examine the stress perceptions and the leisure coping processes among older adult accompanying migrants in China. In particular, this research has three objectives: (1) to reveal the multiple stresses experienced by Chinese accompanying migrants; (2) to identify the accompanying migrants' leisure coping beliefs, strategies and activities; (3) to explore how leisure can help them cope with stress.

## Literature review

### Migration of older adults

The phenomenon of retirement migration attracted the attention of Western scholars as early as the late 1950s (Wiseman & Roseman, 1979). Early studies focused on geographic migration patterns (Rodriguez, 2001), migration motivations (Walters, 2000), and the impact of migration on the place of origin and migration (Bolzman et al., 2006). The mobility patterns of retired migrants involve spatial and temporal indicators. Based on different combinations of these two indicators, O'Reilly (1995) classified retired migrants into seasonally mobile and long-term resident types. Some European scholars have also referred to seasonally mobile retired migrants as second-home tourists (Abdul-Aziz et al., 2014).

In recent years, Western retirement migration studies have begun to focus on migrants' multi-resident lifestyles and identities (Gustafson, 2008), sense of place and social integration (Wu et al., 2018) and increasingly on acculturation and post-migration stress (Chun et al., 2011). Currently, studies on the stress experienced by retired migrants focus on interpersonal interactions, living condition, cultural acceptance, and psychological distance (Hall & Hardill, 2016). Some of the proposed manifestations of acculturative stress include poor mental

health, marginalization, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion (Berry, 2005). Reams of studies have shown that retired migrants' closed social networks make it difficult for them to establish extensive interpersonal relationships with locals; thus, they gradually become a marginal group (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014). A number of issues faced by older adult migrants, such as 'support gaps' in social welfare and cultural disequilibrium, will lead to more stress and poorer well-being, which deserves attention (Virgincar et al., 2016).

In the Chinese context, retired migrants have attracted limited public and political attention in recent years (Cheng et al., 2019). Research to date has mainly focused on the characteristics of migration (Giles et al., 2010) and health impacts (Wang & Hu 2019). For example, Lin and colleagues (2011) suggested that migrants suffer from poor health and well-being due to social exclusion. A number of studies have examined the long-term impact of migration in China on mental well-being at older ages (Guo et al., 2017), as well as the relationship between migration and depression in older adults (Zhang et al., 2021).

Furthermore, China has experienced continuous urbanization since the late 1970s, resulting in a massive rural-urban divide (Gong et al., 2012). The rural-urban classification is not only a geographical split but also a symbol of social segregation. The pension system in China was introduced in the late 1990s. Currently, the system is divided along rural-urban lines and regionally differentiated with decentralized financial and administrative management (Huang, 2003). Generally, the pension and consumption level in rural areas is lower than that in urban areas. Furthermore, because of China's fragmented healthcare system, there is a large discrepancy across residency statuses, and older adults who migrate to cities may have difficulty smoothly accessing healthcare services in metropolitan areas

(Huang & Wu, 2020). Therefore, **older** rural-to-urban migrants may be more vulnerable due to their relatively poor socioeconomic status and lack of access to social services (Ruan et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the Chinese family has functioned as a close-knit social unit for thousands of years, with family members drawing on each other's resources for physical, psychological, economic, and social **needs** (Xu, 2012). Filial piety and family reciprocity are still highly valued in Chinese society (Zhao, 1999). Because of their devotion to familial responsibilities, older Chinese parents continue to support their children by assisting them with tasks and providing physical and spiritual assistance (Ruan & Zhu, 2021). In addition, the National Central Political Bureau announced the implementation of the three-child policy. This policy may increase families' desire to have a third child (Yan et al., 2021), which will place more care-giving pressure on Chinese older adults.

Additionally, scholars have tried to find solutions to promote the well-being of this group in response to the aforementioned negative consequences produced by migration. Ruan et al. (2019) argued that family support for retired migrants should remain a priority because current remote pension services are inadequate. A longitudinal study suggested that appropriate public support, such as general language instruction, cultural engagement programs and community activities, should be adopted to promote older adult migrants' cultural assimilation (Angelini et al., 2014).

To summarize, existing studies on the migration of older adults have focused on migration patterns and impacts, lacking a leisure perspective to further explain older immigrants' well-being. Moreover, since the rural-urban migration within developing

countries is likely to be as marked by cultural differences as migration across national borders, academic exploration of Chinese domestic older adult migrants' stress and their coping approaches is urgently needed.

### **Leisure and stress coping**

In the early 1980s, leisure research began to examine the role of leisure experiences in mitigating the negative effects of stress on health and well-being. Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) pioneered the conceptualization of the function of leisure as a way to cope with stress and maintain health. The hypothesis of leisure as having a buffering function has become a major perspective in leisure and stress-coping research and has been repeatedly validated (Zuzanek et al., 1998).

Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) theorized leisure, stress, and coping strategies and proposed hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping, which was a key development in leisure research. In their study, leisure coping was divided into two dimensions: beliefs and strategies. Iwasaki (2002) claimed that leisure coping impacted versatile results, for example, coping viability, stress reduction, well-being and mental prosperity. A large body of subsequent studies widely applied and supported the hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping (Patry et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2020).

However, this theory considered the psychosocial function of leisure coping and lacked an analysis of leisure activity participation. Leisure activities, which refer to preferred and enjoyable activities that one engages in during leisure time, give people a sense of independence and increase intrinsic happiness (Kleiber & Nimrod, 2009). As leisure theory has evolved, the process of leisure coping has attracted more attention. Caltabiano (1994)

claimed that three categories of leisure activities (outdoor activities, sociability, and cultural interests) serve to alleviate individuals' perceptions of stress, highlighting the type of leisure activity as another study focus. Leisure activities can help people recover from stress and reclaim their social and physical resources (Pressman et al., 2009).

In the field of leisure, scholars have conducted extensive research and produced valuable results regarding the role of leisure participation in migrants' social integration and stress coping. They argue that leisure activities can help migrants cope with acculturation stress and integrate into the mainstream culture by improving their problem-solving skills; increasing their self-confidence, self-esteem, and cultural awareness; strengthening their social networks; and thus increasing their social capital (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Xiong et al., 2020). In Li and Stodolska's (2018) study, **leisure activities helped** rural-to-urban migrant workers cope with work stress, step out of their work roles and counteract the alienation at work. Ridgway's (2022) work on migrant women who experienced divorce revealed that participation in leisure can release their negative emotions generated by this difficult life event while also creating opportunities for new ones, such as pleasure and joy, to emerge. According to Lyu et al. (2020), social leisure activities lower the amplitude of the link between mobility and depressed symptoms in older adults. For rural-urban older adult migrants, metropolitan areas have a wealth of community activities and leisure amenities, which provide them with more opportunities for participation (Zhu & Österle, 2017).

The relevant studies **of older adult immigrants have mostly focused on the migration situation, adaptation stress and consequential effects**, remaining at the level of preliminary status surveys and simple generalizations. However, examinations of how leisure helps in

stress coping among accompanying migrants who migrate for the purpose of intergenerational caring are missing. The specific leisure psychological states, stress perceptions and their impact on the well-being of this group are still unclear. In response to the research gaps identified above, the current study adds to the literature through an inclusive consideration of Chinese older immigrants' well-being. The hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping are adopted to depict a more complete picture of accompanying migrants' leisure and stress-coping approaches.

## **Methods**

Chinese accompanying migration is a unique phenomenon, with few theories or empirical evidence to explain accompanying migrants' leisure and stress-coping processes. Thus, a qualitative design was employed; in particular, the interpretivist paradigm was used in this investigation. This approach allowed us to focus on accompanying migrants' experiences while ensuring the relevance of questions concerning the purpose of the research. A semi-structured interview approach with a broad focus was employed. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit informants with relevant knowledge and experiences.

The inclusion criteria of informants were as follows: (1) original residence in rural areas or underdeveloped towns; (2) migration to first- and second-tier cities to take care of grandchildren; and (3) age above 55 years old. Given that informants recruited using the snowball sampling method may be of a similar type, we screened the candidate participants using the maximum difference information saturation method (Pan et al., 2010), eliminating candidates with similar migration cities and processes to include the participants with differences in background to the greatest extent possible. Table 1 shows the demographics of

the 42 participants. The 1st to 30th participants were interviewed by the second author via video calls between January and February 2020 due to the pandemic. To ensure the comprehensiveness and validity of the sample data, the second author conducted 12 face-to-face interviews from October to November 2020 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. The number of participants was not predetermined; instead, the researchers conducted the interviews until saturation was reached.

[Table 1 near here]

During the interviews, participants were asked to (1) briefly introduce themselves and their family background; (2) discuss their migration experience in cities; (3) recall stressful events they had experienced during their migration and the process of caring for children. (4) give examples of how they coped with these stresses; and (5) discuss how this stress-coping approach affected their lives. **Sample questions included: “How have you felt since you migrated to live with your children? Has it been stressful caring for your grandchildren? Do your friends and family support your participation in leisure activities? Please give some examples.”** The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous (by giving pseudonyms). The average interview time was 40 min.

Each of the 42 interview transcripts was input into NVivo 11.0 for thematic analysis. Inductive and deductive logics were combined and flexibly applied to address the key research questions. The analysis of stress perceptions followed the principles of inductive logic, whereas the examination of the leisure-coping approaches was more deductive, framed by the hierarchical dimensions of leisure stress coping.

This coding process was conducted following specific procedures that included (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) Familiarizing oneself with the data. The authors became fully familiar with the content through repeated review of the source material. (2) Generating initial codes. We worked systematically through the data set and developed initial codes to reflect the original meaning of the material. For example, when an informant said, “I have a generation gap with my son and daughter-in-law”, we categorized it as “intergenerational divide”. (3) Searching for themes. The authors combined, evaluated, and sorted codes into potential themes. For instance, the four sub-themes of “unfamiliar environment” “economic disparity” “cultural differences” and “linguistic barriers” were further integrated into the theme of “adaptation stress”. (4) Reviewing themes. We assessed whether the themes were closely related to the initial codes and the data. (5) Defining and naming themes. After multiple rounds of coding and discussion to reach a consensus on the themes, we formed four major themes and considered each theme in relation to the others. (6) Producing the report. We reported the results in the Findings section. All coding was conducted in Chinese, and the results were translated into English. The translation process involved an agreement between at least two researchers to ensure its accuracy.

During the research process, data validity and trustworthiness were ensured. First, data analysis was done separately by the three authors, and the coding results were compared and cross-checked (Lune & Berg, 2017). Furthermore, the researchers made a conscious effort not to invent their own interpretations and instead based their interpretations on the interviewees’ own words. In addition, an effort was made to ensure that no single interviewee’s ideas would dominate the answers to the research questions. Second, steps were taken to ensure that

interpretations reflected the meaning as put forward by the interviewees by eliciting their feedback after coding. Third, this study also collected additional information such as government reports and older adults' community blogs to obtain a more holistic picture of this group and to triangulate the interview results (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

## **Findings**

The main four themes identified in this study were types of stress experienced by the migrants, leisure coping beliefs, leisure coping strategies and leisure activities.

### **Types of stress experienced by the migrants**

#### ***Adaptation stress***

Longing for reunion, Chinese accompanying migrants leave their hometowns and migrate to urban regions alongside their children. However, migrations often cause difficulties in adaptation to the changes in their social environments and lifestyles and older adults often look forward to returning to their hometowns. Tan feels conflicted psychologically in the process of migration because 'people are homesick when they are old, and I am no exception. I miss my hometown and feel no foothold in cities'. The changes in the environment cause changes in the mental states of accompanying migrants who experience domestic rural-to-urban migration. They are temporarily 'de-embed' in a new environment, lacking a sense of security and belonging while still retaining attachment to their hometowns.

While enjoying the conveniences of life in first- and second-tier cities, accompanying migrants state that life costs in large cities are beyond their imagination, and this disparity in economic growth between urban and rural areas is also one of the stresses they face.

Meanwhile, some accompanying migrants are unable to seek medical care elsewhere due to

limits on the “*hukou*<sup>1</sup>” household registration and the disconnection of health insurance across various locations. Living in the countryside for decades, Yan **laments** about how difficult it **is** for her to get medical services in the city she **relocates** to:

A few years ago, I had a serious illness that cost me a lot. I couldn't afford the medical expenses myself. In order to apply for medical reimbursement, I had to go back to my hometown to complete the formalities, which was complex and time-consuming.

Furthermore, all of the respondent **experience** challenges in social communication and integration. Jin **moves** from the countryside in western China to Guangzhou. She **imparts**: ‘It is cheerful to move here to live with my family members, but there are no contacts between the neighbours because of the difference of dialects. I haven't made any new friends for more than a year.’

Because of linguistic barriers and different perceptions, it is extremely difficult for older adults to mingle and re-establish their circle of friends. As a result, they exhibit clear inadequacies in community contact and lack the time and energy to participate in community activities.

### ***Obligation stress***

Accompanying migrants face the difficult decision of staying in their hometown enduring the loneliness of being left behind or moving to the city and encountering suffering due to various pressures. At the same time, because **many of their grandchildren** are still young, caring for them is a challenging task for older adult migrants. A majority of our participants

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<sup>1</sup> “Hukou” is a system of household registration used in mainland China. The hukou system assigns an agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban) residency origin to each individual at birth, tying their rights to the entitlements (or lack thereof) inherent in their hukou status (Zhu & Österle, 2017).

**report** spending at least half of their day cooking, feeding, and playing with their grandchildren. When grandchildren are ill, the task of caring becomes so difficult that it affects the physical condition of accompanying migrants. Long-term care makes them feel exhausted. Even so, the sense of parental responsibility makes them fulfill intergenerational care responsibilities, which puts older adults under tremendous physical and mental pressure. For example, Zhang **feels obligated** to help her son and **does not** want to be a ‘deserter’ in caring for her grandchildren:

My son has always wanted to hire a babysitter, but I don’t agree. He is under great pressure in Shanghai and working really hard. If he spends money to hire someone to take care of his children and I’m idle at home, I will feel useless.

**The children of Chinese immigrants** form a core family (which includes the children and grandchildren) in a different place and often play a leading role in the modern family structure. This leads to changes in the traditional family value **system adopted** from the original Confucian beliefs of filial piety to ‘modern familism’ (Ruan & Zhu, 2021), emphasizing individual needs and intergenerational care responsibilities, which can lead to tremendous physical and mental stress for those accompanying migrants.

### ***Role stress***

Compared with the other two types of stress, role stress is the most unique and varies from person to person depending on the family and social relationships. Accompanying migrants usually live in their children’s houses for the convenience of taking care of their grandchildren, and conflicts and frictions inevitably arise when three generations live together. Because the centre of gravity of intergenerational relationships has shifted

downward, they are in a more awkward position on the periphery and are the ‘redundant’ members of the core family. In addition, due to the development of technology and changes in the living environment, intergenerational differences have widened and further weakened the parental authority of older adults. Older adult immigrants experience a shift from being family authorities to family spectators. As a consequence, they are no longer in a privileged position but rather excluded from important family affairs and even become free babysitters for the core family. Moreover, the daily needs of accompanying migrants are often neglected. Their children may complain about them for not taking good care of their grandchildren. Huang, who **migrates** from rural areas in northern China to Shanghai **shares**,

My daughter-in-law thinks my cooking is too greasy and unhealthy, but it is hard for me to change my tastes overnight. I can only slowly adapt to her tastes. Our relationship is a little awkward and difficult to handle.

Furthermore, accompanying migrants **assume the responsibility of intergenerational care upon retirement, and the role transition** undoubtedly increases their stress. Such challenges **are** typical of all the participants.

### **Leisure coping beliefs**

Exposed to the three types of stress experienced by the migrants described above, accompanying migrants are more likely to realize that leisure involvement provides the opportunity to develop and strengthen friendships and personal autonomy that aid them in dealing with stressful events (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000).

### ***Leisure self-empowerment***

The majority of participants **believe** that they should have the freedom and time to pursue leisure while taking care of their grandchildren and running the household. In our interview, more than half of the participants reported that stronger self-awareness can help them better cope with stress. Jiang, who's busy taking care of a pair of 3-year-old twins, recalled: 'When I moved to my son's residence, I could only surround myself with children and grandchildren every day. Then, I got fed up with this and decided I also need to live for myself.'

In addition, empowerment of leisure provides a sense of entitlement, self-expression, and challenge or resistance against the demands or constraints in life. Wu **illustrates** how leisure has reconstructed her value of 'Self': 'Taking care of my grandson has almost made me depressed, but painting enriches my spiritual world. It reminds me to concentrate on myself and affirm my self-worth, thereby actively embracing reality.'

This demonstrates that **the pursuit of leisure can fortify accompanying migrants' beliefs in self-empowerment and reconstruction.**

### ***Leisure friendships***

As accompanying migrants live in cities for longer periods of time, their need for social friendship increases. By participating in leisure activities, they constantly develop new interpersonal networks. This leisure-based friendship enables them to receive help in time and feel cared for, encouraged, and gain emotional comfort and identity. Lu **shares** her experience to underline how this kind of leisure mutual support might help with stress coping:

When I moved here, I wanted to find someone to exercise together and do tai chi. I wandered around the community to see who could do it. I went to chat with others and

asked them to teach me. They were more than willing to help me, and we thus became friends.

The function of leisure friendships is to provide not only mutual assistance but also emotional and esteem support. Feng's daughter has a job that requires a lot of travel, and his grandson is not very close to him. He told us:

I felt very uncomfortable when I migrated to this city, and my daughter didn't have time to care about me, but my friends in the old age choir always respected my ideas, which made me feel that I was not marginalized by society.

Therefore, leisure and the resultant friendships may provide support to help older adults regain their self-esteem when under pressure.

### **Leisure coping strategies**

Guided by the above two beliefs, accompanying migrants to varying degrees seek support, shift their focus, and/or **adopt self-adjustment** as ways of dealing with stress.

### ***Seeking support***

When accompanying migrants are under stress, they seek encouragement, support and companionship from family or friends. Most of them live with their adult children who are the first choice for help. Liu **mentions** that she would seek backing from her son when she **is** stressed:

I don't know any places for older adults to exercise, so I let my son take me to dance and asked him to enroll me in a Go class. When I'm tired or bored, my son and daughter-in-law often take me to suburban attractions for relaxation.

Some accompanying migrants, however, report that the friends and neighbours can also provide support. Gong, whose grandson attends community primary school describes his experience of seeking support from his neighbours:

Sometimes I have to go out in a hurry, and I usually entrust my grandson to my neighbours.

We know each other and often send the children to and from school together. We also spend our free time singing in the choir together.

Family is the core for these older adult migrants. When faced with stress, they tend to seek support from their closest relatives first. While friends and neighbours have intimate ties with older adults via leisure interactions, family members often play the most practical support role and often give emotional comfort and care.

### *Shifting focus*

When suffering from negative emotions, accompanying migrants intentionally divert their focus away from the aforementioned stressors and onto other things. They derive pleasurable feelings from the new focus, which allows them to briefly forget about their stress. When confronted with stressful circumstances, a large number of them adopt an avoidance attitude and briefly transfer their emphasis to leisure pursuits. Yang often browses Wechat and TikTok when her 8-month-old grandson sleeps, to get a moment of relaxation through online leisure. Sun goes on a long-distance journey whenever her granddaughter is on holiday. She recalled: ‘When I left home to travel, I thought about nothing. After I came back, I felt very relaxed and contented and was thus energized to take care of my grandchildren.’

Although the diversionary coping strategy can make older adult migrants aware of the importance of leisure and gradually improve their mood, it acts only as a buffer or moderator against the negative impact of stress and lacks positive emotional guidance.

### *Self-adjustment*

Compared to accompanying migrants who actively seek help, those who are reserved and introverted are reluctant to reveal their inner difficulties to the people around them. They ease their unpleasant feelings by relying on changes in their perceptions. Wang is 69 years old and has a daughter who is busy with her work and mischievous grandchildren. She often convinces herself:

Although I am stressed, my children are more stressed because of work. I think helping my children is a kind of responsibility for me, which is represented in the Chinese tradition. We place a high emphasis on family affection, and parents are expected to assist their offspring. Whenever I think about this, I have the mood and strength to care for my grandchildren again.

As the focus of intergenerational relationships is passed down to the offspring, a substantial proportion of accompanying migrants must rethink the parental sense of authority in traditional Confucian cultures through self-persuasion and comfort. Moreover, when accompanying migrants' health deteriorates or their grandchildren reach school age, most of them will no longer provide intergenerational care and return to their hometown. They need to cope with the psychological gap of this temporary reunion and role switching through leisure.

### **Leisure activities**

#### *Exercise*

Recreational sports activities, such as jogging and square dancing, have become the primary way of coping with stress for accompanying migrants by enhancing both physical condition and coping capacity. Li told us that he contributed to the recovery of physical functions and the enhancement of health status to some extent by engaging in sports and exercise: ‘My health improved through workouts and my mental state advanced after a year of playing table tennis. I felt that I still need to exercise more after retirement.’

Additionally, participation in activities can rejuvenate older adult migrants and improve their sleep quality. Zhou, who is often woken up by his grandson at night, states, ‘After exercise, my appetite and sleep have improved. I fall asleep very quickly, and it is not easy to wake up. Now I usually wake up with energy in the morning.’

Exercise is the preferred type of activity for accompanying migrants through stressful times. It is beneficial in not only enhancing satisfaction with their physical condition but also revitalizing and refreshing them so they will be able to take on this new housework.

### ***Social interaction***

Social activities that promote emotional interchange and interaction with others facilitate community participation for accompanying migrants. They can not only establish new acquaintances and become closer to each other but also relieve stress. The most common leisure activities reported in the interviews include visiting, gathering and conversing with friends. Participating in these activities aids in accompanying migrants’ coping by easing their psychological stress and emotional weight associated with caring for their grandchildren. As a result, they may have a more positive attitude toward their children and grandchildren. Xu is an outgoing person who likes to share her feelings and daily life with friends: ‘Chatting with

others and participating in group activities can alter my mood and help me maintain a relaxed mind,' she said, 'those are always the relaxing moments of the day'. As most of our participants' interpersonal networks built in previous geographic locations are disrupted or semi-disrupted due to migration, involvement in such leisure activities can help them develop new relational social capital more rapidly.

### ***Sightseeing***

Visiting various places of interest not only relaxes accompanying migrants but also increases their knowledge and broadens their horizons. More than half of the respondents indicate that they have travelled since retirement or have a desire to travel abroad. Qiao has extensive experience in backpacking. She describes,

I go on a trip every year, together with friends and colleagues, walk around when I'm free.

I enjoy traveling because it allows me to have a broader perspective and gain a wealth of knowledge every time I visit a brand-new location.

Sightseeing tours offer a short rest and adjustment period for these migrants. The scenery and experience of the journey can eliminate their fatigue and increase their sense of well-being, which also helps them cope with stress in a more constructive way.

### ***Entertainment***

Accompanying migrants report participating in urban entertainment activities such as doing karaoke, shopping, and watching movies in malls as a way to better integrate into city life. A number of respondents **have made** new friends through entertainment, thereby reducing their loneliness and isolation in the unfamiliar environment. Wei, who wants to follow the trend, shares,

Staying at home for long hours makes me feel uncomfortable. I usually look forward to going out and having fun on the weekend, shopping with friends, and enjoying something that young people nowadays like. This is a good method for me to ease my loneliness.

Participating in entertainment reflects older adult migrants' desires to integrate into a unique environment and adapt to the urban lifestyle. Meanwhile, new forms of entertainment can change their mindset and state, which allows them to shorten their spiritual distance from their children and grandchildren.

### ***Skill development***

Accompanying migrants who used to live in rural areas may not have received a complete education. A comprehensive urban public service system provides them with the opportunity to continue their education. Senior college in China is a kind of non-academic education school held to enrich the spiritual lives of older adults. Courses in senior colleges (e.g., calligraphy, cooking, and gardening) can help older adults develop different skills to improve themselves and gain confidence. Yao, who **has attended** senior college since 2019, shares his feelings: 'I take a tea course this year, and when I get up from my nap to prepare a pot of tea and read a book, I feel like my mind calms down.' Other participants also emphasize that enrolling at community or public senior colleges brought positive changes to their lives.

## **Discussion**

Based on the above results, a leisure and stress-coping model was devised. First, the three types of stress experienced by the migrants that the accompanying migrants confront stimulate their adoption of leisure coping approaches. In turn, the process of leisure coping

has a positive impact on adaptive outcomes, including stress reduction, better health, and psychological well-being (Iwasaki, 2002). It should be noted that the interplay between stress perceptions and leisure coping approaches produces accompanying migrants' stress-coping experiences.

Based on the above analysis, the dynamic process of **stressors** experienced by migrants and leisure coping can be summarized as follows (Figure 1): (1) Perceived stress may first stimulate two leisure coping beliefs, among them the leisure friendship enables accompanying migrants to maintain close contact with local companions, while leisure self-empowerment promotes migrants' self-determination. (2) Leisure coping beliefs affect accompanying migrants' leisure coping strategies. When holding a leisure friendship belief, they tend to seek social support to help them cope with stress. While those with self-empowerment beliefs tend to shift their focus and engage in self-adjustment as their leisure coping strategies. (3) Leisure coping strategies can be realized through various activities. Specifically, when implementing the support-seeking strategy, accompanying migrants will engage in exercise or participate in social leisure activities with their friends or neighbours, thereby better integrating into the community. When accompanying migrants adopt the strategy of focus-shifting, entertainment and sightseeing activities are more likely to give them a new focus and help them escape from the stressful situation to recover, balance, and adjust. When accompanying migrants prefer the self-adjustment strategy, they choose skill-based activities for inner guidance and relaxation.

Our exploration of the stress dilemma and leisure activities participation extends the existing theory of general leisure coping. We reveal that the stress-coping experience of accompanying migrants cannot be simply concluded to be static or unilateral. Due to

differences in personal situation and external environment, varied combinations of the stresses they perceive may form. These different combinations will lead to different coping methods since the effectiveness and flexibility of leisure stress coping approaches may also vary with the specific migration circumstance. Thus, the mechanism is dynamic and has a clear progressive structure.

[Figure 1 near here]

This study adopted a qualitative approach to fully explore accompanying migrants' stress and the role of leisure in helping them cope with stress, which fills the knowledge gap to understand the poor well-being of this group. By delineating accompanying migrants' stress coping processes through leisure, the following contributions can be made.

First, this finding strengthened the existing understanding of accompanying migrants' psychological and social well-being (Biao, 2007) and further developed its dimensionality and specification. Among all types of stress that the accompanying migrants faced, adaptation stress was the most common, which was reported by the majority of the interview respondents. This is in line with the literature, which argues that the adaptation process induces considerable difficulties for older adult immigrants (Ruan et al., 2019). Obligation stress is formed and accepted in the specific Chinese social and cultural context. Role stress could vary in connotation and presentation due to each accompanying migrant's own family and social ties. In general, accompanying migrants are sensitive in perceiving stress and are easily influenced by the negative emotions induced by stress.

Second, existing leisure coping theories mainly focus on the social and psychological functions that are stimulated in leisure (Tsoh et al., 2016). The proposed leisure coping

framework extends leisure coping theories by identifying the stress-belief-strategy-participation mechanism of Chinese accompanying migrants. Among the three types of leisure coping strategies, seeking support is the most common and prioritized leisure coping strategy among this group. The focus-switching strategy is a passive approach to temporarily avoid the aggravation of the stress impact, and the effect is limited. The self-adjustment strategy is the most effective strategy in enhancing accompanying migrants' emotions.

Furthermore, accompanying migrants' leisure coping strategies rely more on functional (seeking support) and emotional (self-adjustment) support. Leisure activities are more like a passive coping approach for accompanying migrants, allowing them to temporarily escape from and redirect their stress (focus switching and relief) rather than proactively enhancing their positive emotions, as highlighted in the literature based on Western cultural contexts (emotion enhancement) (Iwasaki, 2002). This difference may result from Chinese accompanying migrants' heavy household chores, fragmented leisure time and limited social network resources in temporary places of residence.

Last, this study identified five types of leisure activities by capturing unique categories for accompanying migrants, extending the existing knowledge of general leisure typology (Caltabiano, 1994). Accompanying migrants participate in leisure activities to actualize their leisure coping strategies. Among the five types of leisure activities, exercise is the most helpful for the recovery of physical function, whereas entertainment and social interactions could facilitate accompanying migrants' adjustment to the new environment and ability to make new friends. Skills development and sightseeing contribute to their psychological well-being and stability.

## **Implications**

This study brings forth many implications. The findings offer a useful framework for initiatives that can advance the well-being of older adult immigrants. At present, the supply system of remote aged care and leisure services that align the commitments of various entities, such as government, private business, non-profit, community, and family, is still lacking. Considering these challenges, systematic planning is required for pension and leisure service provision in the era of remoted accessibility.

From a policy perspective, the findings call for the need to first identify stressors associated with migration. More favourable policy changes to support accompanying migrants in coping with stressors are needed. For example, offering better remote medical insurance to accompanying migrants may reduce the pressure associated with their medical costs and increase their sense of security.

From the perspective of industrial development, the increasing need for senior leisure services requires China to expand its leisure service industry. The integrated development of the leisure service industry with other relevant booming industries, such as the health and wellness industry, the financial and internet industries and the culture and tourism industry, should be promoted.

Finally, this research highlights the need to consider how social networks rather than physical environments support the ability of older adult immigrants to live well. Family members and communities should provide sufficient social support to assist this group in adapting to urban life more smoothly.

## **Conclusion**

The idea that older adults are ‘left behind’ to remain in their hometowns is outdated, as older adults move for various reasons. In China, the retirement transition is for some shaped by accompanying migration and caring responsibilities rather than being a time to exploit the possibilities for a new, active leisure life. Through a thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, this paper explored the stress and leisure coping of older adults moving from rural residences to their children’s homes in metropolitan areas. This study advanced the theoretical understanding of an increasingly crucial phenomenon and highlighted how leisure coping beliefs, strategies and activities influence the well-being of accompanying migrants. The findings of this study can inform the development of targeted interventions at the family, society and government levels to jointly promote healthy ageing.

This study is limited, however, in several aspects. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited because they are based on a small number of participants using a snowball sample. Future studies are required to recruit respondents from more diverse backgrounds using representative sampling methods. Second, although our study offered meaningful insights into the significant association of leisure and stress coping, more well-designed studies using quantitative methods are needed to confirm the causality. Furthermore, our study tended to frame accompanying migration as a negative stress source. In the context of traditional Chinese culture, however, it is possible that some seniors view migration as a source of joy rather than stress. Therefore, additional meaningful exploration can be conducted to examine the moderating role of cultural values.

### **Author contribution**

Jiaying Lyu led research design, data analyses, and manuscript review. Xueyu Wang led data collection, data analyses, conceptualization, manuscript preparation and revision. Daisy X.F. Fan contributes to data analyses, manuscript preparation and revision.

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Table 1. Participant profiles

Characteristics		Number of Participants	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	23.81
	Female	32	76.19
Age	55-59	18	42.86
	60-69	15	35.71
	Over 70	9	21.43
Migration city	First-tier cities	16	38.10
	Second-tier cities	26	61.90
	Less than 1 year	6	14.29
Length of Stay	1 to 5 years	22	52.38
	Over 5 years	14	33.33

Figure 1. A model of the Chinese accompanying migrants' stress-coping.

