Rural Migrant Women’s Informal Learning of Life Skills in Social Networks in Urban China

Shujuan Luo1 and Vilma Seeberg2

Abstract
Life skill programs have been widely provided for vulnerable women in Third World Countries but not for the deprived rural migrant women in China. This study explored the way these women informally learned life skills in urban China and their primary sources of learning, in hopes of providing insights into possible life skill programs targeting them. A basic interpretive qualitative research was conducted by interviewing seventeen migrant women in Northwest and Central China. Findings show that these women learned certain core life skills informally as they adjusted to the urban life. They regarded rural migrant social networks as the main source of learning. Yet, their aspirations to acquire better communication and occupational skills remained mostly unfulfilled and a few of them demanded extra emotional support. This study strongly suggests life skill programs provided for rural migrant women in China to enhance their capability for self-protection, empowerment and social integration.

Keywords
rural migrant women, social networks, life skills, informal learning, urban China

Introduction
The last two decades have witnessed a massive increase of internal migrant population in Asia due to the rural-urban migration trends in big manufacturing countries like China, India, and so on (King, 2015). Take China as an example, in 2019, 174.25 million migrant workers left their hometowns and worked in other places within China, among which, 30.7% were female and over 50% were the “new generation” of migrant workers born in 1980 or later (NBSC, 2020). At an increasing rate every year, millions of young rural women undertake migration for urban jobs and living throughout China. In this study, this group is referred as young rural migrant women (or migrant women in brief).

Although internal migrants across Asia have contributed significantly to economic growth and gained higher wages compared to their earnings before migration, they remain largely “socially and economically excluded from the wider benefits of economic growth such as access to health and education, housing, sanitation and freedom from exploitation” (Deshingkar, 2006). Within the large and diverse internal migration population in China, young rural migrant women in their late teens and early twenties are reported very vulnerable to many risks in fast-paced, disorderly urban environments due to their relatively limited experience, preparation, and mental maturity (Shi et al., 2012; Zhang, 2011).

In many developing countries since the 1990s, large world agencies such as World Health Organization (WHO) (1997) and UNICEF (2012) have been providing life skill programs to enhance self-protection of disadvantaged young women focusing on learning of life skills—“a range of psychosocial skills . . . which . . . point toward . . . importance to our protection, well-being and our ability to live productive, meaningful and fulfilling lives” (UNICEF, 2012, p. 7). Life skills have been deemed highly valued skills for young and vulnerable people because these skills enable them to deal effectively with the challenges of life through adaptive and positive behavior (CASEL, 2013; Chow et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2012; WHO, 1997).

Core Life Skills
The Department of Mental Health of the World Health Organization (1999) defined life skills as culturally appropriate psychosocial skills and learning them as “contributing to
the promotion of personal and social development, the prevention of health and social problems, and the protection of human rights” (front matter, n.p.).

A core set of 10 life skills were identified in 1997 by the WHO from cross-cultural research: decision-making and problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress. These 10 core life skills have been adopted by many international NGOs (Room to Read, 2011; UNICEF, 2012). Associated researchers found that problem-solving and social-emotional skills are particularly relevant to youth. The current research limited the research scope and specifically focused on six core life skills: decision-making and problem-solving, communication and interpersonal, emotional and stress coping skills in this study.

Though core life skills are generically psychosocial skills, they are highly related to the context (WHO, 1997). The rural and urban context where the migrant women live were quite different. The rural villages were familiar to the migrant women, peaceful, and slow-paced while urban cities were unfamiliar, dynamic, and fast-paced. Before migrating to the city, they developed certain life skills in the rural context. However, after coming to the city, due to a change of context, they had to develop and expand life skills in a variety of new scenarios including constraints and opportunities.

Most of the young rural migrant women in China have no access to any kind of life skill programs due to a shortage of such programs. However, it is possible that young rural migrant women have learned life skills informally in the transition. Scholars have found connections between informal learning of various capacities and migration in different cultures (McLean & Vermeylen, 2014; Rao & Hossain, 2012; authors, 2012). Kim (2010) examined the learning domains of migrant workers and local citizens in South Korea, finding that continuous engagement in social activities developed migrants’ learning domains such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and intercultural capability. Wen and Hanley (2015), Li (2006) and Seeberg and Luo (2012) discovered that kinship or hometown social networks were notable informal learning sources for Chinese rural migrants to learn to adapt to city life. McLean and Vermeylen (2014) who researched migrants in Canada discovered that a great many of these migrants read self-help books relating to health, relationships, careers and financial success. Though the above scholars mostly did not use the term life skills, the capacities they found migrants had informally learned were highly related to life skills. Schugurensky (2000) theorized that informal learning could happen in any place, for example, the workplace, the family, a religious institution, the community and the like. Based on the literature and long-term field work among a large sample of rural migrant women in Shaanxi (Seeberg & Luo, 2018), this study assumes that young rural migrant women could learn life skills informally in the urban environments to enhance their capabilities and experience better life adjustment. The purpose of this study is to explore life skills learning experiences of young rural migrant women (age between 18 and 29) in China and to identify primary sources of informal learning—as perceived by the participants themselves. This study does not view the migrants as a homogeneous group as revealed in literature but chose to specifically focus on young rural migrant women in order to bring a gendered perspective to the migration literature. Three research questions are addressed in this study: (1) What are the participants’ subjective experiences with informal learning of life skills? (2) What are the primary informal learning sources for life skills? (3) What key conclusions could be drawn to empower migrant women?

Need of the Study

Life skill programs are highly advocated by large world agencies such as WHO (1997, 1999), UNICEF (2012) and small NGOs because such programs show examined effect in empowering young people in deprived, risky situations to have better self-protection and well-being. However, in China, despite large numbers of young migrant women facing challenges and hazardous situations, very few have proposed or researched life skills learning of this particular group except a recent study (Yuan, 2021). The possible reason is that there are almost no life skill programs targeting this population. The importance of life skills for young migrant women in China is often neglected. The recent literature on Chinese internal migrants mainly focuses on the reported physical and mental health, as well some limited work on subjective well-being and life satisfaction of the migrants (Bonnefond & Mabrouk, 2019; Liu & Pan, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; ). But few have investigated how migrants reached such level of subjective well-being and why. The study of their life skills acquisition can uncover the process and reasons behind and the efforts they have made to achieve subjective well-being.

Theoretical Framework

Six core life skills framework. The definitions of the six core life skills and their relations with human well-being are presented below in Figure 1: Six Core Life Skills Framework, which are used as theoretic framework to guide the data analysis related to Research Question 1, what are the participants’ subjective experiences with informal learning of life skills? This framework is developed by the researchers of this study based on the definitions of core life skills given by WHO (1997, p. 2).

Informal learning. Schugurensky (2000) developed taxonomy of informal learning based on two main categories (intentionality and consciousness), which generated three types of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning and socialization. Schugurensky (2000) clarified,
Self-directed learning refers to ‘learning projects’ undertaken by individuals (alone or as part of a group) without the assistance of an ‘educator’ (teacher, instructor, facilitator), but it can include the presence of a ‘resource person’ who does not regard herself or himself as an educator. It is both intentional and conscious. Incidental learning refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience, she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place. Thus, it is unintentional but conscious. Socialization (also referred to as tacit learning) refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life. Not only we have no a priori intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we learned something. (Schugurensky, 2000, pp. 3–4)

The above typology guided the researchers to inquire further about the sources of informal learning of life skills by the migrant women. For example, the sources of intentional self-directed learning for the migrant women may be books, online resources, or resource persons whom the women take action to reference for specific knowledge or skills learning. The researchers kept in mind these possible sources while conducting the interview. This informal learning typology only functions as a framework to facilitate the investigation into the sources of informal learning.

This study pays more attention to investigate the informal learning sources instead of categorizing the learning into the above informal learning types.

**Method**

This study employed a basic interpretive qualitative research design because it allows researchers to study things in their natural settings, “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). Such research design focuses on the participants themselves, and listens to their voices, thus it helps generate findings on what life skills the migrant women have informally learned.

In summer 2014, the researchers of this study received approval by the relevant university’s institutional review board using U.S. federal certifications to conduct this research. Then a hybrid form of purposeful sampling was applied (Patton, 2002), that is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). To begin purposeful sampling, the authors first determined the selection criteria that were essential in choosing participants, which were, first, migrant women who were born and raised in the [Core life skills]

| Core life skills          | Definition                                                                 | Elaboration and its relation with well-being                                                                 |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Decision making          | A skill that helps us to deal constructively with decisions about our lives. | This can have consequences for [well-being] if young people actively make decisions about their actions in relation to health by assessing the different options, and what effects different decisions may have. |
| Problem solving          | A skill that enables us to deal constructively with problems in our lives.   | Significant problems that are left unresolved can cause mental stress and give rise to accompanying physical strain.  |
| Effective communication   | A skill that makes us able to express ourselves, both verbally and non-verbally, in ways that are appropriate to our cultures and situations | This means being able to express opinions and desires, but also needs and fears. And it may mean being able to ask for advice and help in a time of need. |
| Interpersonal relationship skill | A skill that helps us to relate in positive ways with the people we interact with. | This may mean being able to make and keep friendly relationships, which can be of great importance to our mental and social well-being. It may mean keeping good relations with family members, which are an important source of social support. It may also mean being able to end relationships constructively. |
| Coping with emotions     | A skill that involves recognizing emotions in ourselves and others, being aware of how emotions influence behavior, and being able to respond to emotions appropriately. | Intense emotions, like anger or sorrow, can have negative effects on our health if we do not react appropriately. |
| Coping with stress       | A skill about recognizing the sources of stress in our lives, recognizing how this affects us, and acting in ways that help to control our levels of stress. | This may mean that we take action to reduce the sources of stress, for example, by making changes to our physical environment or lifestyle. Or it may mean learning how to relax, so that tensions created by unavoidable stress do not give rise to health problems. |

Figure 1. Six core life skills framework.

*Note.* This framework is developed by the researchers of this study based on the definitions of core life skills given by WHO (1997, p. 2).
rural villages, held “rural” hukou status, and were working or looking for jobs in the city at research time. Second, their ages were between 18 and 29. The data collection used a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling, while striving to reach maximum variation in social, economic, geographic, educational and other background factors (Hatch, 2002).

Then, in one research site, the city of Xi’an and nearby Qingshan Qu (Shaanxi province), convenience sampling was utilized. A group of migrant women who were scholarship recipients sponsored by a joint Chinese-American foundation were selected. They had heard of the authors as the foundation coordinators, some of them had participated in a long-term research project that the authors conducted since 2001. Since contacts had been ongoing and rapport had been established, they were invited to participate in this research. Twelve of them finally agreed to participate.

In a second research site, city of Wuhan of Hubei province, the first author adopted snowball sampling. First, two migrant women who met the criteria and were known by the first researcher socially were identified and invited to join in the research, and they were asked to refer more participants in their workplace or social circle. A total of five women meeting the criteria agreed to participate.

Before data was collected through observation and interview, the participants were verbally informed with the details of this study, such as the purpose of the study, procedures, and the use of the data before agreeing to participate. The participants’ rights to stop participating in the research at any time were also discussed. Only pseudonyms were used in the research so their identity was not discoverable.

Seventeen rural migrant women, the Xiangcun [Village] Sisters (XS), 12 from a remote village in Shaanxi, five from counties in Hubei, participated in lengthy interviews in the summer of 2015. At research time, they had migrated intra-provincially, in Shaanxi migrating to Xi’an and a prefecture-level city nearby, and to Wuhan in Hubei province. Their ages ranged from 18 to 28, with an average age of 21. The terms of being migrant worker status ranged from a few days to 14 years, with an average length of 5 years. Detailed participants demographic information is provided in Table 1. Mr. Pan, long-term field research assistant, provided deep cultural, social and economic background on the Shaanxi XS.

Semi-structured interviewing, at least one 45-to-60-minute interview per participant was conducted in Chinese by the first researcher and followed up by digital communication where necessary. A list of questions or issues were used to guide the interview. Extensive fieldwork done by the second researcher over the course of 15 years had focused on the Shaanxi XS. Over half of the Shaanxi XS’ workplaces and housing in inner-city-villages were visited by both researchers. In Hubei province, observations were conducted at the Wuhan textile factory. The first researcher spent 2 days in four of the XS’ textile factory and stayed overnight in the female dorm. Field study notes were taken. The observation and field study gave the researchers a basic idea of the natural living and work environment of the XS.

The first researcher transcribed and translated the interviews from Chinese into English. With the help of NVIVO software, all interview transcripts, observations and field study notes were coded by the first researcher and checked.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Information Table.

| Participant Pseudonyms | Age  | Education | Work length | Current location | Current/Last position | Marital status |
|------------------------|------|-----------|-------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| Pang Junjun            | 24   | VH graduate | 2.5 years  | Shaanxi          | Projecting budgeting engineer | Single        |
| Pang Xuxu              | 20   | VH graduate | 2.5 years  | Shaanxi          | Program coordinator    | Single        |
| Pang Mingming          | 22   | VH graduate | 1 year     | Shaanxi          | Cashier               | Single        |
| Pang Ranran            | 22   | VH graduate | 5.5 years  | Shaanxi          | Sales                 | Single        |
| Pang Ranting           | 21   | VH dropout  | 2 years    | Shaanxi          | Sales                 | Married       |
| Duan Ranqing           | 21   | VH dropout  | few days   | Shaanxi          | Waitress              | Married       |
| Pang Ranfei            | 18   | M graduate  | 6 months   | Shaanxi          | Assistant             | Single        |
| Dang Mei               | 18   | M graduate  | 1 year     | Shaanxi          | Community Security     | Single        |
| Pang Linsha            | 23   | M Dropout   | 5.5 years  | Shaanxi          | Cashier               | Married       |
| Pang Shishi            | 22   | M Dropout   | 5.5 years  | Shaanxi          | Waitress              | Married       |
| Liu Xinxin             | 18   | M graduate  | 2 years    | Shaanxi          | Waitress              | Single        |
| Luo Mengmeng           | 18   | M dropout   | 5 months   | Shaanxi          | stocker               | Single        |
| Lu Yiyi                | 28   | M dropout   | 14 years   | Hubei            | Textile factory worker | Married       |
| Lu Xiaxia              | 26   | M dropout   | 12 years   | Hubei            | Textile factory worker | Married       |
| Zhu Ning               | 20   | M dropout   | 5 years    | Hubei            | Textile factory worker | Single        |
| Li Qianqian            | 24   | M dropout   | 5 years    | Hubei            | Textile factory worker | Single        |
| Lin Xiaowei            | 26   | M dropout   | 11 years   | Hubei            | Mechanic shop clerk   | Married       |

*Last position was only listed when the participants were unemployed at research time.
*VH: Vocational High School.
*M: Middle School.
by the second researcher. The Six Core Life Skills Framework (Figure 1) served as analytical framework to guide the multiple iterations of the coding process. The data was coded using strategies suggested by Glesne and Peshkin (1992): initial major code clumps were first developed based on the Six Core Life Skills Framework and informal learning theory, which served as a predicted pattern. The local knowledge revealed in this study was compared with the predicted pattern and was coded into related major code clumps. Then the contents of each major code clump were broken down into numerous sub-codes based on different sub-themes. Finally, various data clumps were placed in a meaningful sequence.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, this study applied the use of multiple methods and multiple sources of data. A variety of data collection methods—interviews, observations, and field study were used to collect the main data. The researchers compared data collected through observations at different times and in different places, and cross-checked interview data collected from people with different perspectives and from follow-up interviews with the same people, which were suggested by Merriam (2009). The researchers also set aside prejudices and assumptions before data collection and throughout the research and always maintained a reflective attitude, making sure the analysis and findings emerged from the framework and data instead of the researcher’s predisposition. Consistent debriefing during the analytical process between the two researchers and comparison with findings in the literature added to the internal validity of the analysis and interpretation.

Findings

The analysis of the data in general showed that rural migrant women informally learned and applied all six core life skills in the city to the extent that they were related to migration and urbanization. As they acculturated to the city, the change of context required that they develop an enhanced set of life skills. The details of their life skill learning and application experiences are illustrated below.

Decision Making and Problem Solving

The rural migrant women developed problem-solving skills, making constructive decisions and solving related problems as regards the migration destination, occupational training and entrepreneurship aspiration, and premarital sex and abortion, heightened risks in the urban environment.

Choose migration destination, occupational training, and entrepreneurship aspiration. Almost all the migrant women decided to stay in the city instead of going back to the village, because “there are more job opportunities in the cities,” “I could start my small business in the city,” “I like the colorful city life,” “It is so convenient to live in cities, given the public transportation and all kinds of stores near us.” Going back to the village meant hard scrabble farming, very limited non-agricultural opportunities, and inconvenient transportation, which did not promote their aspirations or win the cost-benefit calculation.

They could make choices to migrate outside their home province to well-known centers of global manufacturing. However, though over half of the XS aspired to go further away to “explore the outside world,” they seriously thought about whether “there were good opportunities.” Pang Xuxu (Shaanxi XS, age 20) thought, “I would like to go to other provinces and challenge myself, but I dare not go just by myself because I am not sure whether I can survive there.” Only one third of the XS had migrated for work in other provinces, and mostly because job opportunities were introduced by family members or relatives. After years of migration, most of them returned to a large city closer to their home, typically to settle down, involving marriage, children, and birth family care. Several XS (Pang Shishi, Lin Xiaowei, et al.) returned at the age of 22 to 25 to find a man from their hometown and got married, and 2 XS (Lu Yiyi, Lu Xiajia) returned for their children. Lu Yiyi (Hubei XS, age 28) shared:

I worked in Hangzhou [city outside her home province] for 6 years. . . . Since my children had stayed behind in my home village, I returned to work in Wuhan [in her province] last year. Now I plan to buy a house in Wuhan, because it is closer to my home village and more affordable.

The general ethos among workers was that they migrated to find better or paying work that was satisfactory with good pay. To fulfill the aspiration, they had to make frequent job decisions in the city, weighing the cost benefits of jobs. There was obvious difference between the Shaanxi XS and Hubei XS regarding the variety of jobs they tried. Most of the Shaanxi XS changed jobs in different profession every 6 to 12 months in hopes of finding satisfactory jobs but with little success. Constrained by low educational attainment and a poor informational base, they tended to navigate through low-skill, low-pay jobs in entry-level manufacturing or the low levels of the service sector. Comparatively, the situation for four Hubei XS in the textile industry was better. Although they also very often switched from one textile plant to another because “some factories don’t have constant manufacturing work and we need to switch for other textile factories” (Li Qianqian, Hubei XS, age 24), they stayed in the same industry. They were satisfied with the high pay but complained of extremely long work hours (often 90 hours per week), which were typical features of textile factories at the time.

After years of working, the Shaanxi XS had had enough of poorly paid, arduous work; they aspired and looked for occupational training or business opportunities. Though a large variety of vocational high schools and occupational skill training programs existed in the research sites, tuition
was high and educational quality was not guaranteed. Three XS dropped out of vocational high schools that were inadequate and badly organized, another three graduated from vocational high schools but only two of them found relevant work (see Table 1). Most of these Shaanxi XS lacked knowledge regarding the quality of vocational high schools or skill training programs and could not make constructive decisions on what programs to choose. Their aspirations of further occupational training couldn’t be fulfilled.

Comparatively, there was almost no further occupational training aspiration among the Hubei XS. The XS in the textile factories had had a few months of sewing skill training before getting employed. And having worked in this industry over 5 years, they became very skilled and none of them decided to switch to a different profession. Li Qianqian (Hubei XS, age 24) mentioned,

I have worked in clothing factories for 5-6 years. Before that I worked in small stores as cashiers or sales. My family said, since I was a girl, I needed to learn some craft skill to make a living. They suggested I learn sewing. I learned sewing for 3 months in a training center at the age of 18, and then started working in textile factories.

Sewing skills were viewed as a solid skill by the girls’ parents which could help girls make a living. Four Hubei XS had worked in textile industry for 5 to 14 years (see Table 1). Another Hubei XS (Lin Xiaowei, age 26) working as a mechanic shop clerk was also satisfied with her job and did not look forward to further occupational training.

Starting a small business was an aspiration of two Shaanxi XS and three Hubei XS. The Shaanxi XS had already carried out their entrepreneurial plans. For example, Pang Linsha learned to run online retail business from a friend and Pang Ranting and her husband opened a food stand. The Hubei XS had bigger entrepreneurial aspirations while remaining quite rational. For instance, Lu Yiyi shared, “I want to open a small clothing plant, but I do not think I can fulfill this dream in the near future. I have to move forward step by step and wait for good opportunities.” And Zhu Ning said,

In the future, I plan to open my own clothing plant. I already know what equipment is needed and other requirements. Recently, two friends invited me to invest in one plant with them. Each of us needed to invest 100,000 RMB. I am considering this. I really want to start the business with them, but I would have to borrow a large sum of money.

For the XS, big entrepreneurial dreams were a further reach that would require large sums of starting capital. It appeared to them much easier to put into action small entrepreneurial plans. The Shaanxi XS who started their small businesses did not make large profits due to a lack of capital and business management acumen. The entrepreneurial aspirations and actions of the migrant women lacked both information and financial support.

Cope with premarital sex and abortion risks. The migrant women’s problem-solving skill was applied when they coped with premarital sex and abortion risks. Due to the difference between rural and urban contexts, the XS were exposed to premarital pregnancy and abortion risks in urban settings. Most XS lived alone or with friends in the city, away from the prying eyes of their family and villagers back home and had to solve any related problems alone. Premarital pregnancy had become “widespread phenomenon” among the XS’ friends and colleagues. The XS knew very little about reproductive health, so they were hindered in solving related problems. Over half of the XS had vague or wrong ideas about contraceptive methods, “taking contraceptive pills or using condoms is bad for your health” was heard from several of them. However, the premarital pregnancy and abortion risks mattered differently to the Shaanxi XS and Hubei XS. Most of the Shaanxi XS had conservative attitudes about premarital sex cited by them to be due to their religious conviction and they disapproved of abortion completely. Their Catholicism had made decisions about premarital sex and abortion clear to them, and hence they avoided problems associated with sexual behaviors. But the protective role of religion was not available to the Hubei XS in making decisions about premarital sexual behavior and there were more involved with it. The Hubei XS Lu Yiyi, Li Qianqian and Lin Xiaowei had lived with and broken up with boyfriends before marriage. Lu Yiyi had problem-solved the consequences with an easily available abortion.

To sum, the migrant women made constructive decisions on migration destinations and their aspirations for occupational training or entrepreneurship. Yet, most of the Shaanxi XS were limited by lack of information in making choices. Also both Shaanxi and Hubei XS lacked needed support to convert entrepreneurship aspirations into profitable earnings. The Shaanxi XS faced lower premarital pregnancy and abortion risks due to their religiosity while their non-religious friends, the Hubei XS, held less clear attitudes regarding premarital sexual behavior and consequences such as abortion.

Learning Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Regarding the learning of communication, the XS admitted to weak communication skills when interacting with urban locals or other migrants. They felt “too shy;” “only feeling comfortable to talk to people I know,” or “I don’t know how to communicate with urban middle-class customers.” Most of them wanted to improve communication skills but did not know how.

Having the need to speak up was a new communication experience for some of the XS. Several older XS learned to be clear when relating to their boss or colleagues. Pang Junjun (Shaanxi XS, age 24) mentioned, “My boss made me work overtime but did not increase my pay. I did not put up with this, so I asked for a raise.” Her boss did not give her the raise so she quit that job and found one with higher pay. But
younger XS on the other hand was not as skilled to speak up for themselves. When Luo Mengmeng (Shaanxi XS, age 18) did not get her full pay, she did call her manager,

I told her I did not get the money in my account and asked why, she did not say anything. I called my manager again, but she did not answer the phone, nor did she reply my text message. I did not want to complain to her anymore.

The ability to speak up effectively on one’s behalf is in part a personality trait, but among the XS it was related to length of migration and past experiences. Younger migrant women who just moved to the city lacked experience and did not know how to communicate effectively, whereas older XS who had worked in the city for more than 2 years were more able to argue for their rights when they were unfairly treated.

In terms of Interpersonal relationship skill, most of the XS applied this skill to develop strong bonds with family members, kept friendly relationships with old friends and classmates from villages back home, and developed new friendship with other rural migrant workers on their job. Their such connections were referred as rural migrant social network in this study. Since migrant workers had busy work schedules, they communicated with their families and friends by cellphones or social media. Dang Mei (Shaanxi XS, age 18) shared, “My old friends and me call each other occasionally and hang out once a month.” And they enjoyed hanging out with colleagues during breaks. Lin Xiaowei (Hubei XS, age 26) mentioned, “Sometimes we work extra time and get off work at 9 pm. But when there is no extra work, I am free at 6 pm and will hang out with my colleagues, eating and having fun.” Their colleagues were mostly migrants from different rural areas.

Bosses or customers may be urban local residents, but there was no social interaction with them after work. The XS spent most of their time with other rural migrants, and interaction with urban locals was confined to brief encounters with customers, bosses or landlords. Urban local residents also did not live with them in urban villages but segregated in better neighborhoods.

To sum, the XS realized their deficiency in communication in urban settings and aspired to learn more communication skill. They exerted good interpersonal skill within the rural migrant social network but did not make connection with urban local residents.

Coping with Emotions and Stress

For the XS the most stressful and emotionally negative factors were top most extremely long work hours and financial pressures, followed by family separation, unfair harsh treatment at work, challenging jobs, and conflicts in intimate relationships. The XS applied emotional and stress coping skills to deal with these negative factors and tried to maintain well-being.

Long daily work hours (11–13 hours in this study) in mostly textile industry and some restaurants or beauty salons constantly created negative emotions on half of the XS and negatively affected their mental and physical health. Pang Ranfei (Shaanxi XS, age 18) shared, “I work at a hair salon from 8:30 am to 10 pm, sometimes 11 pm. We have 2 hours lunch break. The work hour is too long. I am so tired after work.” The four Hubei XS in textile factory were also exhausted in the afternoon and evenings while working and after work. They complained about the long work hours frequently. However, none of them would like to ask for a sick leave day before next break, though they had the option. They tried to prioritize their economic needs over emotional, physical needs and chose to endure the stress.

Financial pressure was experienced by four Shaanxi XS and three Hubei XS who were married or had worked over 3 years. Increasing individual or family expenses and low pay caused the pressure. Pang Ranting (Shaanxi XS, age 21) shared, “I cannot have kids now. I think my husband and me will feel very stressful financially if we have kids.” Lin Xiaowei (Hubei XS, age 26) shared, “I felt very stressful and burdensome to support my parents and siblings during my first 6 years working in the city.”

Family separation caused the most negative influences on the XS during the first few years of migration. Unreasonable scold or unfair treatment in work, challenging jobs and intimate relationship conflict also negatively influenced the XS’ wellbeing. For example, severe intimate relationship conflict had significant negative influence on two XS (Shaanxi XS Pang Shishi, Hubei XS Zhu Ning) who had unhappy marriage and problematic father-daughter relationship respectively. Both of them got limited support from family and friends and could only cope with the negative emotions and stress to a certain extent. Their experience reflected that they need extra help and support to deal with such extreme cases.

The XS mainly coped with negative emotions and stress by sharing with their rural migrant social network, trying different kinds of relaxing activities, or relying on religion. For example, Pang Ranran (Shaanxi XS, age 22) shared, “Once I post one complain on social media, my friends asked me what’s going on. I said nothing. They said they had ears for me if I wanted to share. So I share with them sometimes.” Smart phones and social media made it easy for them to share feelings online and get attention from friends.

The XS suffering from long work hours coped with unhappiness or exhaustion through relaxing activities during their limited free time after work. Zhu Ning (Hubei XS, age 20) said, “Every day after work I either go out and eat, or relax in the dorm and play with cellphone.” Lu Yiyi (Hubei XS, age 28) shared, “At night I couldn’t sleep because I am exhausted. I used to read books, such as fiction, magazines, or short stories and got relaxed. Now I have a smart phone and play with it.”

To cope with financial pressure, Pang Ranting (Shaanxi XS, age 21) shared, “It’s really not easy to live in the
society. . .really [meaning financial stress]. But for me, I just work in the day and go to church in the evening. I am not ambitious; I do not need a lot of money.”

When the negative emotions and stress related to work was unbearable, they tended to quit the jobs and looked for new ones. And when they failed to solve intimate relationship conflict, they chose to get out of the relationship temporarily by migrating to other places. Migration provided them with the freedom to escape from the unsolved problems and live lives in the way they valued.

Yet despite these challenges, when asked directly, the XS claimed to have no major problems to adapt to urban life. Pang Ranran (Shaanxi XS, age 22) said, “I had no problems to adapt to the city life since the beginning of migration. I was very curious and wanted to explore everywhere. I was not scared at all.” Close scrutiny of their voices revealed that they understood problems of adaptation to involve mostly basic survival matters, such as finding work, getting familiar with urban surroundings, finding housing and surviving financially. Such problems may have been associated with life in the village, but in the city, they could meet basic needs adequately, which they interpreted as having no problems with adjusting to urban life.

To sum, the XS learned how to cope with their many emotions, with their stress from work and life in general, by sharing with others in similar circumstances or doing relaxing activities alone or with friends. The Shaanxi XS also held on to their faith to cope with stress.

Primary Informal Learning Sources

Research Question 2 of this study asked, “What are the primary informal learning sources in the city where the XS could learn core life skills?” The XS’ response helped to generate that rural migrant social network was the primary informal learning source. Most of the XS communicated most strongly within the rural migrant social networks that primarily consisted of family members, old friends and classmates from villages back home, and new friends they made in work who were also migrants from different regions. Through the rural migrant social network the XS learned the essentials of urban living including using information technology. Lin Xiaowei (Hubei XS, age 26) mentioned,

When I first migrated to Guangdong in 2004, I didn’t have a cellphone or know anything about computer. I hanged out with my colleagues who had worked for longer time. They taught me to surf internet in the internet cafe and to use different apps in computers and cellphones.

They learned to make better decisions and solve problems by consulting the rural migrant social network. Pang Ranting (Shaanxi XS, age 21) said, “When I feel puzzled and need suggestions, I will talk to my close friends.” Pang Shishi (Shaanxi XS, age 22) shared, “Sometimes I consult others’ opinion before making decisions. For example, I asked for my brother’s opinion on whether I should learn cosmetic skills. I cannot make the decision. He has clear minds. He is smarter.” They also shared emotional concerns or stress within this social network, which was illustrated above. The rural migrant social network was to them the most significant space where they learned about and practiced all the core life skills.

Since most of the XS worked for long hours and had no regular weekends, they preferred to contact people using smart phones and social media more frequently. Due to the falling price of smart phones and faster, more affordable data plans, most of the XS had smart phones and could get access to the social media easily. Smart phones contributed to the establishment and enhancement of migrants’ social network for the XS.

Besides the primary informal learning source, there were other sources such as the Internet, work environment, church, and religious practices, and books contributing to the informal learning of life skills. For example, Pang Ranting (Shaanxi XS, age 21) said, “I searched online regarding contraceptive measures and found that some contraceptive measures had potential harm to our body. “ Luo Mengmeng (Shaanxi XS, age 18) said, “If you do not understand anything, you can search it online.” Pang Shishi (Shaanxi XS, age 22) shared, “When I was working in the restaurant, I learned something from the boss, such as . . . how to talk to different people.” Pang Xuxu (Shaanxi XS, age 20) also mentioned, “communicating with college students is a piece of cake for me because I have learned to deal with tougher customers in work.” The Shaanxi XS mentioned that the teachings in church and verses of Bible taught them to be “more considerate and tolerant” toward relationship issues and be “less materialistic” when considering financial issues. And about one third of the XS mentioned they read paper books or electronic articles on relationship management, communication or psychology. These XS learned communication-interpersonal skills and emotional-stress coping skills to a certain extent through reading.

To sum, rural migrant social network was the primary learning sources where most XS informally learned core life skills. Other informal learning sources, which part of the XS referred to, were the Internet, work environment, church/religious practices, and books.

Discussion

This study found that the migrant women had informally learned and applied different core life skills consciously or unconsciously to cope with challenges and risks faced in the urban settings. They strove to adapt to city life and nurtured strong rural migrant social networks while experiencing isolation from local urban residents. The life skills they obtained were strongly related to their well-being, supporting the Six
Core Life Skills Framework (WHO, 1997). Although not part of the present study, it is important to remember that their legal status (hukou) and identity card as “rural, from elsewhere” curtailed their opportunities ubiquitously and underlay many challenges they faced in the city.

The study revealed that while making decisions, the XS took into consideration their aspirations, benefit and cost calculations, as well as the needs of their birth and contemporary families. Thus, the decisions they made contributed to their well-being, limited as it was by structural barriers. The XS were not “floating” blindly but were part of chain migration moving to places they were more familiar with and where they found it easier to make a living, which was consistent with Li’s (2006) report. At research time all the XS had migrated intra-provincially and were more satisfied with it than with their inter-provincial migration previously. It meant shorter distance to their parents or children left in hometown. Intra-provincial migration helped them to better balance their roles as daughter, wife and mother.

The biggest challenge faced by the XS was to obtain satisfactory work with sufficient pay. Most of the Shaanxi XS, aware of their human capital deficit, aspired to upgrade their occupational skills. Similarly, Hu (2012) found that new-generation rural migrants such as the XS’s often saved money for additional training and aspired to build careers. However, it is important to note that the Shaanxi XS lacked knowledge of affordable and effective occupational training opportunities, and most did not fulfill their aspirations. Both Shaanxi and Hubei XS’ aspirations to earn from small businesses ran afoul of lack of capital, information and skills, confirming findings by Tuñón (2006), Démurger and Xu (2011). This study as well as the literature revealed that, although the rural migrants made constructive decisions regarding learning new occupational skills and starting entrepreneurship, they faced various external structural constraints well beyond their capabilities.

Solving problems around premarital pregnancy and abortion were challenges the XS largely rose to. Noticeably, this study found that religion served as a protective factor for the Shaanxi XS in that they had internalized the Catholic doctrine on virginity and chastity. They had less problems to solve regarding premarital pregnancy or sexual health and thus had better well-being. The premarital sex and abortion risk faced by millions of rural migrant women were addressed in a lot of the literature (Guo et al., 2015; He et al., 2012). This study revealed different findings due to the selection of a small group (n=12) of Catholic migrant women from Shaanxi; however, this study did not contradict the existence of these risks faced by the majority non-religious migrant women in China.

After migrating from the rural areas to the city, migrants have a significant need to express themselves in ways that are appropriate in the urban cultures and situations. Similar to Jacka’s (2006) findings in Beijing, most of the XS had little confidence in general and were silenced by their weakness in participating in urban ways of communication. Jacka found that rural migrant women in Beijing, in the context of Chinese culture, suffered from a lack of communication skills acquired in formal education which thus marked them as of lower status. This reason could also explain the findings in this study. Additionally, XS devalued their communication skills as they encountered much more diverse individuals and population groups in the urban context.

Most of the XS were doing well in interpersonal skills by purposefully establishing a rural migrant social network to gain emotional and social support in unfamiliar urban society. Their expanded social network helped them to cope with acculturation stress and negative emotions, coinciding Wen and Hanley’s (2015) findings on migrants in Shanghai. In addition, the network also served as the primary informal learning source for life skills. Therefore, we conclude that interpersonal skills matter greatly to the XS since the skills contribute to the establishment of the rural migrant social network and thus benefits their well-being.

The XS’ rural migrant social networks did not include non-kin urban residents. This is strongly related to the labor and residential segregation, difference in identity and socioeconomic status between migrants and the urban locals (Fan, 2004; Li, 2006; Yue et al., 2013), and less related to the migrants’ interpersonal skills. This study confirmed Zhu’s (2002) findings that the XS largely didn’t socially or psychologically adapt to the urban community. On one hand, Yue et al.’s (2013) research found if social networks included urban residents, it contributed greatly to the acculturation, socioeconomic and psychological integration of migrants. And better social integration meant higher life satisfaction, better physical health, and subjective well-being of Chinese internal migrants (Chen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). On the other hand, more social ties between the rural migrants and the urban locals also could expand rural migrant social networks, and resources to advance life skills learning.

In the literature, contradictory findings on the psychological well-being of migrants were published. Li et al. (2007) and Chen (2011) reported no significant difference in the psychological well-being of rural migrants and urban local residents in a rich eastern coastal province and in Beijing. However, Jiang et al. (2007) and Qiu et al. (2011) reported that the mental health of migrant workers in Western China (Chongqing and Chengdu) was significantly worse than the Chinese norm. In the current study, most of the XS did not report severe depressive symptoms or mental health problems but coped with stress through the rural migrant social network, relaxing activities and religious practice. Yet, the risk factors that caused negative emotions and stress remained real. Extremely long work hours for female factory workers was one big factor causing exhaustion and negative emotions. But they preferred long work hours because it meant higher pay. This is similar to Chen’s (2021) findings that part of the migrant workforce chose to work significantly longer hours in order to get economic integration.
These findings highlight the importance of applying emotional and stress-coping skills to counter the risk factors and maintain psychological well-being. This study also suggests providing counseling service and mentoring support to those who faced extreme family relationship conflict and failed to cope with their stress.

This study coincided with general findings in literature (e.g., Liu et al., 2016; Wen & Hanley, 2016) that the migrants received various types of support mainly from informal ties, but rarely from formal support networks. Liu et al. (2016) reported that Beijing migrant women’s needs for social support clustered around instrumental, informational, and emotional support, and that they were willing to seek formal support. Similarly, most of the migrant women in this study aspired to seek formal training support in forms of communication, occupational skills and a few wanted formal emotional support.

Schugurensky’s (2000) framework was used to analyze the nature and categories of the informal learning sources revealed in this study. It’s found that learning from social networks, work environment and religious activities were mostly incidental learnings and socialization, while learning from the Internet and books were mostly self-directed instrumental learnings. The participants in this study experienced much more socialization and incidental learning than self-directed learning. Despite the availability of books, smart phones and the Internet, most of the XS participants did not make full use of the available resources. A possible explanation was that they lacked the mindset of self-directed learning and the understanding of how to apply these learning resources. They did not engage in non-formal training of life skills because of a lack of knowledge and external accessibility regarding such opportunities.

In recent years, the Chinese central government has spent more effort on providing vocational training or community services for the migrants in order to empower the workforce and strengthen social solidarity. But very few of such programs have a special focus on life skills training. Recently, Yuan (2021) explored a pioneer vocational training program integrated with life skills education in Chengdu, China, and reported that such a program had empowering impact for young migrant women at intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral levels, and promoted their whole-person development. This study supported Yuan’s new findings that life skill training program integrated with workforce training.

This study also posits that the impact of life skills on well-being should not be exaggerated. We must truthfully, responsibly and ethically consider the many socioeconomic barriers and personal constraints. For example, the rural migrant women had limited and inadequate formal education in rural schools, lacked proper occupational training and entrepreneurial support, faced labor segregation, residential and social exclusion imposed by the local urban populations with local hukou status. Nelly Stromquist (2015) posited that education had been over-estimated as a pillar of social change, although it did have empowering impact. In the case of this study, informal learning should not be over-estimated. Nussbaum (2011) emphasized that there is a need for social/political/economic conditions to support “the development of internal capabilities—through education, resources to enhance physical and emotional health, support for family care and love, a system of education, and much more” (p. 21).

Conclusion

Probing into the rich migration experiences of 17 rural migrant women from central and northwest China from the perspective of life-skill and its learning, this study concludes that the migrant women had informally learned core life skills in their migration but only to a certain extent, and that their primary source was their mostly extant rural migrant social network.

This study proposed integrating life skill training programs with vocational training programs and community services for the migrant women to increase their capabilities and enhance their well-being. Regarding specific implications for such programs, this study forwards several suggestions: First, such programs should make maximum use of migrant’s social network for program outreach. Second, such programs should focus on the learning and practice of more varied communication, interpersonal and emotional, stress-coping skills—necessitating greater social integration with urban peers. Third, such programs should provide information and resources related to occupational training opportunities and systems as well as entrepreneurial support, such as micro-loans. Fourth, such programs should also pay attention to the sexual and reproductive health of migrant women by distributing correct information related to sexually transmitted infections, birth control and sexual health (WHO, 1997). In addition, this study suggests that the legal and structurally induced labor and social segregation of non-local rural and township migrants in cities be ameliorated by government action to promote the economic and social-cultural integration of the migrant population in the cities.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it elaborates the deep meaning of core life skills for migrant women and backs up numerous NGOs’ claims of the importance of life skills. It reveals what life skill the migrant women have learned informally and the primary informal learning sources, and thus discloses how the migrant women have achieved subjective well-being and life satisfaction, which enriches the migration literature. This study also contributes to the growing literature on social support and community service for the large internal Chinese migration by suggesting life skill program as a novel and effective way of social support.

Second, this study makes an original contribution by focusing on two understudied populations of new generation migrant women who migrated intra-provincially: one, women from poor, rural areas of western China; and two, women from comparatively more developed rural areas of central China. Their occupations cover both service sectors and
factory work. Most studies to date have focused on female migrants who have been located in China’s eastern hubs of global manufacturing rather than female migrants in central and western China. In addition, the Catholic background of the majority of the participants in this study adds diversified and extended knowledge about China’s migrant women.

Despite contributions, the limitations of the research were also recognized. The participants in this study only covered several occupations such as clothing factories and service sectors with a focus on the 18 to 29 age group, migrant women of other professions and different age groups may have different informal learning experiences that needs to be explored. Another possible limitation is that some other incidental learning or socialization might have happened in the XS’ work and life context, which might not have been identified due to the limits on research time for interviews and fieldwork observation. However, due to the long-term research relationship between the researcher and the majority of the participants and the use of multiple data collection method, we believe that this research has captured most of the key informal learning sources and types of life skill learning. The greatest limitation on this research, however unavoidable, is the structural context which restricts the aspirational horizon and sought-after achievements of rural women from poor backgrounds (see also Appadurai, 2004).

Future research is needed to investigate social mobility of migrants in relation to the intersection of legal and structural segregation and life skill learning of migrants. In future studies, male and female migrants should be included, and the results disaggregated could identify the role of gender in social mobility. Ultimately the distributional equality of social mobility will provide the basis for social stability in urbanization, so that individuals can enhance their well-being.

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Ethics Statement
In summer 2014, researchers of this study applied for Approval to Use Human Research Participants as Level I/Exempt from Annual review research. The Kent State University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved our application and assigned the following IRB number: 14-354.

ORCID iD
Shujuan Luo https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8863-0418

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