

Experiences and Coping of Adults with Death of Siblings during Childhood in Chinese Context: Implications for Therapeutic Interventions

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Abstract—The death of a sibling in childhood leads to significant impacts on both personal and family development of the surviving siblings, however, both short-term and long-term effects of sibling loss in Chinese societies such as Hong Kong have been inadequately documented in the literature. This paper explores the experience of encountering siblings' death during childhood with the use of semi-structured interviews. Through thematic analysis, the author explores the impacts on surviving siblings' emotions, coping styles, struggles and challenges and personal development. Furthermore, the influences on family dynamics are explored thoroughly, including the changes in family atmosphere, family roles, family relationship, family communication and parenting styles. More importantly, the author identifies (i) existing continuing bonds; (ii) crying; (iii) adequate social support; (iv) hiding own emotions as a gesture of protecting parents as the crucial elements pertinent to surviving siblings' successful adaptation in the face of sibling loss. In addition, "child-centered" and "family-centered" service implications of families with a sibling's death in a Chinese context are discussed.

Keywords—Surviving children, sibling's death, child-centered, family-centered.

I. INTRODUCTION

WITH the technological advancement and improvement in living conditions, there is a steady increase in the life expectancies at birth for both sexes [1]. There is a common misperception that the distance between children and death is the furthest among all the age groups. However, in reality, a child aged under 15 dies every 5 seconds in the world [2]. In Hong Kong, the number of children deaths was 216 in 2014 and the children mortality rate was 0.2% [3] with fatal disease as the major cause of death.

Apart from individual loss, child death also leads to loss of family members and causes direct influences on family composition, family dynamics and family communication. When talking about child death, people will unconsciously place the focus on the parents. However, at the same time, the surviving children in the family are also facing the loss of their irreplaceable siblings. With the focus on the well-being of the parents, surviving children became forgotten grievers whose grief and well-being are easily being neglected [4]-[7]. Siblings' death leads to long-term impacts on the personal growth and development of the surviving siblings [8]. Meanwhile, it creates unignorable impacts on the personality development and psychological growth of the surviving

children [9], [10]. In addition, the cause of suffering from mental illness in adulthood is closely correlated with the unresolved childhood bereavement [11]-[15].

Parental grief is a common focus in both scholar research and public concern domains. Yet, there is limited local and overseas research on the experience of loss of siblings from the perspective of surviving children [16].

The purpose of the research is to explore the subjective experience of bereaved adults who experienced siblings' death during childhood.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Impacts of Losing a Sibling during Childhood

Siblings play a variety of roles in fostering socialization and personal growth development, including attachment figures, learning partners, playmates, friends, consolation, protectors, competitors and antagonists [17]-[20]. In the face of a sibling's death, surviving siblings encounter a range of physiological, psychological and behavioral consequences [21], [22]. Physiologically, anorexia, stomachache, headache and somatic complaints are common after the death of a sibling [23]-[25]. Psychologically, surviving siblings experience strong feelings of anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, fear of intimacy [21], [26]-[30]. In addition, when a sibling dies, surviving siblings incline to isolate themselves. Surviving siblings feel fearful to express their grief to their peers at school as grief experience can alienate surviving siblings from their peers [25], [28]. Meanwhile, surviving siblings experience double loss after the sibling's death. Apart from losing a sibling, surviving siblings are easily neglected as parents also have to deal with their own grief and could not place much emphasis on the needs and grief of the surviving siblings [31], [32].

B. Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

Surviving siblings have to overcome four tasks to enable themselves to journey through grief and adapt to the life without the deceased, including accepting the reality of loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to an environment without the deceased and finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life [33].

C. Loss of Siblings as a Journey of Transformation Growth

Although loss of siblings leads to inevitable changes in both

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individuals and the whole family system [35], the experience of grief could be transformed into opportunities for growth. Surviving siblings could transform their grief experiences into learning opportunities, including loss strengthens faith, loss builds maturity, loss strengthens beliefs, loss builds love and community and loss transforms values [36].

TABLE I
 WORDEN'S FOUR TASKS OF MOURNING [33]

Tasks of Mourning	Parents' role
To accept the reality of loss	To allow surviving children to comprehend the concept of death and acknowledge siblings' loss, parents should use age appropriate language to explain that death is permanent and the deceased sibling will never come back.
To work through the pain of grief	When surviving siblings experience a variety of physiological, psychological and behavioral reactions, parents should facilitate surviving siblings to identify and express their grief reactions by different means.
To adjust to an environment without the deceased	Surviving siblings have to journey through three types of adjustments, including internal, external and spiritual adjustments. Externally, surviving siblings have to face the change of family roles and take on new responsibilities [34]. Internal adjustments include changes in self-concept and self-efficacy while spiritual adjustments include changes in meaning of life, personal beliefs and values.
To find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life	After adapting to the world without the physical presence of the deceased, surviving siblings are encouraged to strike a balance between remembering the deceased siblings and living a meaningful life.

D. The Social Construction of Death in Chinese Society

Under the influence of Chinese Culture, people are willing to talk about baby's birth openly, however, death is always a taboo. Although death is an inevitable stage of life, death is still a taboo in our society which restricts people to have an open discussion about death-related issues [7], [37]. With the belief of death as a taboo, surviving siblings are not allowed to mention about the deceased siblings at home [24]. In other words, surviving children have no chance to express their yearnings towards deceased siblings at home.

III. METHODOLOGY

Five adult participants who aged above 18 were recruited from the author's personal social network, in which purposeful sampling was applied in this research. The participants who experienced siblings' death during childhood were invited for an in-depth interview. Prior to the interview, participants were explained the purpose and the format of the research. Confidentiality and audio recording arrangement were highlighted. Consent to the interview was granted by the participants. A semi-structured interview guide including questions about the story of losing their deceased siblings, their copings in the face of siblings' loss, impacts of siblings' loss on their personal growth and their needs in the face of deceased siblings were used to structure the individual interview. All interviews which lasted approximately 1.5 hours each were conducted in Cantonese and audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

TABLE II
 PROFILE OF ADULT PARTICIPANTS

Participant/Background	G	C	K	Y	A
Sex	F	M	F	M	F
Age	33	24	25	29	45
Occupation	Social Worker		Civil Servant		Lecturer
No. of Siblings	3	2	2	3	5
Cause of Sibling's Death	TA	Suicide	Cancer	Cancer	TI
Age when sibling passed away	14	15	9	17	9

a. TA: Traffic Accident; TI: Terminal Illness

Thematic analysis [38] was applied in this research, supplemented with narrative analysis [39]. With mass data collected from the in-depth interview, the author first familiarized herself with the data. Followed by generating initial coding and highlighting key themes, the author then re-evaluated the themes and started to define and name the themes related to the research questions. This analysis identified six main themes: (1) emotions in the face of sibling loss; (2) copings with the death of siblings; (3) struggles when facing sibling's death; (4) impacts on personal growth and development when facing sibling loss; (5) impacts on the family after sibling's death; (6) surviving siblings' needs in the face of sibling's death. The above-mentioned themes are illustrated as follows using quotations from surviving siblings' interview, which the author translated into English. In addition, narrative analysis [39] is also supplemented in this analysis. Through the process of collecting and narrating life stories, participants' unique experiences could be recorded [40]. Through the interaction and conversation between interviewer and participant, participants could reorganize their life stories with the use of their own languages, so as to explore the meaning of their unique experiences [41]. Narrative analysis was applied to analyze two participants' unique experiences when facing the death of their siblings, meanwhile, so as to analyze their emotional reactions, challenges and personal growth in the face of siblings' death.

IV. EMERGING THEMES

A. Theme 1: Emotions in the face of sibling loss

Surviving siblings experience more negative feelings than positive feelings in the face of siblings' death. Two participants (Participant Y and K) felt relieved when witnessing the deaths of their siblings who had been tortured and suffered from illnesses for a long period of time. Two participants perceived that death of their siblings freed both deceased siblings and the family from sufferings and torture.

'It is really out of my expectation...that is...after my elder sister passed away, that burden which lasted for a long period of time also went away with my deceased elder sister. It is a relief for both my elder sister and us. My elder sister no longer had to suffer from pain anymore. We, as family, also no longer had to suffer anymore. Then, we all could have a better life with less suffering and pain.' (Participant Y).

‘But I viewed my elder brother’s death from another perspective. My elder brother had been tortured by cancer since small. It might be better for my elder brother to leave us as he did not need to be tortured by pain anymore, it might be more comfortable to him.’ (Participant K).

Five participants reveal a variety of negative emotions when their siblings passed away. Being emotionally out of control, guilt, sadness, helplessness, isolation and fear are the common negative emotions experienced by the surviving siblings.

‘When I learnt about my elder sister’s death, I realized that my elder sister left us already and I kept sitting beside my deceased elder sister...and then...I think I had never cried so hard like this before, I felt numbness over my body when I cried so hard.’ (Participant Y)

‘I doubted if I did not provide proper care to my younger brother. I really doubted myself....doubted that..doubted that if I am the one who caused my younger brother to die.’ (Participant A)

‘We were all immersed ourselves in sadness and depression at that time.’ (Participant C)

‘Apart from crying, I could not find another way to help myself.’ (Participant K).

‘In fact, I felt that I could not get along with others in class. I felt lonely, or even isolated myself unconsciously.’ (Participant Y)

B. Theme 2: Copings with the Death of Siblings

In the face of siblings’ death, surviving siblings have to overcome both internal and external adjustments [34]. Regarding internal adjustment, some of the participants revealed that when their siblings passed away, they lost a precious peer who accompanied and talked to them (Participant C, K and G). Meanwhile, surviving siblings have to overcome external adjustments. Some participants revealed that there were significant changes in family life and family structure when deceased siblings left them. In addition, they had to adjust to a family life without the deceased siblings.

‘I have to change my living habits. Since I was in high school, my elder sister had to use a ventilator support machine at home. Therefore, I could hear the sound of the ventilator support machine clearly, especially at night. At the night when my elder sister just passed away, all the family members could not sleep and it was very quiet at home without the sound of the ventilator support machine...We all had to get used to the change in the environment.’ (Participant Y)

Participants revealed that they found a number of effective coping ways to support them to overcome the difficult times, including emotional ventilation through crying, social support, creating continuing bonds with the deceased and hiding their own negative emotions in front of family members.

‘When learning about my elder brother’s death, although you had already anticipated his death, I really could not control my emotions and I had to ventilate my sadness and yearnings through crying.’ (Participant C)

‘I received social support from different people. The most effective way for me to overcome such a difficult

time was to talk to others. I loved sharing my thoughts and feelings to my friends and school social worker so that I could express my inner emotions openly. Meanwhile, I felt comforted when receiving feedback from others. Through communication, it was easier for me to accept the reality of loss. I was thankful that I received so much social support from my school social worker, girlfriend and friends. I realized the importance of companionship from my past experience.’ (Participant C)

‘I have habits of lighting a candle on his birthday every year. Also, my deceased elder brother loved yellow flowers and therefore, I also bought some flowers for him to celebrate his birthday. In addition, my deceased elder brother loved superman so much. When I go to Japan, I must buy Superman souvenirs for him. Although I don’t like superman, whenever I see something related to Superman, I would like to buy it for him as a way to remember my deceased elder brother.’ (Participant K)

‘After the death of my younger brother, I pretended to be calm and stable, so that I could take care of my mother who was deeply depressed and had been crying for the whole day. When I saw my mother crying, I realized that I must be tough and calm to avoid creating further burden on my mother and to comfort my mother.’ (Participant G)

C. Theme 3: Struggles When Facing Sibling’s Death

In the face of siblings’ loss, meanwhile, parents are also experiencing intense emotional distress. Therefore, in order to avoid causing a burden on depressed parents, surviving siblings tend to hide their grief and avoid disclosing their own emotions.

‘I hid myself in my room and cried during the night. I did not want my parents to worry about my condition. They have already lost a child and I did not want to intensify their emotional burden’ (Participant K)

In addition, many of the surviving siblings were deprived of the opportunity to participate in the after-death arrangement of the deceased siblings. Parents believed that excluding surviving siblings from participation in after-death arrangement is a way of protecting surviving siblings. Most of the surviving siblings were not involved in the discussion and decision-making process of the deceased’s after-death arrangement, such as cause of death, funeral arrangement and memorial ceremony. Therefore, surviving siblings were confused and uncertain about the loss of siblings.

‘There were a lot of administrative procedures when someone passes away. Even though I was 14 years old and able to assist, I was told not to ask or assist in the after-death arrangement. Instead, what I could do was to wait and to be informed to attend the funeral. I felt so helpless during the process as I could do nothing to say goodbye to my siblings.’ (Participant G)

‘I was informed that my elder brother passed away two days after his death. I did not have a chance to see him for the last time before he left, which was definitely a big regret to me for the rest of my life. I had a lot of queries about my elder brother’s death as I did not have the chance to witness.’ (Participant K)

Therefore, from the above experiences, excluding surviving siblings from participation in after-death arrangement could not protect them, it leads to confusion, uncertainty and regret to them instead.

Dealing with family members' emotional distress is also one of the greatest challenges to the surviving siblings. Although witnessing parents having intense emotional distress due to loss of siblings, surviving siblings encountered difficulty in discussing and responding to siblings' death with parents.

'Although I realized that my father was greatly depressed, my father would not display any emotional reactions in front of us. Discussion about deceased elder sister became a taboo in the family. I was unsure if my parents were ready to discuss it or not. I was afraid to bring up the topic of my deceased elder sister at home.' (Participant Y)

'What I could do was to allow my mother to ventilate her emotional distress. However, I did not know how to respond to my mother's feelings. I could only keep nodding my head to show that I was listening and attending to her.' (Participant G)

D. Theme 4: Impacts on Personal Growth and Development When Facing Sibling Loss

Loss of a sibling leads to a crisis to a family, meanwhile, it could also be transformed into a growth opportunity. After going through a family crisis, surviving siblings experienced developmental growth, such as reflection on top priority in life, building resilience and transformation of experience.

Experiencing loss of a loved one enables surviving siblings to reflect on their own top priority in life. Most of the surviving siblings realized the importance of their family.

'I was greatly influenced by the loss of my elder brother. I should be filial to my mother as she was my only family member. In the past, my elder brother shared the responsibility of taking care of my mother with me. However, my mother and I had to depend on each other. I had to place my family as a top priority.' (Participant C)

'When I learnt that my elder sister had almost come to the end of her life, I decided to give up my study. At that moment, I decided to spend all my effort, time and commitment on my family.' (Participant Y)

After going through such a difficult time, surviving siblings were able to cultivate resilience in the face of adversity and to become a more mature and resilient person with empathy.

'I thought it was a growth process. Everyone must come across life and death in life, I just experienced siblings' death earlier than my peers. To a certain extent, I thought I was more mature than my peers after the incident.' (Participant C)

Being able to transform experience facilitates surviving siblings to get out of the sorrow of sibling's death. Surviving siblings who successfully transformed their experience felt grateful to share their feelings and insights with someone who shared similar experience. Participant C was even inspired to become a social worker in his future career.

'When encountering someone with family suffering

from terminal illness or a critical condition, my concrete experience could assist them in overcoming the difficult time and being their companion.' (Participant Y)

'I would like to become a social worker as I experienced the power of companionship and sharing of thoughts and feelings.' (Participant C)

E. Theme 5: Impacts on the Family after Sibling's Death

Loss of siblings leads to negative impacts on the family dynamics, including family atmosphere, family roles, family interaction and ways of parenting.

After a sibling's death, the surrounding atmosphere within the family is very heavy which greatly influences the emotions of the family members.

'I was very puzzled and the atmosphere was greatly influenced. All of our emotions fluctuated a lot at that time, which lasted for 3 to 4 years.' (Participant Y)

'All of us were immersed into a depressed atmosphere.' (Participant C)

In addition, loss of siblings potentially became a catalyst of poor family relationships. Some participants reported that loss of siblings became a trigger point of worsening family relationships, provided that there were deficits in family communication and dynamics before siblings passed away (Participant A, C and G).

'There were more conflicts among us and we became more distant with our relatives. After the death of my younger brother, apart from the existing family relationship problem, it triggered more family problems popping out.' (Participant A)

'Family members tended to blame each other. After the loss of siblings, my father indeed perceived it was my mother's fault. My father blamed that my mother did not provide proper care to my elder sister.' (Participant C)

Meanwhile, loss of siblings could also serve as a protective factor of strengthening family relationships.

'I had more time to spend with my father. In the past, he always stayed at the hospital to accompany my elder brother. My father could have more time staying at home and I could have a closer relationship with my father.' (Participant K)

'As my mother was my only family member now, we now relied on each other. Our relationship became closer.' (Participant C)

Apart from change in family relationship and atmosphere, loss of siblings also leads to changes in family communication. All of the participants reported that deceased siblings-related issues became a taboo in the family. Although loss of siblings is an undeniable fact, family members are evasive to mention about deceased siblings with other family members. Parents rarely explained the reason of siblings' death to the surviving siblings and would not discuss and explore surviving siblings' emotional condition.

'My parents did not bring me to view my deceased brother and no one explained what was happening to my younger brother. There was no one comforting me. My parents did not manage our emotions as they perceived

that we were not affected by our younger brother's death.' (Participant A)

'All along these years after my elder sister's death, all of us rarely reveal our emotions in front of each other as all of us knew that it was a taboo in our family.' (Participant C)

'No one dared to bring out the discussion of the deceased younger brother.' (Participant A)

In addition, ways of parenting are also influenced after experiencing loss of siblings. Two participants reported that their parents became very anxious and focused on the care of the surviving children (Participant A and G).

'My mother then placed all her attention on the health condition and every word and deeds of our family members. She became very anxious and stressed.' (Participant A)

Apart from being aware of the family changes caused by loss of siblings, we also have to pay special care to the needs of surviving siblings arising from loss of siblings.

TABLE III
 NEEDS OF THE SURVIVING SIBLINGS

Needs of surviving siblings arising from loss of siblings	Details of needs
Tangible Support	1. Information on after-death arrangement 2. Career support services
Emotional counselling	1. Emotional counselling for individual family member 2. Family meeting
Accompany and Space	1. Social worker's and extended family members' accompany 2. Space for expressing emotions and being listened
Facilitation of family communication	1. Open platform for discussion about deceased siblings.
Participation in the after-death arrangement of the deceased sibling	1. Attend ceremony 2. Being involved in after-death arrangement preparation

In the face of siblings' loss, surviving family members not only have to deal with their own emotional turmoil, they also have to manage deceased siblings' after-death arrangement which involves complicated administrative procedures. Participants shared the importance of tangible support to surviving family members to reduce their stress level.

'It was the first time for us to encounter a loved one's death and we had very limited knowledge and information about the after-death arrangement. It was important for us to be given information about application procedures of the death certificate and financial assistance of burial expenses.' (Participant Y)

Secondly, surviving siblings also expressed the need of emotional counselling. Each family member encountered complicated feelings in the face of sibling's death. Participants raised the need of both individual and family counselling to assist them in managing their grief.

'I thought there should be someone to listen to my mother and to be understood. We did not know how to start up a discussion about our deceased elder sister with my mother and therefore, she had no ways to ventilate her sadness and yearnings. Meanwhile, my father was always

a silent person. Although I noticed that my father had some emotions, I did not know how to help him.' (Participant Y)

'I preferred to have an individual session at the very beginning as I did not feel comfortable to disclose all my feelings and thoughts to my family members at the beginning. I thought I could better ventilate my emotions without the presence of other family members.' (Participant C)

Apart from being understood and listened to, companionship and both psychological and physical space were of paramount importance to surviving siblings, allowing them to ventilate their inner emotions and express yearnings to their deceased siblings.

'After my elder brother passed away, I realized the importance of companionship. When there was someone to accompany me during difficult times, he or she could give me a certain extent of support. The most memorable moment for me was when my school social worker escorted me to visit my elder brother at the hospital every time. I felt more comforted and peaceful with my school social worker's accompany.' (Participant C)

'I was forced to accept the loss of my elder sister, however, I had no way to express my yearnings towards my beloved elder sister.' (Participant Y)

Mentioning deceased siblings becomes a taboo within the family, family members lack an open platform to express and understand how others feel in the face of loss of siblings. Participant K was keen on social worker's intervention to facilitate the family to have an open discussion.

'I wished for a space for all of us to discuss our feelings and thoughts regarding the loss of our beloved sibling. I did not have to guess how others feel, however, I felt embarrassed to bring up the topic. Therefore, if there was a social worker, he or she could facilitate or guide us to express our worries and yearnings.' (Participant K)

Apart from open communication about deceased siblings, participation in after-death arrangement could allow surviving siblings to have more solid experience with less regrets.

'I truly thought it was my greatest regret that I could not say goodbye to my elder brother. When reviewing the whole experience, viewing the body and saying last goodbye to my elder brother mean a lot to me.' (Participant K)

'I wonder if children could attend the memorial ceremony indeed. However, I was afraid to ask my parents for approval. As a child, parents had to involve surviving siblings in the memorial ceremony to make it complete during the growth journey. For me who could not say the last goodbye to my elder brother, it was a pity for me that I could not attend the last part of his life. It was a regret to me.' (Participant G)

V. TRANSFORMATION OF EXPERIENCE

To go through tough times, it is important for surviving siblings to transform grief into an opportunity to grow and move forward in life. From the growth story of Participant C, it reveals that loss builds maturity and loss transforms value [56].

TABLE IV
 PARTICIPANT C: STORY OF POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH [39]

Main parts of Labov's model	Details
Abstract	Elder brother was deteriorating and dying at hospital
Orientation	Elder brother was found to hang himself in the bathroom.
Complicated Actions	Called the police-->Burst into tears--> hospitalization-->all the time were spent on rushing around school and hospital--> found to be deconditioning during visit--> failed to resuscitate-->witnessed the death of elder brother
Evaluation	1. Feeling tortured about rushing around school and hospital during elder brother's hospitalization 2. Feeling anxious when receiving calls from the hospital 3. Terrible shock to mother who had poor social support network 4. Participant C wished to adapt to the loss of elder brother as soon as possible, so that he could take care of his mother. 5. Social support could assist surviving family members to go through the loss of the elder brother.
Result/Coda	With the social support from friends and girlfriend, participant C went through the tough time successfully. Meanwhile, the responsibility of taking care of his mother also became his motivating factor.

When elder brother was found to hang himself in the bathroom, it was a terrible shock to both participant C and his mother. Although elder brother was not certified dead upon arrival at hospital, he was in coma during his last week of life. Participant C was told that there was nil active treatment for his elder brother and there was no sign of recovery. However, participant C still held out hope that elder brother might still survive. Therefore, participant C kept rushing around the hospital and school during elder brother's hospitalization. He felt extremely tortured and anxious at that time as he had to keep a close eye on his mobile phone around the clock. He was afraid that he had missed any calls from the hospital. He was also worried that he would be informed about elder brother's death when he received every single call from the hospital. When the elder brother was certified dead, participant C could not suppress his emotions anymore. Instead, he burst into tears. From the story of participant C, it clearly revealed the torture and uncertainty experienced by family members when beloved family member was deteriorating and dying.

During the torturing week, the companion of the school social worker, friends and girlfriend was the protective factor to assist participant C in overcoming the tough time. Meanwhile, change in family role also becomes a motivating factor to encourage participant C to get rid of the sorrow of his elder brother's death as he took up the responsibility of taking care of his mother. Filial piety is an essential moral value in Chinese culture. Therefore, with a poor social support network, participant C was motivated to assist his mother in going through the pain and meanwhile, he became a more mature and resilient person to succeed his elder brother's family role. Participant C could successfully transform his grief into a valuable growth opportunity in his life by reflecting his life

values. From his life story, it revealed that loss built maturity and loss transformed values.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Cultural Influences on Siblings' Death

Chinese traditional culture is deeply rooted in the society and it inevitably influences how we respond to siblings' death. Confucianism advocates that the best interest of the family should be the top priority and harmonious family relationship is the most important element of individual happiness [42]. From the stories of Participants A and Y, when surviving siblings took the initiative to talk about deceased siblings, it led to parental distress reactions, such as crying consistently. Therefore, surviving siblings were frightened that their discussion about deceased siblings would create further harm on their parents which possibly led to family disharmony. In order to protect their parents and become parents' burden, surviving siblings inclined to hide their grief reactions [29] which turned to be a forgotten grievers [4], [5] as their grief was usually overshadowed by parental grief.

Deeply influenced by Confucianism, death has become something of a taboo subject [37]. From the experiences of the participants, apart from being a taboo in the general public, death is also a taboo within a family. Family members are evasive to talk about the deceased siblings. Being a taboo, it severely hinders surviving siblings and their family members to have an open communication about the deceased siblings by sharing their own feelings and thoughts [37]. Being influenced by the social norm, surviving siblings are deprived of the opportunity to express their yearnings towards the deceased siblings [24].

B. Personal Growth and Siblings' Death

The focus of the past local researches mainly is the negative impacts on surviving siblings and the family caused by siblings' death. There is very limited literature highlighting the personal growth experienced by the surviving siblings. The finding of this research is the personal growth and changes experienced by the surviving siblings. The experience of losing beloved siblings is an important life lesson in their growth journey [43]. The transformation of grief experience is a golden growth opportunity for surviving siblings in their life journey. From the life stories of the participants, we witnessed that loss strengthened faith, loss built maturity, loss strengthened beliefs, loss built love and community and loss transformed values [36]. In the face of such terrible shock, participants G, A, Y and C learnt to be a more resilient and mature person with greater independence, perseverance, motivation and problem solving ability. Meanwhile, after experiencing siblings' death, surviving siblings were given a chance to reflect on their life priority by recognizing the importance of family in their life and life values.

C. Involvement in After-Death Arrangement

Parents usually perceive that surviving siblings are too young to be involved in after-death arrangement, therefore, parents feel uncertain and uneasy to decide if it is appropriate to involve

surviving siblings in the after-death arrangement. Parents express worries that surviving siblings will have negative emotions during the process, such as feeling frightened and depressed [44]. In reality, surviving siblings raise the importance of participation in after-death arrangement. Participants A, K and G expressed a strong desire to be involved in the decision-making process of deceased siblings' after-death arrangement [44]. In addition, they also expressed the need of boosting the information transparency related to the deceased siblings [45], [46] to allow them to have better understanding and preparation of accepting the loss of siblings [47].

Engagement in grief rituals, such as remembrance ceremonies and sharing of stories of the deceased siblings is a therapeutic act [48] which facilitates the grief process of the surviving siblings [49] to cope with the loss and grief adjustment. For participants G and C, they could process their loss during the funeral ceremony by reviewing the precious moment spent with their deceased siblings and sending the last wish and saying goodbye to their deceased siblings. During the funeral ceremony, the surviving siblings were allowed to express their feelings and thoughts openly, meanwhile, they could also receive social support and comfort from others [50].

D. Continuing Bond between Surviving Siblings and Deceased Siblings

From the experience of the participants, continuing bond assists surviving siblings in accepting and adjusting the loss of deceased siblings [51]. Acknowledging the loss of deceased siblings does not represent the termination of sibling relationship [52]. Continuing bond serves as a consolation to the surviving siblings [29]. Participants K and Y revealed that they still maintained self-talk with their deceased siblings in their hearts even though they were not physically present to maintain continuing bonds with their deceased siblings. Whenever they encountered critical life stages and special occasions, participants K and Y had habits of sharing the special moments with their deceased siblings. Surviving siblings were able to maintain a continuing bond with the deceased siblings by catching up and reaffirming [26].

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

When reviewing the process of witnessing siblings' death, it could be observed that the pain and complicated feelings experienced by surviving siblings were beyond expression. From the stories of participants, unresolved grief will lead to longitudinal impacts on both personal growth and family relationship development if grief has not been resolved. Therefore, child-centered and family-centered counselling and community education services should be advocated.

A. Child-centered Social Work Intervention

In the face of sibling loss, both adults and children encounter complicated emotions and express yearnings to their beloved one. However, influenced by Chinese traditional culture, parents are inclined to avoid discussion about the deceased siblings with surviving siblings as a way of protecting the surviving siblings, to prevent surviving siblings from having

emotional distress. However, all participants perceived that they had the right to be informed and involved in the process. Therefore, parents should use age-appropriate language to explain the process of saying last goodbye to the deceased siblings with reference to children's cognitive development. Parents could then assist surviving siblings in transforming the grief experience into growth opportunity. In addition, parents should invite surviving siblings to participate in deceased siblings' after-death arrangement according to their wish by allowing them to have different extent and forms of participation.

B. Family-Centered Social Work Intervention

In the face of sibling loss, every single family member has to encounter unexpected family changes and challenges, leading to an inevitable shock to the family dynamic. Therefore, family-centered social work intervention is of paramount importance to place emphasis on the interactions among individuals, family and the environment [53]. Perceiving death as a taboo, discussion about deceased siblings becomes an invisible barrier to all family members. To avoid evoking unresolved grief reactions, family members choose to be silent. To facilitate the family overcoming adjustment successfully, an open platform for family communication and enhancement of social support plays indispensable roles.

By offering an open platform, every single family member could express their thoughts and feelings in a carefree environment to facilitate mutual support among family members [20]. It is important for family members to realize that they could share their own emotional distress and adjustment difficulties with each other frankly, so that they could transform individual experience into common experience owned by all family members. Sharing grief experience and reviewing memory with the deceased sibling is a therapeutic process [43].

Apart from open platforms, social support also acts as a catalyst to adjust grief reactions. In the face of a sibling's death, the family has to manage a lot of complicated administrative procedures of after-death arrangement. Tangible support, such as legal advice, application of death certificate, choosing funeral service company, respite child care service and financial assistance and counselling service are critical factors to assist surviving family members in overcoming crisis in life. From the stories of participants, social workers' accompany also plays a crucial role in facilitating surviving siblings to overcome grief. Social worker accompanies surviving family members to look for suitable resources, inform relatives about the news of death, arrange a funeral ceremony and pack the remains of the deceased. Social workers were able to provide both physical and psychological space and time for the family members to express yearnings to the deceased.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The limitation of this research should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. Only five surviving siblings participated in the research. However, the author could conduct in-depth research with limited samples [54]. In addition, to enhance the reliability and validity of the research, triangulation

was applied in the research [55]. Multiple data collection methods were applied, such as interview transcript, literature review and theory to maintain objectivity and avoid bias with qualitative data analysis.

This research advances our knowledge and understanding of surviving siblings by exploring the experience of losing a beloved sibling during childhood. It also offers insights into the needs of surviving siblings and development of child-centered and family-centered social work interventions to assist surviving siblings and the family to live with grief and transform grief experience into growth opportunity.

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