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Navigating the world of work: experiences and perspectives of care leavers in China

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the employment experiences of care leavers in China, addressing a gap in understanding their transition into the workforce. Through qualitative interviews with 19 participants, five distinct work pathways were identified: (i) placement approach – typical, (ii) placement approach – typical plus, (iii) self-job-searching approach – typical, (iv) self-job-searching approach – typical plus, and (v) self-job-searching approach – typical ‘on the way.’ The findings highlight care leavers’ proactive roles in navigating their employment journeys, yet also reveal challenges such as educational setbacks, insufficient work skills, lack of support, and societal discrimination, particularly against those with physical impairments. Enhanced support systems are essential.

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Introduction

Care leavers in China

There exists a lack of consensus on the terminology used to describe individuals who have experienced care during childhood and subsequently transition into society as young adults. In the United States, this population is commonly referred to as youth aging out of care, while European countries prefer the term ‘care leaver’ (Stein et al., 2011). In the Chinese context, however, they are often categorized by individual’s physiological or demographic characteristics, known as older/adult orphans or orphaned and disabled young people (Yin, 2024a). Despite this, the paper also adopts ‘care leavers’ as the author believe it can aid in destigmatization and address negative stereotypes associated with this group of people. Specifically, unlike those leaving family foster care in Western contexts, care leavers in this paper primarily refer to young people who have had lived experiences in childcare institutions¹ and have already left these out-of-home care settings. Individuals leaving other forms of alternative care officially recognized in China, including family foster care, kinship care, and adoption, will not be involved.

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According to recent government data, there are 53,302 children and young people living in 539 such childcare institutions, known as *ertong fuliyuan* or *shehui fuliyuan* (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). These institutions are typically state-funded, with childcare practices provided by paid staff in a campus-like environment and limited freedom to leave (Chen, 2019). Most of the care receivers are orphans, resulting from abandonment (often due to congenital disease/disability) or bereavement (Shang et al., 2008). Welfare provided to the residents in recent years ranges from food, clothing, and shelter to educational opportunities, free medical care, and monthly living allowances (Shang & Fisher, 2017). However, they are required to leave care at the age of 18 unless they are receiving formal education. Estimates suggest that approximately 10,000 to 20,000 young people leave care each year in China, based on the percentage of age cohorts and the total number of care receivers (Shang & Li, 2015). Nonetheless, the precise total of this demographic remains unknown.

Transitioning from care to independent living constitutes a critical milestone for young people worldwide, representing a pivotal moment in their journey toward adulthood. However, for care leavers—individuals who age out of the foster care or institutional care system—this transition often results in negative outcomes. These often include lower academic attainment, reduced employment opportunities, housing instability, mental health issues, and social exclusion (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018; Harder et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2022; Pinkerton & McCrea, 1999; Sacker et al., 2021; Stein & Dumaret, 2011; Stein et al., 2000; Yin, 2024b). Additionally, they are overrepresented among the homeless population and are more likely to be involved in incarceration and suicide (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2022). Furthermore, additional risk factors affect those living in out-of-home care settings. Some argue that long-term residence in institutions, compared to other care provisions, increases the likelihood of numerous challenges for children and young people, including poor physical health, delayed language development, neurodevelopmental problems, emotional and behavioral disorders, and difficulties in social integration (Frank et al., 1996; Hope and Homes for Children, 2019; Parker & Nelson, 2005; Petrowski et al., 2017; Šiška & Beadle-Brown, 2020). In the context of China, institutional living experiences also reflect isolation, and young people's educational needs are often unintentionally or intentionally neglected (Chen, 2011). While transitioning out of care, they typically have limited or no support from the formal systems (Yin, 2024a). These characteristics further compound the obstacles to achieving more fulfilling outcomes for young people after leaving care. Often, due to this, a number of young people who have passed the upper age limit and, although healthy, remain trapped in childcare institutions (Chen, 2020; Xia, 2013).

Work participation for care leavers

This paper examines care leavers' navigation in the world of work. Generally, work participation is critical to individuals due to its provision of substantial individual and societal benefits, including financial independence, social networks, self-esteem, and community involvement (Vickerstaff et al., 2011). However, care leavers in Western contexts often experience unemployment, underemployment, and low wages compared to the general population (Courtney et al., 2001; Johansson et al., 2024). Although meaningful work experience before leaving care, such as part-time jobs, practical and emotional support from other adults, such as carers, and strong self-motivation are essential for care leavers' prospective career success (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015), many may be unable to benefit from such protective factors. Substantial research has shown that they often face multiple barriers to employment, including limited access to education and training opportunities, stigma and discrimination, mental health challenges, and a lack of stable housing and social support networks (Dworsky et al., 2012; Göbel et al., 2021; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). These factors often create significant obstacles to finding and keeping a job, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Furthermore, critics argue that young people's lack of encouragement, resources, and capacity to realistically plan for the job they want contributes to their difficulties in accessing satisfactory work status after leaving care (Tilbury et al., 2011).

Concerning the employment sector for care leavers in China, similar challenges exist. They often find it difficult to gain access to the world of work on their own due to a lack of qualifications and disabilities (Xia, 2013; Zhu & Yu, 2009). However, the policy and practice support intended to enhance their employability are either missing or inadequately addressed (Shang & Fisher, 2017; Yin, 2024a). Even if some care leavers enter the workplace, they often end up with low-paying jobs due to low skills and may prefer to conceal their care identity from employers and coworkers due to concerns about discrimination and stigmatization (Chen, 2011; Yao & Liu, 2018; Zhu, 2018). As a result, the quality of their post-care life is highly concerning. Despite these challenges being widespread, work experiences for care leavers may still vary. Scholars note that some care leavers in China, although a small number, have taken advantage of government-assigned job opportunities, while a few are self-employed and lead a comparatively satisfactory post-care life (Shang & Li, 2015).

The current study

However, previous studies have primarily focused on what has happened, lacking in-depth exploration of how young care leavers plan, negotiate, access,

remain, or are rejected in the world of work. Simultaneously, the perspectives of care leavers on work are rarely discussed. Inspired by this, the current paper seeks to examine the work experiences of care leavers and their perspectives on work, focusing on the context of China. The central research question of this paper is: “How do care leavers in China navigate their pathways to the world of work?” The work pathway here represents a collection of care leavers’ trajectories and changes in negotiating formal and paid jobs, while temporary and voluntary work experiences are discussed to a lesser extent in this paper. Understanding their perspectives on work can enable the provision of tailored employment support to this group of individuals, while examining the work pathways of care leavers is essential for promoting social justice and equity. By uncovering the root causes of these disparities and advocating for policy changes and supportive services, we can work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable labor market for all young people, regardless of their care background.

Methods

Research design

This study is qualitative in nature. It adopts a constructionist ontology, which views the minds of young people as the source of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge production in this study is based on interpretation and understanding, thus embracing an interpretivist epistemology. The qualitative approach is well-suited for exploring and elucidating meanings, personal experiences, identities, and social phenomena (Mills & Birks, 2014). It holds particular significance in uncovering lesser-known aspects of the lives of marginalized populations (Squire et al., 2014).

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study, which involved human participants, was obtained from the university ethics committee with which the author was affiliated. The study adhered to the approved ethical guidelines, with the author thoroughly explaining the research aims, objectives, voluntary participation, benefits, and potential risks to all participants prior to each interview. Written consent was obtained from each participant, along with the assurance of their right to withdraw at any stage—before, during, or after participation.

Sampling and participants

Fieldwork was conducted in the inland provinces of China in 2021, including Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei. Initially, childcare institutions were targeted as the

main recruitment sites in the hope that they maintained contact with care leavers. However, it turned out that only a limited number of young people had grown up in those institutions, while a larger proportion had been adopted or passed away at an early age. Additionally, staff members informed the author that many leavers wished to disconnect from the childcare institution after their departure. Consequently, he resorted to contacting those who were most accessible, a method known as convenience sampling. Nevertheless, since the author could only access a few ‘visible’ or ‘contactable’ leavers in this way, there was a need to also rely on snowball sampling, where participants are referred to him.

Individuals were eligible to participate in this study if they had previously lived in care and possessed work experience. This combination of sampling tactics resulted in a total of 19 participants, comprising eight females and 11 males (see [Table 1](#)). Among them, three participants who had aged over the care age (18) but were still residing in care at the time of data collection, were included to enrich the sample pool; only seven were not disabled. The mean age of the participants was 33 years, with the average age of first employment at approximately 20, ranging from 14 to 27 years old. Seven participants had dropped out of school, while five had pursued higher education, and the remaining seven had completed secondary education. Most participants had multiple formal job experiences, although some experienced frequent workplace and career changes, making it difficult to determine the exact number of jobs they had held. With the exception of two unemployed participants, the rest were employed in various fields, with four currently employed in the child care system as kitchen staff, caregivers, or office clerks.

Data collection

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants the freedom to discuss significant issues or topics of interest (Carless & Douglas, 2017). Prior to each interview, the research team established discussion points, with researchers actively generating follow-up questions during the interviews (Wengraf, 2001). Given the benefits of remote interviews—including time and cost efficiency, expanded participant diversity, and enhanced anonymity—all interviews were conducted remotely via WeChat audio calls (Gruber et al., 2021; Oltmann, 2016). Throughout the interviews, the author explored participants’ experiences and perspectives related to their engagement in the world of work. Example interview questions included: “Could you please talk about your stories related to work? What does work mean to you? What is your current status? What happened? What did you do? How did you manage it? Could you please tell me more about your stories



Table 1. Overview of participant demographics, educational attainment, work experiences and family life experiences.

Participants	Age	Gender	Health condition	Educational attainment: achieved or in progress	Number of formal jobs	Age of finding the first formal job	Current job	Working for the care system?	Age of first marriage	Age of first child	Number of children	Current marriage status
CL03	38	F	Hand impairment	Primary school dropout	1	Approx. 18	Caregiver	Yes	25	26	2	Married
CL04	33	F	Non-disabled	Junior high school	Over 7	16	Homemaker	No	21	23	1	Married
CL05	22	M	Penis deformity	Vocational school diploma	2	20	Food deliveryman	No	null	null	0	Single
CL06	33	M	Non-disabled	Junior high school diploma	out of number	16	Factory worker	No	null	null	0	Single
CL07	29	M	Non-disabled	Junior college diploma	out of number	14	Barista	No	null	null	0	Single
CL08	27	M	Polio (difficult walking)	Undergraduate degree	3	22	Laid off	No	null	null	0	Single
CL09	39	F	Eye deformity	Vocational school diploma	2	23	Clerk	Yes	28	29	1	Married
CL10	38	F	Spine deformity	Primary school dropout	2	22	homemaker	No	24	25	2	Married
CL11	39	F	Non-disabled	Vocational school diploma	2	19	Nurse	No	25	26	2	Married
CL12	34	M	Non-disabled	Junior college diploma	3	23	Auxiliary police	No	27	29	1	Married
CL13	40	M	Visual impairment	Vocational school diploma	2	20	Massager	No	null	35	1	Broke up
CL14	31	F	Non-disabled	Vocational school dropout	3	20	Massager	No	18	18	1	Divorced
CL15	35	M			5	20	Cleaner	No	null	null	0	Single

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Participants	Age	Gender	Health condition	Educational attainment: achieved or in progress	Number of formal jobs	Age of finding the first formal job	Current job	Working for the care system?	Age of first marriage	Age of first child	Number of children	Current marriage status
CL16	31	M	Polio (difficult walking) Non-disabled	Primary school dropout Junior high school diploma	out of number	16	security staff	No	null	null	0	Single
CL18	35	F	Cleft lip and palate	Primary school dropout	Over 5	16	Caregiver	Yes	20	21	3	Divorced
CL24	27	M	Cleft lip and palate	Junior college diploma	1	22	Factory specialist	No	null	null	0	Single
CS03	27	M	Cleft lip and palate; polio (difficult walking)	Uneducated	1	23	Laid off	No	null	null	0	Single
CS06	29	M	heart disease	Vocational school diploma	1	20	Kitchen staff	Yes	null	null	0	Single
CS10	34	F	Leg impairment (difficult walking)	Junior college diploma	3	27	Accountant	No	null	null	0	Single

Note: (i) Considering confidentiality and anonymity, here applies pseudonyms. The abbreviation "CL" refers to "Care Leave" – people who have left care experience; "CS" means "Care stayer" – people who are over 18 years old but still living in care. The number contains no semantical value.
 (ii) The age was calculated by the birth year that was reported by each participant in the fieldwork (2021).
 (iii) "Out of number"– Some participants have had many job and direction changes in the workplace, but they failed to recall the exact number of how many jobs they have done.

related to work? How do you feel about your present status? How do you feel about your experience?”

Data analysis

To address the research question, interview data—consisting of rich narratives—underwent systematic processing using the six-step thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and ultimately, producing a comprehensive thematic report. As no predetermined codes exist in the literature, this study’s thematic analysis is entirely inductive and data-driven. Data were interpreted at a semantic level, with themes identified within the explicit meanings of the data, as the author did not explore beyond participants’ interview responses. Throughout the process, the author developed empirical codes instead of relying on established codes from existing theory and literature. Full words and short phrases were the primary codes in the analysis, capturing vivid trajectories, events, and work changes for participants of this study. Subsequently, themes were created by categorizing similar collections of codes. Furthermore, participant quotations were included to demonstrate the themes’ prevalence and validity. Additionally, the author summarized and highlighted select life stories of young people to enhance understanding of themes, codes, and data extracts. All information from the participants’ stories was derived from interview transcripts, which the author then paraphrased in a profile-like style. Specifically, these profiles detail the key milestones and changes in a person’s work experiences. The findings section will present themes, codes, quotations, and life stories in the order identified in this study.

Findings

Considering the different paths by which participants first entered the world of work and their varying levels of work stability, five types of work pathways have been identified: (i) placement approach – typical pathway, (ii) placement approach – typical pathway *plus*, (iii) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway, (iv) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway *plus*, (v) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway ‘*on the way*’. The term ‘typical’ refers to a relatively stable working status with few changes in career direction and workplace, while the adverb ‘plus’ describes an extended process for participants to find stability in the world of work. ‘on the way’ indicates a state of unemployment for care-experienced participants at the time of data collection. Descriptions of each pathway, along with representative life stories and participant perspectives, will follow in subsequent sections.

Placement approach - typical pathway

Participants following this pathway secured their first formal job within the childcare system and have remained steadily employed at the same place (Figure 1). This group consists of three participants (two females). Two completed vocational education, while one attended primary school for only one academic year. A common characteristic among them is that all were born with physical impairments or serious congenital diseases, which likely explains their abandonment and subsequent care experiences. Consequently, this condition left participants feeling powerless to undertake independent job searches. Their health conditions limited their competitiveness and ability to participate broadly in the workforce. Additionally, environmental factors like stigma and discrimination further exacerbated this exclusion. Consequently, working for the institution became a last resort, as they have relied on the care system for job placement and viewed it as a more viable alternative:

It's hard to find work for people like me who don't have hands. The only solution is (to rely on) fuliyuan². (CL03)

My body still harbors some hidden dangers even though I had heart surgery. That's to say I can't do heavy labor work and probably can't go out to work. Then I went back to the institution and hoped they would find me a job, after all, I belong to fuliyuan. (CS06)

Although their work positions may have changed over the years, their recent roles include caregiver, office clerk, and kitchen staff.

Due to the work arrangements, participants following this pathway expressed significant gratitude toward the childcare system. Despite the low salaries associated with institution-arranged jobs, they also reported satisfaction with their employment status, valuing the intrinsic sense of worth derived from their work:

Everyone needs to work. It's only through work that people get to feel valuable and confident. People can feel needed by others. Do I make sense? . . . I think I grew up here, the residents are the same as me. We are pitiful, lonely and abandoned. Even though my life has gotten better after I got married, I still want to do something, do my best to help them. (CL03)

Well, work for me (pause), this gives me a sense of worth and makes me feel like I'm not a loser. When I work here, I work hard and don't procrastinate. If I haven't done my work for the day, I won't go home. Life is life, work is work. Even if the pay is low, it is still a job. (CL09)



Figure 1. Placement approach - typical pathway.

Nevertheless, the timing of individuals' choices significantly shapes their life course (Elder, 1998). Consequently, leaving school early continues to negatively affect their work performance. For instance, one female participant (CL03) described her work experience as being limited and marred by her illiteracy:

I'm illiterate because I hated school and didn't write a word when I was a kid. At my workplace, there are a lot of writing demands, like filling out worksheets. But I can't handle it. In that moment, I felt incredibly helpless (stillness). I cried several times over this. I hate and blame myself for not studying hard, for my defective body, for my tragic lot . . . (silence)

To deepen our understanding of their gratitude toward the childcare system, this section presents two stories of individuals on this work pathway. After considering their available options—either working within the childcare system or leaving care—and the constraints imposed by their health conditions, they reached the following conclusions:

“Working for the institution is best for me.”

CS06, a male participant, was diagnosed with congenital heart disease at birth. Abandoned on the road, he was subsequently taken to an institution by the police. After completing his vocational education in cooking at age 18, he returned to the institution to await job placement. During this period, he underwent surgery to treat his heart condition, which left him physically unable to perform heavy labor. Consequently, he felt apprehensive about leaving the institution. Two years later, at the age of 20, the institution offered him a job suited to his capabilities, involving cooking and stocking in the kitchen. He continues to reside and receive support from the institution. Expressing satisfaction with his employment, CS06 remarked, ‘At least my skills are not wasted.’ Having worked there for nearly ten years, he considers this employment the optimal choice for his situation.

“I have no place to work but the institution.”

CL09, a female with a nursing degree from a vocational school, struggled to find employment due to her eye deformity. Consequently, the institution where she trained offered her a position, and she has been employed there since the age of 23. Initially, she worked in the clinic and ward, primarily caring for children and assisting doctors with basic medical tasks. Over time, as the institution began to receive fewer children and hire more professional medics, her responsibilities shifted towards administrative roles. Now, she serves as a clerk, managing paperwork and completing various forms. This role offers her a manageable workload, which allows for a balance between her professional duties and homemaking commitments. She reflects on her job, stating, “I can't make a lot of money from this job. But it prevents me from feeling like a loser and provides me with a sense of value.”

However, not all participants value this work placement as highly as those in this group. Some opted to leave the institution-arranged job and reenter the workforce independently.

Placement approach - typical pathway plus

Individuals in the ‘typical pathway *plus*’ category initially secured their first formal job through the childcare system but subsequently redirected their careers or transitioned to different jobs outside the institution (Figure 2). Compared to those on the typical pathway, these participants experience greater job instability. This category includes four members: one male and three females. Two of them are non-disabled and completed secondary education, while the other two, who have physical impairments, did not complete their primary education. After departing their initial formal roles within the childcare system, these individuals have predominantly navigated their own career trajectories.

A significant variety of job changes has been documented; only one participant had two formal work experiences, whereas the others engaged in multiple different jobs. This participant experienced a smooth transition from working in the childcare institution to her partner’s clinic, where her newfound family support network facilitated her continued career as a nurse. In contrast, the other three faced significant challenges in their work journeys. After multiple attempts to secure employment in various companies, two participants chose to become stay-at-home mothers to care for their school-age children. Meanwhile, one male participant, having never held formal employment and frequently engaging in criminal activities, had recently been released from intermittent imprisonment. At the time of data collection, he was employed as a cleaner in a factory, a position he found unsatisfactory but saw as his only option. As for their perspectives on work, two viewed it pragmatically, considering work essential for survival. For example,

Work means survival to me. How can I survive if I don’t work or make money? I need food to eat, right? (CL04)

Conversely, the other two looked at this topic differently. According to them, work can function as a ‘window,’ through which individuals are able to socialize with more people and interact with the outside world. As CL10 described:

For me, work means being able to learn more things. My job was not just about taking care of kids. I have also seen a lot of things through by doing this job. I didn’t know until I was exposed to the outside world that people are like this, you know? . . . I always took the initiative to talk to them [Note: people living outside the institution], and they were

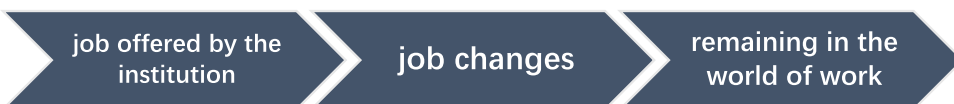


Figure 2. Placement approach - typical pathway plus.

willing to talk to me. The more I talked to them, the less inferior I felt, so I don't feel that way anymore.

This is likely linked to the similar life pathway those two participants have taken, i.e., they had a longer stay in institutionalized life than others and did not leave care until they got married. In other words, work to some extent meant dissolving social exclusion for this group of people (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015).

To deepen our understanding of individuals on this work pathway, two illustrative stories are presented below. Although both individuals eventually left institution-arranged employment to become homemakers, their journeys differed significantly. These variations can be attributed to the limited work options and increased constraints from stigmatization and discrimination that individuals with physical impairments often face in social settings, including workplaces. As a result, their views on institution-arranged work varied considerably:

“I'd rather find a job on my own.”

CL04, a non-disabled female, left school early due to her frustrations with exams and a lack of academic support. Subsequently, she was placed in a government-owned restaurant as a waitress, a position she soon left due to sexual harassment. Following this, a staff member at her institution secured her an apprenticeship in a hair salon. However, she had to abandon the apprenticeship a year later due to a lack of financial support. Rehired by the institution, she then took a position as an office clerk but was dissatisfied with the low income. At the age of 18, CL04 decided to leave the institution to seek employment independently. She initially worked intermittently as a karaoke waitress for four years, then briefly for a fraudulent company before leaving to get married to someone she met online. Since her marriage, she has relied primarily on her mother-in-law for support, as her husband has not taken responsibility for their family. CL04 has since held only a few informal and part-time jobs. Currently, her primary role is caring for her daughter.

“I don't want to leave the institution job but I have to.”

CL10, a female with a spinal deformity, left primary school early and spent her teenage years doing unpaid work in the institution or performing chores for local villagers in exchange for food. At the age of 22, she began receiving a salary, funded by an overseas NGO, for her work in the institution, which included tasks such as babysitting, cleaning, laundry, and transporting children to and from school. As time passed, the number of babies in the institution decreased, leading to reduced demand for caregivers. This prompted CL10 to explore new skills, and she enrolled in a hairdressing training school. Although she managed to secure free training for a month, she was unable to continue due to lack of funds. Despite having a room in the institution, she faced ridicule over her marital prospects, which spurred her to marry at the age of 24. Subsequently, she continued to work at the institution during the day but left her job at 26 due to the birth of her second child, in violation of the 'One Child Policy' then in effect. Later attempts to find employment in shoe factories were unsuccessful due to discrimination

over her appearance and illiteracy. Ultimately, CL10 resigned herself to becoming a homemaker.

Contrasting with the previously described work pathways, a greater number of participants in this study secured their initial employment independently, without the assistance of care providers. The relevant pathways and experiences are detailed as follows:

Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway

As previously mentioned, individuals who followed this pathway entered the workforce through self-exploration. This group includes two male participants, both of whom have physical impairments. Typically, they acquired skills training during their schooling and secured their first formal job immediately after graduating. This led to a relatively stable career path with minimal changes throughout their professional journey (Figure 3).

Although similar to those who followed the ‘placement approach’ pathways in receiving some support from the childcare system during their job search, this group of individuals chose not to accept the offered help, opting instead to pursue employment independently. For example, one participant articulated his decision to seek work outside the institution as a clear preference for independence over accepting an institution-arranged job, highlighting his strong desire to engage with the broader job market. CL13 recalled:

At that time, he [Note: the director of fuliyuan] asked me to work there, but I didn't, I didn't want that. I wanted to go out and strive for myself. No matter how well I did, it would be better than working there, right? So, I came out and work on my own . . . I won't live here for the rest of my life, because I had seen many people living like this since I was a kid. It was very meaningless. I decided I wanted to go out. And I did make it.

This divergent attitude is likely linked to their vocational education, which provided them with specialized job skills—for instance, one participant specialized in auto repairs, while another trained in body massage. This education enabled them to earn a living using the career-focused skills they acquired. Despite initial job-search frustrations due to physical limitations, all participants ultimately expressed positive views about their current employment status:

Now I have been there for five years. This job is fairly stable . . . I think I'm lucky. Even though I have physical defects, it was hard to find a job. Fortunately, the job I got after



Figure 3. Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway.

help from kind-hearted people is pretty good. It is in a state-owned company with benefits and commercial insurance. It's also enough to support me in renting a room and living on my own. (CL24)

After working for more than 20 years, I personally feel very satisfied with my job. First of all, it helps relieve pain for patients. Secondly, we can solve our own living (demands) through this work, right? This is the main reason . . . This is the only way we can create our own lives with our own hands. (CL13)

The details provided below illustrate how the two participants employed human agency in shaping their career paths. They adeptly navigated both the opportunities available within the care system, such as receiving vocational training, and the constraints they faced, notably the lack of support post-care. These strategic adaptations led to their choice of a stable career path well-suited to their individual circumstances:

“I am happy with my massage career.”

CL13, a male born blind, was abandoned on the street at the age of 2 or 3 months and subsequently taken to an institution by a stranger. He spent the next 20 years in this institution, where he received three years of vocational training at a special education school, specializing in massage therapy. Eager to engage with the world, CL13 left the institution at the age of 20 and immediately secured employment with a massage company. However, the job location was far from his hometown, and he struggled to adapt to the new environment. After two years, he returned home and has since worked in local massage shops. To enhance his professional skills, CL13 has actively participated in numerous workshops and pursued additional training to obtain relevant qualifications. He is satisfied with his professional achievements and the income he earns from his work.

“It’s a good job!”

CL24, a male, was initially cared for by an elderly woman who found him abandoned in the grass as a baby. When he turned 12, the woman, due to her advancing age, could no longer care for him, prompting her family to place him in an institution. CL24 has a cleft lip and palate, impairing his speech and significantly affecting his social interactions and educational experiences. This condition led to repeated rejections from potential employers, plunging him into deep depression. Fortunately, a volunteer at the institution connected him with a job opportunity at a state-owned automobile factory. After completing a year’s internship, he secured a full-time position. The job offers a competitive salary and benefits, enabling him to afford rent and live independently. He has now been employed at the factory for five years.

Acquiring relevant skills through education has led to a cumulative effect of life advantages—a concentration of positive events and influences (Elder, 1998)—ranging from enhanced employability to higher salaries and benefits. Consequently, both male participants have achieved increasing independence. In contrast, those lacking adequate job skills have encountered greater uncertainty and risk in their career trajectories.

Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway plus

Participants who followed the ‘typical pathway *plus*’ experienced numerous changes and redirections in their career paths, despite initially starting with a relatively stable trajectory (Figure 4). This pathway includes eight participants—three females and five males—five of whom live with physical impairments. The majority have attained at least secondary education, except for one female who had an extended absence from education after primary school. After leaving school, these individuals explored various industries, gradually carving out their place in the workforce. Recently, they have held diverse jobs such as security staff, masseur, and factory worker, none of which required advanced labor skills.

The work pathway, marked by frequent job changes and shifts in direction, is exemplified by the two stories presented below. The first narrative describes an individual whose career changes were driven by a persistent pursuit of higher salaries. In contrast, the second narrative focuses on personal encounters that significantly influenced the individual’s career decisions. These life events and experiences have shaped their distinct career paths and attitudes toward their work, resulting in varied work trajectories and perceptions:

“I will do whatever I can do to make a living.”

CL06, a male who was eager to leave care and begin his independent life, secured his first job as a waiter at the age of 16 through a recommendation from a fellow care leaver. This role not only provided his initial income but also helped him transition from care to independent living. Seeking better opportunities, he soon transitioned to higher-paying jobs, gaining diverse experiences across multiple industries, including hospitality and manufacturing in electronics, plastics, and automobiles. His consistent employment enabled him to secure a mortgage and purchase his own home. Currently, he plans to resign from his job and return to his hometown, where he aims to decorate his new residence and start a small business.

“I don’t know why I am living in the world.”

CL16, a non-disabled male, left care at the age of 16 and was initially employed illegally at a factory, despite being underage. Initially, he felt a sense of normalcy and excitement, but he soon encountered the harsh realities of society. Tragically, two of his close friends died in separate accidents, plunging him into deep sadness and overwhelming him with grief. His emotional vulnerability led him to join a company that, unbeknownst to him, operated on fraudulent practices and manipulated him with false promises of a prosperous future. This illusion was shattered when he was arrested due to his



Figure 4. Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway plus.

involvement with the illegal activities of the company, leaving him aimless and despondent. After a period of self-harm and recovery, CL16 managed to find sporadic work through food delivery jobs on zero-hour contracts. Despite his continued reluctance to fully engage with the world—often preferring to sleep rather than face daily challenges—he now makes a living as a security officer.

Concerning their general perspectives on work, there is a strong consensus among the participants that they ‘work to survive.’ Born with physical constraints and growing up without parental support, these individuals often faced both inherent and situational vulnerabilities, leaving care with minimal resources (Mackenzie et al., 2014). In light of these challenges, employment became their sole means of achieving financial stability and independence. Participant CL18 shared a viewpoint similar to that of CL16, as outlined below:

Work. . .it’s everything for me. After I enter society, I have to support myself. If I don’t have a job, I’ll starve to death. It’s true. Starve to death. I slept in a park for two weeks once. That’s because I didn’t have a job and I didn’t have any money . . .

Expanding on the code of work as a means to achieve financial stability, it additionally serves the significant roles of supporting families and realizing life goals. CL12 maintained:

Work means a . . . because I think, without a job, it is unrealistic to talk about dreams . . . Only if I keep working can I realize my previous ideas. Only work can realize some realistic or unrealistic ideas. If I want to travel, I have to work (to make money). Then I have to work to raise my children and family. I think work means everything to me now.

The concept that work serves as a bridge to social integration is further validated by participants in this group. One female participant (CS10), living with a mobility impairment, emphasized the significance of engaging with society and fostering interpersonal relationships. Despite the challenges of commuting, she expressed satisfaction with her regular and interactive work routine:

Having said that, for me, the workplace is my social circle and it is where I socialize. Someone told me I didn’t need to look for a job after I graduated. I was told I could get a job online so I could work from home (fuliyuan) every day. Personally, I don’t like the idea, because if my life went on like this, I’d be out of touch with society and interpersonal relationships. . . After all, working from home doesn’t get you everything. I also like the life status that comes with working from nine to five. Every day I commute an hour early and get home an hour late, but I’m used to it. I am happy with where I am.

This section details the work experiences of employed participants, while the subsequent section will address the experiences of those who were unemployed at the time of data collection.

Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway 'on the way'

The phrase 'on the way' denotes an unsettled work status, where an individual's career progression has been halted. Participants on this pathway have experienced one or more formal job roles, each followed by various changes and disruptions (Figure 5).

There are two male participants living with physical impairments occupy distinct levels within this group: one holds an undergraduate degree, while the other was excluded from formal education early on. Despite these differences, their experiences underscore the common challenges they face in maintaining stable employment. One noted that a major barrier to employment is widespread discrimination against individuals with physical impairments. In other words, societal attitudes that disregard, undervalue, and systematically exclude people with disabilities have severely restricted his job opportunities. As he complained:

"Shit, nobody wants to hire me . . ."

CL08, a male born with poliomyelitis, has relied on a cane for mobility since childhood. Reportedly abandoned as an infant, he faced a challenging upbringing in various schools and an institution before leaving care at age 24. Initially, he secured several sales positions, which he performed well in at first. However, as his success in these roles waned, he contemplated a career change. Despite earning certificates in accounting, he encountered persistent negative feedback on his job applications, which he attributed to discrimination due to his disability. His attempts to venture into business with others also failed, leaving him burdened with substantial debt. The economic downturn exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with his physical challenges, has led to a prolonged period of unemployment. Currently, CL08 is grappling with feelings of depression due to his circumstances.

In this context, social environments and structures that fail to accommodate individuals with disabilities have exacerbated their disadvantages, leading to feelings of failure and discouragement in the workplace. These challenges indicate the need for continuous support for young people with physical impairments, even after they have left care, and call for an urgent transformation of societal attitudes and environments. Regarding his view of work, nonetheless, it aligns with that of many participants across various pathways: work is primarily seen as a means of survival:

Only by work can I make money. In order to survive, I have to work. There is no special meaning to it. To me 'work is survival.' (CL08)



Figure 5. Self-job-searching approach - typical pathway 'on the way'.

Similarly, another male participant (CS03) experienced frequent degradation, humiliation, and was perceived as wholly incapacitated. Despite his own belief in his work capabilities, he was not offered any job-related training or opportunities.

I don't have a job skill. . . no certificate. I didn't get skill training in the institution either. That means it's hard to get a good job and earn my own living. . . But in fact, I think as long as I've been trained long enough, I can do anything.

His desire for fuller work participation was evident:

I do want to work, because life in the institution was too boring. I want to do something to show my worth. I want to earn my living, rather than depending on the state.

However, he faced a significant dilemma: he was concerned about losing his welfare benefits if his external work was discovered. As he said:

They [Note: staff in fuliyuan] didn't know I worked outside, but I was worried about being found out by them if I worked there for long . . . If they did, I would be criticized by the directors and even kicked out from the institution. They said people who can earn their livings should not benefit from state welfare. But look, if I left the institution, where could I go? So, (I) let it go . . . I won't work.

The welfare provision in the care system here seems to act as a disincentive, as the opportunity cost of employment is too high for an individual to justify the risk. This creates a paradox where young people from care backgrounds are both expected and striving to achieve independent living, yet they face substantial barriers in their pursuit of self-sufficiency due to the social environment and lack of adequate support.

Discussion

This paper examined the work experiences and perspectives of care leavers in China, providing valuable insights into their varied paths as they transition into the workforce. Through the analysis of participant interviews, five distinct work pathways were identified, which participants have adopted either actively or passively. These include: (i) the placement approach – typical pathway, (ii) placement approach – typical pathway *plus*, (iii) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway, (iv) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway *plus*, and (v) self-job-searching approach – typical pathway *'on the way'*. The 'typical' pathways denote a stable and uninterrupted career progression, whereas the *'plus'* and *'on the way'* pathways often involve significant turbulence and uncertainty. These pathways highlight the complex interplay of individual characteristics, institutional support, societal attitudes, and structural barriers that shape the participants' employment trajectories.

The findings of this study can and do acknowledge the positive relationship between educational attainment and work stability: higher

education and skill training determine one's chances in the labor market (Groinig & Sting, 2019; McNamara et al., 2019). Despite facing such challenges, it is clear that care leavers can exhibit diverse performances (Stein, 2006). Some utilize their agency to shape their destinies and successfully transition into the established workforce (Göbel et al., 2021; Johansson et al., 2024). In addition, the findings reveal multiple progressive paths into full-time employment post-care, challenging earlier studies that deny a linear progression from school to employment (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015). According to this study's sample, at least two primary gateways emerge for young people to enter the workforce: work placements facilitated by the childcare system and independent job searches. While institution-arranged employment is often low-paying and labor-intensive, it has nonetheless eased some individuals into stable employment. However, such arrangements are typically ad hoc, without a formalized placement program, leading to varied experiences and outcomes. Not all assigned positions guarantee independence or stability. Instead, most participants in this study face significant obstacles in navigating the world of work, reflecting experiences that are consistent with those documented in the existing literature on the Chinese context. Key challenges include low educational attainment, a deficiency in job skills, insufficient support from the formal systems, and pervasive social discrimination, all of which have hindered fuller employment participation for care leavers in China (Chen, 2011; Liu et al., 2022; Shang & Fisher, 2017; Yao & Liu, 2018; Zhu, 2018; Zhu & Yu, 2009). Enriching this body of knowledge, participants' detailed accounts of their lived experiences further asserted their disadvantaged position in the labor market. Policymakers and practitioners are urged to address these issues thereby enhancing the employment outcomes for this vulnerable group.

From the perspective of most participants, work serves as a means to gain financial resources, realize social value, and facilitate social integration. Specifically, work holds a fundamental meaning for these young people: earning a livelihood. Furthermore, they perceive it as a crucial institutional foundation for social integration, especially important for this marginalized group (Arnau-Sabatés & Gilligan, 2015; Gilligan & Arnau-Sabatés, 2017). Additionally, the findings indicate that young people with care experience also see work as a way to enhance their self-worth. This broader understanding reflects the varying characteristics of young people from different care settings. For those with physical impairments and who have experienced institutional living and associated discrimination, these factors have often diminished their self-value and identity (Shang, 2015). Conversely, work provides an opportunity for these individuals to forge new identities (e.g., as employees) and to affirm their worth (Vickerstaff et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a pressing need

to improve their employment opportunities to support their integration and personal growth.

This study provides important insights into the work pathways and experiences of care leavers in China, yet it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Geographically, participants of this study came from a limited range of areas. Meanwhile, the use of convenience and snowball sampling methods might have introduced bias, as participants were selected based on their accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate, potentially skewing the representativeness of the sample (Stratton, 2021). Therefore, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among care leavers across different geographic locations, ethnicities, and cultures. Furthermore, the study's reliance on self-reported data could also lead to biases. Participants' responses might have been influenced by social desirability or societal expectations, which could lead to potential inaccuracies in reporting their experiences (Squire et al., 2014). Additionally, recall bias could have compromised the accuracy of the participants' recollections of past events (Ventura et al., 2006).

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study have significant implications for practice and policy aimed at supporting care leavers in China. Firstly, there is a crucial need for targeted interventions to address the unique needs and challenges faced by care leavers transitioning into the workforce. This includes providing access to education, vocational training, and employment support services. Policymakers should prioritize the development of comprehensive support systems that enhance the employability of care leavers, such as promoting internships and job-skills training opportunities while in care, and offering continuous employment support like career advice and mentoring during their transition out of care. Also, efforts should be directed toward combating stigma and discrimination in the workplace and the broader society, focusing on promoting inclusive employment practices and fostering supportive work environments for care leavers.

Based on the findings, moreover, it is vital to recognize that leaving care is not a one-off event, especially for individuals with disabilities. The challenges arising from early-life disadvantages and care experiences can persistently impact their post-care lives over the long term. Yet, the reality remains that young people are required to leave care and enter the workplace at the age of 18 (Shang & Li, 2015), and it is evident from this study that not all are prepared to manage their lives post-care confidently. Therefore, the implementation of a transitional program is essential. This program should provide care leavers with a designated timeframe to access a spectrum of extended services, during which they can receive professional support from service providers and local authorities. For example, professionals within the childcare system could offer crucial information, practical guidance, and emotional support as needed. Moreover, the involvement of the Human Resources and

Social Security Bureau is critical in enhancing employability through the provision of job-search assistance, skills training, and facilitating connections to relevant resources, including employment opportunities and interest-free loans for entrepreneurial ventures. The duration of the transition period should be flexible, contingent upon an individual's ability to adapt and achieve social and financial independence within society. Drawing upon the UK model, where transitional services are extended to young people until they reach the age of 25 (UK Parliament, 2017) – approximately seven years post-care – can provide valuable insights for policy-making in the Chinese context.

Endnotes

1. 'Institution' and 'childcare institution' in this paper refer to 'fuliyuan' in the Chinese context.
2. 'Fuliyuan' is the name of the state-funded childcare institution in China.

Notes on contributor

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