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Diverse Pathways and the Role of Timing: Youth Experiences of Leaving Care in China

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ABSTRACT

In China, young people in state-funded childcare institutions (*Fuliyuan*) are required to exit at age 18 unless still in education, compressing the move to adulthood. This study applies a life-course lens to examine how the timing and sequencing of key life events shape care leavers' trajectories. We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 22 care leavers and analysed the data thematically. The findings indicate three pathways: (i) school-leaver, marked by exits at or around 18 aligned with finishing school and rapid entry to the workplace; (ii) family-builder, characterized by extended/gradual exits beyond 18, with marriage commonly signalling departure; and (iii) unpredictable, where participants experienced disordered, nonlinear life trajectories associated with cumulative disadvantages. Across pathways, outcomes reflected structural conditions, including limited preparation for independence and sparse aftercare. Findings contribute a China-specific perspective to international leaving-care research and underscore the need for flexible, individualized policies that assess readiness rather than rely solely on age thresholds. We also highlight the potential benefits of extended care, provided it is paired with continued support and opportunities to build agency, and call for early interventions to prevent disrupted exits from school and other key institutions.

1 | Introduction

The transition to adulthood typically involves multiple changes in education, employment, family life and residential status. Unlike their peers, however, young people leaving out-of-home care (care leavers) often undergo what is termed 'instant adulthood', characterized by accelerated and compressed transitions that allow little time for adequate preparation, resulting in poor outcomes (Stein 2012, 2019). These include unstable housing, low educational attainment, employment failures, unplanned pregnancies, social exclusion and mental health problems (Berlin et al. 2011; Dworsky et al. 2012; Sacker et al. 2021; Stein and Dumaret 2011; Strahl et al. 2020). Additionally, care leavers within OECD countries are disproportionately represented among the homeless population and are more likely to experience incarceration or suicide (OECD 2022). Despite this,

aftercare outcomes can vary significantly, depending on the quality of care they received, the nature of their transitions and the level of social support provided (Stein 2006). For instance, raising the care age to 21 has been identified as an effective strategy for supporting a smoother transition to adulthood, allowing young people more time to prepare for independence and benefit from extended services. Evidence from various contexts has shown the positive impact of this policy, leading to better outcomes in education, employment and social integration (Courtney 2019; van Breda et al. 2020).

International scholarship has examined leaving-care transitions using diverse methods. A cohort study in Sweden revealed significant educational inequalities among care-experienced youths (Forsman 2020), while research in Britain, Germany and Finland found that care leavers often face adverse living

conditions despite the varying leaving care systems in these countries (Cameron et al. 2018). Some researchers presented a growing interest in qualitative approaches to better understand the experiences and insights of care leavers. For example, a study involving 37 narrative interviews in Switzerland examined the aspects of transitions from the participants' perspectives, identifying both entering and leaving care as structural disruptions in their life course (Gabriel et al. 2021). Others conducted a systematic review of qualitative studies. Based on the UK context, they identified supportive relationships with caregivers as key facilitators in positive transitions to adulthood and highlighted barriers such as deficient support and lack of emotional readiness (Atkinson and Hyde 2019). In Israel, Sulimani-Aidan (2014) applied mixed methods, noting the challenges young people face when transitioning from residential facilities to independent living, such as difficulty separating from caregivers, adjusting to life outside care, and finding adequate support. Refaeli's (2017) narrative study further distinguished two patterns among care leavers. 'Struggling to survive' captures persistent difficulties, scarce resources and continued reliance on services, whereas 'surviving through struggle' highlights present gains achieved through sustained effort and the mobilization of supports despite adversity. Collectively, this literature demonstrates that both structural conditions and personal resources strongly influence how care leavers navigate adulthood.

More recently, attention has extended beyond Western contexts to the Global South. Among them, Gwenzi (2023) examined care leavers' concepts of the 'ideal' family in Zimbabwe, and Frimpong-Manso (2020) identified factors such as social support networks and personal capacities that facilitate successful transitions in Ghana. Studies in India and South Africa further underscore the role of informal social networks in supporting care leavers (van Breda and Dickens 2017; Keshri 2021). Moreover, studies on Vietnam show how stigma and social/family relations shape care leavers' journeys (Gilligan et al. 2025), while policy, culture and government-led initiatives also play important roles (Collins and Tuyên 2016). In Indonesia, recent work maps care leavers' numbers, experiences and outcomes. The article notes limited aftercare policy amid ongoing deinstitutionalization and therefore recommends a national strategy to ensure extended support (Radityaputra et al. 2024). These studies have enriched the international picture but also underline the diversity of leaving-care experiences across socio-economic and cultural settings. Much of the world, however, remains underexplored, leaving significant gaps in understanding how young people manage transitions in contexts where institutional care, rather than foster or kinship care, predominates.

China presents a distinctive case for contributing to the international leaving-care literature. Unlike in many Western contexts where out-of-home care is primarily a child protection response to abuse or neglect, institutional care in China mainly serves children whose parents are deceased, missing or unable to provide care due to poverty, illness or disability (J. Chen 2019a; Conn et al. 2013; Peace 2021; Šiška and Beadle-Brown 2020; Shang and Fisher 2017). This form of care has a long-standing history and continues to play a central role in the country's child welfare system. Recent data indicate that over 50 000 children and young people-around 30% of the total care population-live in 539 state-run institutions known as *fuliyuan* (PRC Ministry of Civil Affairs 2021). The remaining 70% are placed in foster care, kinship care or adoption, although these systems remain unevenly developed (Yin 2024a). Until 2010, young people could remain in institutional care indefinitely, but regulations now require them to leave at age 18 unless they continue in education (Zhu 2018). It is estimated that 10000–20000 young people exit these institutions annually, although precise figures remain unclear (Shang and Li 2015).

Like their peers worldwide, care leavers in China face multiple adversities. Many leave with low educational attainment, which restricts their opportunities in the competitive labour market (L.X. Chen 2019b; Shang and Dou 2014; Sun 2014). As a result, they often enter low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, sometimes arranged by the institutions themselves, without job security or formal contracts (Chen 2011). Others experience unemployment and, in some cases, homelessness (Yin 2024b). Social integration is also a persistent difficulty, as many struggle to maintain supportive relationships within the broader community. For male leavers in particular, barriers to family formation intensify the risk of social isolation and exclusion (Yin 2024c). Disabilities and congenital health conditions further intersect with these disadvantages, compounding the obstacles to stability and independence (Shang and Li 2015; Zhu 2018; Zhu and Yu 2009).

These poor outcomes are closely linked to structural constraints within the Chinese out-of-home care and welfare system. Compared with family-based care, institutional settings provide fewer opportunities to build supportive relationships (Shang et al. 2011). Childcare institutions have historically prioritized nursing and basic needs over education and preparation for independence, leaving young people without the skills required to transition successfully (Jia et al. 2019; Yin 2024d). At the policy level, welfare support is generally restricted to those under 18, and there is still no comprehensive legal framework for transitional or aftercare services (Liu et al. 2022). This absence of structural support forces young people to navigate adulthood abruptly and largely alone, reinforcing cycles of dependency and disadvantage (Shang and Fisher 2017).

However, current knowledge of care leaving in China remains limited. Existing studies have primarily documented adverse outcomes such as low educational attainment, unemployment and social isolation but offer little insight into how young people themselves navigate this transition. Internationally, research has increasingly incorporated care leavers' voices to understand their resilience, agency and strategies for coping with change (e.g., Atkinson and Hyde 2019; Gabriel et al. 2021; Refaeli 2017). Yet, such perspectives remain underexplored in China's institutional context, where distinctive structural conditions, including large-scale and enclosed care settings, limited aftercare policy and mandated exit at age 18, condition young people's lived experiences in ways not well captured by existing international literature.

To address this, the study draws on life-course theory, which examines people's trajectories, transitions and turning points within their historical and social contexts (Giele and Elder 1998). The framework emphasizes four principles: location in time and place, linked lives, human agency and the timing of lives (Elder 1998). Among these, the timing of leaving

care is especially salient for shaping care-experienced people's life courses. Stein (2012), for example, showed that early, compressed transitions in key life events are often associated with heightened risks of homelessness and unemployment, while more gradual and supported transitions can provide stability. Research from other Global North contexts similarly demonstrates that extended exits, when accompanied by continued support, are linked to more positive outcomes (Duncalf et al. 2013; Mendes et al. 2023). At the same time, in a life-course perspective, timing is culturally and historically situated; what counts as 'appropriate' timing varies by context.

Building on these insights, this study examines the timing and sequencing of key life events, such as leaving care, completing education, entering the workforce and forming a family, to provide a comprehensive understanding of how leaving-care experiences unfold and with what consequences for care leavers in China. The central research question is: How does a life-course perspective illuminate the timing and sequencing of care leavers' transitions to adulthood in China? In answering this, the study seeks to inform the development of a more supportive care-leaving system and contribute to international debates on how timing and structural conditions inform care leavers' pathways to independence.

2 | Methodology

2.1 | Research Design

We utilized a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for capturing the nuances and complexities of personal experiences (Lewis 2015). They are effective in exploring how young people with care backgrounds navigate significant life events such as leaving care, finishing school, finding employment and establishing families.

2.2 | Sampling and Participants

This study is part of a completed PhD project, conducted from 2020 to 2023. Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Eligibility criteria included those who had grown up in any state-funded childcare institution (*Fuliyuan*) in China and were over the age of 18. Exclusion criteria included those who were unable to participate due to physical or mental incapacity (e.g., conditions preventing verbal communication or informed consent). The initial participants were identified using convenience sampling, where the researcher accessed willing participants. Field visits were made to childcare institutions in inland provinces like Jiangxi, Hunan and Hubei, using social networks and cold-calling visits. Subsequently, snowball sampling was utilized, where initial participants referred additional young people, an approach particularly effective for accessing hard-to-reach populations (Naderifar et al. 2017).

A total of 22 participants were included in this study given the fact that they had left institutional care, comprising 10 females and 12 males (Table 1). Among them, nine reported having various health conditions, including poliomyelitis, physical or visual impairments, hypospadias and congenital diseases. The average age of participants at the time of data collection was nearly 30. Many entered care as newborns or young children, with the duration of time spent in care varying from 4 to 34 years.

2.3 | Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews in Mandarin, which provide a balance between structured guidance and flexibility, allowing participants to share their perspectives while ensuring essential topics are discussed (Kallio et al. 2016). These interviews are particularly effective for delving into complex issues and enabling participants to bring up unanticipated topics (Nathan et al. 2019). In line with institutional ethics requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely via telephone or WeChat calls. This approach not only complied with safety protocols but also enhanced inclusivity by enabling participation across different regions without the burden of travel (Lo Iacono et al. 2016). Participants could choose their preferred communication mode and schedule, and they were free to pause or reschedule if needed, ensuring accessibility for those with work, study or personal commitments. Care was taken to use plain and accessible language, and sensitive questions were approached gradually to minimize distress.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 min and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. They were invited to share their memories of key milestones in their transition to adulthood, such as entering and leaving care, finishing school, entering employment and parenting. The interview guide featured open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive narratives about participants' life experiences and perspectives.

2.4 | Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Clarke and Braun (2017). This method allowed for a detailed understanding of participants' experiences by identifying, analysing and reporting recurring themes within the data. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to explicit meanings (what participants directly expressed).

This process began with familiarization, where we firstly transcribed and translated all transcripts from Mandarin to English, and then thoroughly read and re-read to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. Initial notes were made during this phase to capture early ideas and key points. Following this, the generation of initial codes took place. Each transcript was systematically coded by highlighting segments of text that were relevant to the research question. This step was conducted using a manual approach via MS Word, ensuring that all important aspects of the data were captured.

Once the data had been coded, the next step involved searching for themes. Codes were organized into broader themes based on their similarities and relationships. At this stage, the life-course framework guided the analytic lens. In particular, we used timing (relative to the Chinese leaving-care policy) and sequencing

TABLE 1 | Participants' demographic information.

				Care levers (n = 22)				
Name code	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Health status	Age entering care	Age leaving care	Years in care	Life pathway
CL01	Wei Jun	25	M	Nondisabled	12	22	10	School-leaver
CL02	Ming Yu	n/a	n/a	n/a				
CL03	Li Hua	38	F	Hand impairment	0	25	25	Family-builder
CL04	Yan Mei	33	F	Nondisabled	3	18	15	Unpredictable
CL05	Hao Chen	22	M	Penis deformity	0	22	22	Unpredictable
CL06	Jian Guo	33	M	Nondisabled	5	16	11	School-leaver
CL07	Bo Wen	29	M	Nondisabled	6	22	16	Unpredictable
CL08	Zhi Qiang	27	M	Polio (difficult walking)	0	22	22	School-leaver
CL09	Xiu Ying	39	F	Eye deformity	0	32	33	Family-builder
CL10	Mei Lin	38	F	Spine deformity	0	24	24	Family-builder
CL11	Qian Hui	39	F	Nondisabled	5	25	20	Family-builder
CL12	Yong Liang	34	M	Nondisabled	9	23	14	School-leaver
CL13	Da Wei	40	M	Visual impairment	0	20	20	School-leaver
CL14	Jing Yi	31	F	Nondisabled	0	24	24	Unpredictable
CL15	Liang Peng	35	M	Polio (difficult walking)	0	34	34	Unpredictable
CL16	Chen Gang	31	M	Nondisabled	5	16	11	School-leaver
CL17	Rui An	n/a	n/a	n/a				
CL18	Fang Lan	35	F	Cleft lip and palate	0	15	15	Unpredictable
CL19	Kai Ming	20	M	Nondisabled	15	19	4	School-leaver
CL20	Han Dong	19	M	Nondisabled	14	18	4	School-leaver
CL21	Xin Yue	20	F	Nondisabled	15	19	4	School-leaver
CL22	Lan Xin	19	F	Nondisabled	14	18	4	School-leaver
CL23	Yi Fang	20	F	Nondisabled	15	19	4	School-leaver
CL24	Qiao Feng	27	M	Cleft lip and palate	12	22	10	School-leaver
CL25	Tian Yu	n/a	n/a	n/a				

Note: (i) The deleted ones refer to people withdrawn from the project on the halfway. (ii) The age was calculated by the birth year that was reported by each participant in the year of data collection (2021). (iii) The abbreviation 'CL' refers to 'Care Leaver'—people who have left care; the number and name code contains no semantical value. (iv) All names are pseudonyms assigned by the researcher to protect participants' anonymity.

(the order of life events) to cluster codes and interpret patterns across accounts. Because timing in our study is anchored to the institutional context in China, that is, mandatory exit at 18 unless enrolled in education, we applied the following operational definitions: (i) early transition out of care: exit care before age 18; (ii) on-time transition: exit care in line with policy requirements, that is, at 18 or for those still enrolled beyond 18, upon completion of education; (iii) delayed transition (referring to

later-than-required exit, which may be understood as 'Extended/ Gradual' in other contexts): not in school but remaining in care beyond 18. Themes were therefore not only descriptive but interpretive, reflecting how narratives mapped onto different pathways through education, work and relationships.

The themes were then refined during the reviewing phase, ensuring they adequately captured both the empirical patterns in

the data and their theoretical significance through a life-course perspective. The final phase, producing the report, involved weaving the themes into a coherent narrative. Key excerpts from participants' responses were selected to illustrate each pathway, and these were integrated into the findings section, where the themes are presented as distinct but interconnected trajectories of transition.

2.5 | Rigour

To mitigate the possible bias of recalled memories, we applied data triangulation and member checking to improve their quality and trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Further, to enhance the credibility of the research, peer debriefing and external scrutiny were conducted (Nowell et al. 2017) through participation in conference presentations and PhD examination and supervision meetings. Furthermore, we maintained a reflexive approach, continuously reflecting on our own positionality and potential biases during the research process.

2.6 | Ethics

The study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human subjects suggested by the University of Nottingham. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's purpose, procedures and their rights. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Counselling services were available to the participants.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Nottingham, School of Sociology and Social Policy Ethics Committee (Ref. 2021-053-PGR) in 2021, following external examination and internal review of the application.

3 | Findings

Despite diverse precare, in-care and postcare histories, participants' accounts coalesced into three life pathways: (i) school-leaver, (ii) family-builder and (iii) unpredictable. They illustrate how the timing and sequencing of leaving care, schooling, work and family events shape opportunities, risks and the kinds of support young people mobilize.

3.1 | School-Leaver Pathway

This group includes 12 participants who typically left care after completing formal education. From an institutional perspective, these participants left care 'on time'. Their transition followed a normative sequence in which they exited care upon completing their education, aligning with the current leaving-care policy for young adults in China (Yin 2024e). There are two subgroups (Figure 1). The first ($n = 8$) followed a structured, step-by-step progression, benefiting from family environments and non-disability backgrounds. The second subgroup ($n = 4$), who entered care at a younger age and with disabilities, experienced more disruptions in education, which further complicated their trajectories.

Despite different experiences in early years, the common and crucial issue for them is the lack of gradual preparation for an independent life. All participants struggled with the abruptness of leaving care, often describing feelings of isolation and inadequacy when faced with adult responsibilities like finding employment and housing. The timing of their transition, while institutionally appropriate (leaving upon education completion), felt premature to these young people, as they had not yet fully developed the skills or networks needed to navigate adult life effectively. For example, some reflected:

> The feeling of leaving is … like I have been familiar with people in Fuliyuan, with the routines with all the help and supports from others. But all in a sudden, everything is gone … (silence).
>
> (Wei Jun)

> I just feel that there is something missing in my life, because I have lived there for so many years. All in a sudden, I had to leave ….
>
> (Xin Yue)

These accounts highlight the importance of sequencing life events, where leaving care coincided with a significant change—leaving school—without adequate support and preparation. The
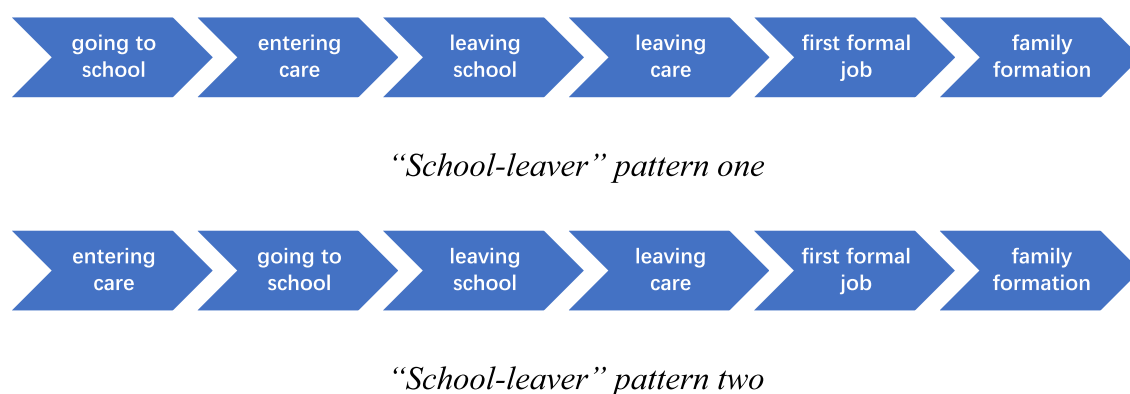
going to school → entering care → leaving school → leaving care → first formal job → family formation

"School-leaver" pattern one

entering care → going to school → leaving school → leaving care → first formal job → family formation

"School-leaver" pattern two

FIGURE 1 | School-leaver pathway.

compressed timeframe in which they had to manage multiple new tasks was overwhelming, as Yong Liang expressed:

> I thought at that time that I had nowhere to live and had to do everything on my own after leaving. I felt very helpless. No matter what I did, I did it alone. I felt very lonely.

Another participant further added:

> I was a little bit confused in the days after I left. After all, I started to arrange everything by myself. Sometimes I suddenly don't know what to do tomorrow.
>
> (Yi Fang)

Clearly, their lack of gradual preparation disrupted their sense of control over their transitions, which, however, can be further exacerbated by their limited social networks and resources after leaving care. In the case of Wei Jun, for example, despite holding a university degree, he continued to struggle with maintaining stable employment, housing and personal relationships, as he complained:

> It was hard to get through it.

He thought his life could have been different if someone senior had provided guidance or connected him with information earlier. This demonstrates how timing without support can limit positive outcomes, even for those with educational advantages. Their postcare lives are concerning.

3.2 | Family-Builder Pathway

This group includes four female participants who experienced delayed transitions out of care, staying in care well into adulthood. In contrast to the normative pathways of the school leavers, these women remained institutionalized for longer periods, leaving care only upon marriage (Figure 2).

Two participants completed vocational education; the remainder reported limited schooling. On reaching age 16, several were offered institutional jobs and continued access to housing, which maintained strong ties to the *Fuliyuan* system. Within this pathway, marriage often functioned as the practical marker of exit from care. The timing was frequently externally steered, via caregiver- or acquaintance-facilitated matches, rather than driven by personal readiness or autonomy (Yin 2024c). Compared with some participants in the third pathway, these unions tended to occur later, providing residential and financial stability.

However, this extended stay in care could also constrain agency and choice over their own lives (Zhao et al. 2025). As they illustrated:

> Honestly, I do not feel as if I ever departed ... At least for me, if you ask me to go into society now, (I) cannot adapt to it well. I'm staying here, only here ... I feel like I've never left Fuliyuan since I was a kid ....
>
> (Xiu Ying)

> Every day in Fuliyuan, I did the same thing. My daily life was spent with abandoned babies, young kids and lonely old people. I didn't have many opportunities to go along with people outside this place. I would have had more chances to meet all kinds of people and experienced all kinds of things. I could have greatly improved my social skills this way ....
>
> (Qian Hui)

This resulted in the blurring of institutional care and adulthood, creating feelings of entrapment for some:

> I can say that most of my life so far has been related to Fuliyuan. I always think that my life has been trapped here ....
>
> (Qian Hui)

But for others, like Li Hua, were grateful for the extended support, especially given her physical disabilities:

> It's hard to find work for people like me who don't have hands ... It is thanks to the care and help of officers at Fuliyuan that I have this job.

The contrast between participants like Li Hua and Qian Hui illustrates that the impact of delayed transitions depends significantly on personal circumstances, particularly regarding health and personal expectations.

3.3 | Unpredictable Pathway

The six participants in this category experienced disordered life trajectories, with poorly timed life events that created instability and disadvantage. Their experiences stand in stark contrast to those in the other two pathways, as they left school early and subsequently faced chaotic transitions that disrupted any normative life sequence (Figure 3).

Upon leaving school, they were not participating in work or training, resulting in more involvement with juvenile delinquency, imprisonment or premature family formation, outcomes largely driven by the poor timing of life events and the lack of support during critical transition periods.
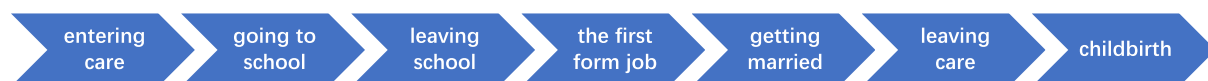

FIGURE 2 | Family-builder pathway.

FIGURE 3 | Unpredictable pathway.

For these participants, the absence of structure during their transitions from care was evident, as Bo Wen's reflection on his chaotic youth suggests:

> When I was a gangster, they [Note: other gangsters] all took drugs. I slept next to them at night, and caught an unknown disease ... I cut people. Once I was almost hacked to death. I was hacked by about a dozen men with machetes, and I got about eight cuts. My head got three holes, and I got cuts all over ... my life was meaningless at all. I was like 15 or 16, and I started to hurt myself ... I broke a beer bottle and scratched my body, my belly, my eyes, and my face with it. My hands are covered in scars ....

Possibly due to substantial engagement with the world outside institutions than other participants, their perspectives on leaving care were relatively neutral, with some participants simply feeling indifferent about the transition.

However, the early timing of some life events propelled participants into a cycle of disadvantage. Without adequate support or guidance, these early transitions disrupted their life courses, making it difficult for them to secure stable employment or relationships, ultimately reinforcing long-term challenges in achieving stability and independence. For instance, Jing Yi's unplanned pregnancy forced her to leave school prematurely and take on family responsibilities before she was ready, a life event that derailed her education and personal development. Following failures in employment and her marriage life over the years, she reflected on her life with a strong sense of regret and disappointment:

> Look at what I am now ... I do regret, I shouldn't have gotten into marriage so early.

Similarly, the case of Liang Peng further illustrates the detrimental impact of disordered timing on social integration. He dropped out of school early and became involved in delinquent behaviour, eventually spending much of his adolescence and adulthood—15 years—in and out of prison. All jobs he can get were low-paying and required hard labour, such as miner or car washer, making it difficult for him to commit to them. While he appreciated the institutional support he received in rearing and caring in his childhood, he ultimately blamed himself:

> I fucked up my life.

Nevertheless, the lack of structured transitions and support at key turning points (e.g., leaving school early) led to long-term struggles with stability, as evidenced by his continued difficulties in securing stable jobs, arranging housing and integrating into society.

4 | Discussion

4.1 | Interpretation of the Findings

This study investigated how care leavers in China have navigated their transition out of institutional care. Three distinct pathways for the 22 participants were identified: the school-leaver pathway, the family-builder pathway and the unpredictable pathway. Each is characterized by unique timings and sequences of life events that profoundly shape their lived experiences. While the school-leaver and family-builder pathways show relatively structured transitions, marked by education completion or family formation, the third reflects nonlinear and precarious life trajectories.

Overall, the findings contribute to the global out-of-home care literature by providing empirical knowledge of leaving care in China. Firstly, it is clear that the event of leaving care significantly interrupted the life course of many young people (Gabriel et al. 2021). Upon leaving, they had to manage housing, employment, emotional separation and social relationships with minimal guidance and within a compressed and accelerated timeline (Stein 2006, 2012, 2019). However, our findings related to the 'school-leaver pathway' suggest that while these participants may have exited care at an institutionally appropriate time (in line with Chinese leaving-care policy), the lack of gradual preparation or transitional support hindered their ability to exercise agency in navigating adult life (Liu et al. 2022; Shang and Fisher 2017; Yin 2024b). These participants were ill-equipped to handle the postcare complexities of independent living, often overwhelmed by negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, distress and helplessness when reflecting on their experiences. This raises critical questions about the role of childcare providers in supporting young people during the transition out of care, the appropriateness of the current timing for leaving care in China (either at age 18 or upon graduation), and whether the timing should be adjusted based on personal readiness rather than rigid institutional age limits.

In contrast, the 'family-builder' pathway reflects delayed transitions into adulthood, with participants remaining in care well into their adult years. The prolonged timing of these transitions enabled some participants to achieve markers of adulthood (such as employment and family formation) in a more secure and structured environment. The potential benefits of extended care seem evident (Duncalf et al. 2013; Mendes et al. 2023; Munro et al. 2022), as these participants experienced a more gradual transition out of care, allowing more time and space to respond to critical changes in life. However, efforts will be compromised if service providers only extend the care period

without offering young people external support, motivation and opportunities to build personal strength (Refaeli 2017). It is so true according to participants like Xiu Ying and Qian Hui: The extended care also fostered their dependency on the institution and restricted the development of personal agency and social skills. This dual outcome—providing both security and restriction—reveals that extended care should be managed with an individualized approach that balances the need for stability with opportunities for independence.

Moreover, the 'unpredictable' pathway illustrates the profound consequences of disordered transitions, where key life events—such as early school leaving, unplanned pregnancies, juvenile delinquency or imprisonment—occurred outside the normative sequence. These findings align with Elder's (1998) concept of cumulative disadvantage, where early disruptions in life trajectories create a cascade of negative outcomes. The early timing of these life events, particularly without the support needed to navigate them, often left participants struggling with job instability, low self-esteem and a sense of social dislocation, as seen with participants like Jing Yi and Liang Peng, consistent with existing literature that reports concerns about young people's adverse leaving care outcomes (Berlin et al. 2011; OECD 2022; Strahl et al. 2020). These participants exemplify how disordered transitions, without timely intervention, can lead to long-term struggles in adapting to adult life, reinforcing the need for better-structured support systems to help mitigate the effects of early disruptions.

4.2 | Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. It draws on a small, context-specific sample and findings should be understood as situated rather than generalizable. Convenience sampling used here may have led to the inclusion of participants who were more accessible or willing to engage, potentially excluding those with more challenging life experiences or those living in more remote areas. Snowball sampling, while useful for accessing a hidden population, can sometimes lead to homogeneity in the sample, as participants are likely to refer others from similar backgrounds or experiences (Naderifar et al. 2017). In addition, the study was conducted in three inland provinces, chosen due to the researcher's access to local contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this facilitated fieldwork, it also means the findings may not reflect the full diversity of care-leaving experiences in other regions, such as more developed coastal provinces or less resourced western areas. Future research could benefit from larger-scale quantitative studies to validate and expand upon these findings (Takona 2024), providing a broader understanding of the issues faced by this population.

Furthermore, all interviews were conducted remotely via telephone or WeChat, in line with institutional ethical requirements during the pandemic. While this approach enhanced access across regions and respected participant safety and anonymity, it may have limited rapport compared to face-to-face settings (Lo Iacono et al. 2016) and excluded those without reliable digital access. These factors should be considered when interpreting

the narratives presented. Options for home visits, face-to-face interviews or meeting in community settings to accommodate participants' various circumstances could be considered in the future.

In addition, reflexivity and positionality shape the research process. As a Chinese researcher without personal lived experience of leaving care or disability, the first author approached participants' accounts as an outsider. This position provided a degree of analytical distance but also risked missing nuances embedded in lived experience. To address this, the first author engaged in ongoing reflexive practice and sought advice from academic supervisors (e.g., the second and third authors) and colleagues with expertise in child welfare and disability studies (e.g., internal and external examiners). Nonetheless, the absence of coresearchers with lived care experience remains a limitation, as insider perspectives could have enriched interpretation. Future research could build on this study by incorporating participatory or coproduced approaches with care leavers themselves.

Finally, the use of retrospective life-history interviews entails risks of recall bias, and the translation of transcripts from Mandarin into English may have led to some loss of nuance. While steps such as repeated listening, careful translation and member checking were taken to mitigate these risks, they cannot be fully eliminated.

4.3 | Implications for Policy and Practice

Despite limitations, the implications of this study are significant, particularly concerning the nature of care leavers' transitions. Firstly, the study suggests the importance of a gradual, rather than abrupt, transition out of care. Unlike in many Western countries, where there is a trend towards extending care support to age 21 or beyond, young adults in China are required to leave care upon reaching specific milestones, for example, age 18 or school graduation (Shang and Fisher 2017). This discrepancy creates a critical gap in the provision of support services during the crucial period of emerging adulthood, suggesting an urgent need for policy reform to extend care beyond the age of 18, in line with practices observed internationally (Courtney 2019; van Breda et al. 2020). As a step further, care-leaving policies should be more flexible and individualized, taking into account the readiness of young people rather than relying solely on age-based criteria for leaving care.

Secondly, continued support services are essential, especially for those who experience extended or disordered transitions. Such support could include continued access to education, vocational training, mental health services and transitional housing, which would provide care leavers with a more supported entry into independence. Meanwhile, service providers should enhance educational opportunities, foster life skills and create an environment that supports emotional readiness and relationship-building for young people (Atkinson and Hyde 2019; Refaeli 2017). The length of this service provision should be tailored to the personal readiness for social and financial independence, based on a comprehensive evaluation of social workers. Thirdly, the study highlights the need for

early interventions to prevent disrupted exits from critical institutions like education. Programmes that focus on re-engagement with schooling, vocational training and mental health support for care leavers are crucial in preventing the accumulation of disadvantage that we observed in the unpredictable pathway.

Finally, the diversity of pathways and experiences suggests inconsistency in institutional childcare practices across China. Some settings appear more supportive (e.g., female care leavers in the 'family-builder' pathway who received extended care). We interpret this inconsistency as reflecting variation in resources, staff training and institutional philosophies, and as signaling a system gap in cultivating relational, practical and emotional supports alongside skills for adult life. Rather than aiming solely for independence at 18, policy and practice should promote interdependence, that is, durable, developmentally appropriate connections to the institutions, caregivers, peers and community organizations, with flexible aftercare and opportunities to re-enter services. System-level standards and funding are needed to ensure that all care leavers, regardless of background or condition, receive consistent, high-quality support that sustains stable housing, education/employment continuity and ongoing connectedness.

5 | Conclusion

By exploring the timing and sequence of life events through the life-course perspective, this study highlights the importance of individualized, flexible care-leaving strategies that recognize the diverse needs and trajectories of young people. The findings reveal that timing alone is not sufficient to guarantee positive outcomes—support, preparation and the ability to exercise agency are equally crucial in helping care leavers navigate their transitions to adulthood confidently.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data will be available upon reasonable request.

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