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Perceptions of adulthood in context: voices of young people with care experience in China

Shian Yin[1]

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Abstract
This study explores how young people with care experience in China perceive and construct their identities as adults, focusing on the interplay between socially defined and self-perceived markers of adulthood. This study employs qualitative design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with 34 participants and analyzed using thematic analysis. Despite being over the age of 18, many participants expressed uncertainty about their adult status, reflecting a disconnection between societal expectations and their lived experiences. Independence emerged as a central self-defined marker of adulthood, emphasizing self-reliance, financial autonomy, and the ability to navigate life's challenges. Mental maturity, defined as the adherence to societal norms and responsibilities, was also identified as crucial to adult identity. These findings challenge conventional narratives that equate adulthood with specific life milestones, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and flexible understanding of adulthood. The study's implications suggest that tailored support systems focusing on life skills development and mental maturity could empower care-experienced youth as they transition into adulthood. Future research should explore these themes further across different regions and populations in China to enhance the findings' representativeness.

Keywords Care experience · Young people · Adult marker · Emerging adulthood · Independence · Mental maturity

Introduction

In recent decades, the academic community has increasingly directed its attention towards the intricate phase of life that bridges the chasm between childhood and adulthood: the transition to adulthood. During this pivotal stage, young individuals often encounter a multitude of formidable life changes, which encompass leaving the familiar confines of educational institutions, embarking on their professional journeys, forming their own families, and even embracing the responsibilities of parenthood (Arnett, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007; Eliason et al., 2015). Despite the undeniable significance of these milestones, people argue that these markers have traditionally been defined and understood through the lens of the adult perspective, often overlooking the voices and experiences of the young individuals themselves, as well as the nuances and socially constructed variations among them (Hendy & Pascall, 2001; Valentine, 2003). Furthermore, this transformative journey into adulthood is profoundly shaped by historical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Zhong & Arnett, 2014; Green, 2016), making the application of homogeneous understandings inadequate in a broader context and across diverse populations. For example, while independence and self-sufficiency are often highlighted in the West, Chinese young people may understand adulthood in terms of relational responsibility, social contribution, and alignment with collective expectations. Notably, much of the existing research has centered on non-marginalized groups (Arnet, 1994; Bynner, 2005; LaFreniere, 2024; Nelson et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2013), resulting in a skewed picture of the transition to adulthood. Consequently, less is known about how marginalized or vulnerable populations, such as care-experienced youth, define and navigate adulthood, leaving critical gaps in the literature.

This study focuses on young people with care experience in China. "Care experience" here refers to the life experiences of those living in institutions, while other types of

✉ Shian Yin
shian.yin1211@gmail.com

[1] Department of Health and Social Care Professions, Birmingham City University, Seacole Building, Westbourne Road, Brimingham B15 3TN, UK

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care recognized in China, such as kinship care, foster care and adoption (Yin, 2024a), are not involved in this discussion. Scholars have noted that these individuals often face numerous challenges during their transition to adulthood, including early school termination, frequent educational interruptions, employment and housing instability, a lack of formal support, a heightened risk of unemployment, and difficulties in forming marital bonds (Yin, 2024b, c; Chen, 2011; Liu et al., 2022; Shang & Fisher, 2017; Shang & Li, 2015; Zhu, 2018). These unique challenges may shape their perspectives and experiences, distinguishing them from their peers who have not undergone similar experiences. However, there is limited literature available on this topic. Given this, the primary aim of this study is to explore how young people with care experience in China understand the concept of adulthood and adult markers. The three pivotal research questions are:

i. RQ1. How do young people with care experience perceive their adult status?
ii. RQ2. What do young people with care experience think of socially constructed markers, such as leaving school, entering the workplace and forming their own families?
iii. RQ3. How do young people with care experience define adult markers?

By addressing these questions, this research will illuminate the unique voices and experiences of this underrepresented group, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the transition to adulthood. Moreover, the findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners to develop tailored support systems that improve outcomes for young people transitioning from institutional care.

Adult status and socially constructed markers

Childhood is commonly associated with imperfection and immaturity, whereas adulthood is viewed as a transition from dependence to independence and from imperfection to maturity (Norozi & Moen, 2016). The definition of adulthood, however, varies across disciplines and cultures. In many countries, including China, the age of 18 is legally recognized as the threshold of adulthood, conferring a range of rights and responsibilities such as voting, entering binding contracts, serving in the military, and making independent medical decisions. This legal standard rests on the assumption that by 18, individuals have developed sufficient maturity and cognitive capacity to undertake civic duties and make informed life choices (Arnett, 2003; Steinberg et al., 2015; Scott & Woolard, 2004). Nonetheless, there are social science researchers who are keen to identify distinct markers that signify this identity. These include milestones such as home ownership, financial independence, cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood (Eliason et al., 2015), as well as role transitions, particularly the shift from school to work (Johnson et al., 2007).

However, an increasing number of studies and discussions have highlighted a shift in the markers and definitions of adulthood, reflecting the concept's broader social and cultural construction. Arnett (2000) introduced the concept of "emerging adulthood" (generally 18–25 years old), highlighting the importance of self-responsibility and independent decision-making as key markers of adulthood, particularly among White American youth. Similarly, research in Eastern Europe has shown that traditional markers such as completing education, marrying, and having children are declining in importance, while personal responsibility and financial independence are becoming more prominent (Walczak, 2023). These shifts suggest a movement away from universal, traditional, and gendered definitions of adulthood toward more diverse and individualized interpretations (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). This transformation brings challenges, including the tension between persistent societal expectations and the varied realities of young adults, but also opportunities to reconceptualize adulthood in contemporary contexts (Settersten et al., 2015). Furthermore, identity development is further influenced by intersections of race, gender, and other social categories, prompting a need for expanded research on how different backgrounds influence perceptions and markers of adulthood (Cheah & Nelson, 2004; Clark, 2005). For example, studies of Asian American populations reveal that, in addition to self-responsibility, adulthood is strongly tied to family obligations and role transitions, reflecting the influence of collectivist cultural values (Arnett, 2003). Taken together, these findings underscore the necessity of developing more inclusive and representative definitions of adult markers.

In traditional Chinese culture, Confucius, dating back 2,500 years, outlined a distinct path to adulthood. He stressed the commencement of knowledge pursuit at age 15, followed by achieving a "whole person" status at 30 (Confucius, 500 B.C./2005). This status, as described by Confucius, is often defined as the attainment of sociodemographic accomplishments in family and career, including securing stable employment, marriage, and parenthood before the age of 30 (Shi, 1999). Although contemporary Chinese society has evolved, these ideals continue to shape expectations. Importantly, such expectations are embedded within a collectivist cultural framework that prioritizes family obligations and social harmony over individual autonomy (Mazzula, 2011). Within this framework,

adulthood is defined not only by self-sufficiency but also by fulfilling duties to parents, children, and the wider community. This is evident in cross-cultural research: Chinese college students, compared with their American peers, emphasized role transitions (e.g., marriage, childbearing), compliance with norms (e.g., sobriety, avoiding delinquency), family responsibilities (e.g., financial support, caregiving), and relational maturity (e.g., equitable relationships with parents) as key markers of adulthood (Badger et al., 2006). These views align with the centrality of filial piety (*xiao*) in Chinese culture, where being an adult entails supporting both younger and older generations (Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

Further research highlights the intersection of cultural norms and gender. Chinese cultural expectations link marriage and education with family obligations, positioning financial contributions and caregiving at the core of adulthood (Duan & Chen, 2007). However, these expectations are gendered. Among rural-to-urban migrant women workers, for instance, financial independence was not viewed as a central marker of adulthood (Zhong & Arnett, 2014). This reflects broader gender norms in which men are associated with breadwinning and leadership, while women are linked to caregiving and maintaining relational harmony (Zhang, 2000; Lyu & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, women's earnings were often redirected to their families, further complicating the notion of economic autonomy (Zhong & Arnett, 2014). Recent large-scale research ($N = 7099$) also shows ambivalence about adult status and a hybrid conception that combined individualistic markers (e.g., independence) with collectivist and Confucian ones (e.g., norm compliance, relational maturity) (Kuang et al., 2024). These findings diverge from Western perspectives, which typically prioritize individual independence, underscoring the importance of cultural and contextual variation in conceptions of adulthood.

Despite this growing body of research, much of the literature still reflects the perspectives of relatively privileged populations, with marginalized groups often overlooked. In particular, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how young people with care experience perceive adulthood, especially within the Chinese context. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how these young people construct their adult identities and interpret markers of adulthood within this collectivist cultural setting.

Young people with care experience in China

The young people with care experience in this study are those who have lived in state-funded childcare institutions, specifically the "*ertong fuliyuan*" (Child Welfare Institution) and "*shehui fuliyuan*" (Social Welfare Institution). In China, children typically enter these institutions due to abandonment, parental loss, or state intervention when families are unable to provide adequate care (Shang & Fisher, 2017). According to official statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the institutional care population peaked around 2010 and has since declined, with the most recent data indicating that approximately 53,302 children and young people (27.36% of those in alternative care) were living in 539 institutions nationwide in 2021 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022; Yin, 2024a). Upon reaching the age of 18, young people are generally required to leave care and transition to independent living, unless they cannot demonstrate employability or self-care ability, in which case they may remain in care (Yin, 2024d). While estimates suggest that 10,000 to 20,000 young people leave care each year (Shang & Li, 2015), there are no comprehensive national statistics on the total population of care leavers.

Several factors distinguish their journey to adulthood. This group typically experiences early loss of contact with their parents due to bereavement or abandonment (Yin, 2024a; Shang et al., 2008), resulting in a lack of parental support throughout their lives, in contrast to their peers without any care backgrounds (Kucheva, 2018). Furthermore, their lived experience in institutions often deprives them of opportunities to benefit from supportive relationships and attachments from diverse sources, making them less able to acquire essential life skills and practical experiences (Shang et al., 2011). Moreover, these care institutions often focus more on nursing and rearing, while neglecting education and preparation for social and independent living (Yin, 2024e; Chen, 2019; Xia, 2013; Zhu, 2018). Additionally, existing support and provisions in the care system are generally limited to individuals under 18, with minimal attention to their later lives through law, policy, or programs (Yin, 2024d; Chen, 2011; Jia et al., 2019). The state's lack of involvement in this aspect and the absence of comprehensive arrangements within the care system for transition preparation, planning, and aftercare services make it challenging for many youths to leave institutional care at the required time (Chen, 2020; Xia, 2013; Zhu, 2018). For the majority who have managed to leave care, outcomes in terms of educational attainment, employment stability, housing status, social integration and overall well-being remain concerning (Shang & Li, 2015; Shang & Fisher, 2017; Zhu, 2018). Given their unique experiences of living in and leaving care, their understanding of adulthood and adult markers may differ significantly. Therefore, the research focuses on understanding their perspectives on socially constructed markers and their own definitions of adulthood.

Materials and methods

Research design

Qualitative methodology was chosen for this study due to its alignment with the ontological and epistemological foundations of the research. Ontologically, the study adopts a constructivist perspective, recognizing that reality is socially constructed and subjective—an essential viewpoint for understanding the varied perceptions of adulthood among young people with care experience in China. Epistemologically, an interpretivist approach was employed to gain insights into the participants' lived experiences and their interpretations of adult markers, allowing for a deeper understanding of their unique perspectives.

Study context

The data for this study were collected during the author's PhD project (2020–2023), which invited young people with care experience in China to reflect on their experiences and perspectives on the transition to adulthood. This broader project investigated multiple dimensions of transition such as education, employment, and relationships. The present article reports on a distinct analysis focusing specifically on participants' perceptions of adulthood and adult markers—an aspect not explored in previous publications or in the doctoral thesis. Neither the extracts nor the thematic interpretations presented here have been published elsewhere.

Fieldwork was carried out in several inland provinces of China, including Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei. These sites were chosen for their accessibility and because they host childcare institutions (*fuliyuan*), providing opportunities to recruit participants with care backgrounds. Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling: convenience sampling facilitated initial recruitment from institutional contacts, while snowball sampling enabled access to additional participants through peer referral.

In total, participants were selected using a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling was initially employed to recruit participants who were easily accessible to the researcher, while snowball sampling helped in reaching additional participants through referrals. The final sample consisted of 34 participants, including 19 males (55.9%) and 15 females, with ages ranging from 19 to 40 years (M = 27). This demographic diversity allowed for the exploration of a range of perspectives on adulthood (*see* Table 1).

Table 1 An overview of participants' demographic information

Name Code	Age	Gender	Age entering care	Age leaving care	Length of care experience (year)
CL01	25	M	12	22	10
CL03	38	F	0	25	25
CL04	33	F	3	18	15
CL05	22	M	0	22	22
CL06	33	M	5	16	11
CL07	29	M	6	22	16
CL08	27	M	0	22	22
CL09	39	F	0	32	33
CL10	38	F	0	24	24
CL11	39	F	5	25	20
CL12	34	M	9	23	14
CL13	40	M	0	20	20
CL14	31	F	0	24	24
CL15	35	M	0	34	34
CL16	31	M	5	16	11
CL18	35	F	0	15	15
CL19	20	M	15	19	4
CL20	19	M	14	18	4
CL21	20	F	15	19	4
CL22	19	F	14	18	4
CL23	20	F	15	19	4
CL24	27	M	12	22	10
CS01	21	F	12	n/a	9
CS02	22	F	0	n/a	22
CS03	27	M	2	n/a	25
CS04	23	F	11	n/a	12
CS05	21	F	11	n/a	10
CS06	29	M	0	n/a	29
CS07	19	M	12	n/a	7
CS08	20	M	9	n/a	11
CS09	24	M	9	n/a	15
CS10	34	F	5	n/a	29
CS11	23	M	8	n/a	15
CS12	23	M	5	n/a	18

(i) The age was calculated by the birth year that was reported by each participant in the year of data collection (2021). (ii) Considering confidentiality and anonymity, here applies pseudonyms. The abbreviation "CL" refers to "Care Leaver" -- people who have left care experience; "CS" means "Care stayer"—people who are over 18 years old but still living in care; The number and name code contain no semantical value.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility and depth (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This approach enabled participants to discuss topics that were meaningful to them, allowing the researcher to explore areas of interest in detail (Wengraf, 2001). The interview schedule covered multiple domains of transition to adulthood. Within this structure, a specific block of questions

Table 2 Interview questions

For RQ 1.
(1) "Do you think you are an adult? Why do you think so?"
For RQ2
(2) "Some people believe life events are also meaningful as to be an adult (such as, leaving school, starting to work, forming own family, and having your own residence)? What do you think of these events?"
For RQ 3.
(1) "I am very interested in understanding your perspectives in adulthood. Could you tell me what you think of the markers of being an adult?"

asked participants to reflect on their adult status and the markers they associated with being an adult (see Table 2). Although the interviews as a whole lasted between 45 and 90 min, discussions specifically concerning adulthood marker typically spanned 10–15 min. These sections of the interviews form the empirical focus of the current study.

Given the logistical and ethical considerations, all interviews were conducted remotely via WeChat audio calls. Remote interviewing offered several advantages, including time and cost efficiency, the ability to include participants from diverse geographic locations, and enhanced anonymity, which may have encouraged participants to speak more freely about sensitive topics (Steele et al., 2022). All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study, which involved human participants, was obtained from the university's ethics committee where the author was affiliated with. The study strictly adhered to the approved ethical guidelines. Before each interview, the author thoroughly explained the research aims, objectives, voluntary nature of participation, potential benefits, and any risks to the participants. Oral and written consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their right to withdraw at any stage—before, during, or after participation.

Data analysis

To address the research questions, the relevant interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture the complexities of participants' experiences. The six-step process included:

i. Familiarization with the Data: The researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim and engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the data.
ii. Generating Initial Codes: The researcher systematically coded the data, identifying significant phrases, sentences, or sections that were relevant to the research questions. Both semantic and latent codes were used to capture explicit content and underlying meanings.
iii. Searching for Themes: The codes were then organized into potential themes, which represented broader patterns of meaning within the data. This step involved grouping related codes together and identifying overarching themes that captured key aspects of the participants' experiences.
iv. Reviewing Themes: The initial themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring that they accurately reflected the data. This involved checking for coherence within themes and distinguishing between themes to avoid overlapping.
v. Defining and Naming Themes: Once the themes were finalized, each theme was clearly defined and given a descriptive name that conveyed its essence. Detailed descriptions of each theme were prepared to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives.
vi. Producing the Report: The final step involved writing up the analysis, linking the themes back to the research questions and literature, and illustrating them with direct quotes from the participants. This thematic report forms the basis of the study's findings.

Findings

Enquiry into adult status and socially constructed adult markers among young people with care experience

In response to the first research question, the participants' contradictory perspectives of socially constructed adult markers are particularly pronounced. Nearly one-third of the participants were uncertain about their adult status, despite being over the age of 18, which is commonly recognized as the threshold for adulthood by laws in China. This uncertainty reflects a broader disconnection between the participants' lived experiences and societal expectations of adulthood. For instance, two male participants expressed that while their age indicated they were adults, their lingering sense of immaturity left them uncertain:

> *"I am over 20 years old. I think I should be an adult by now. But sometimes, I don't really feel that way. It seems like my mind is still like a child's. I'm still a little uncertain whether I'm an adult. I'm not sure…"- CS06.*

> *"I think… I think maybe in terms of age, I have reached adulthood. But in terms of the situations in my life and the way I act and speak, I can't even take care of my own life. How can that be considered being an adult? I am not an adult."- CL16.*

This sense of uncertainty and reluctance to fully embrace the adult identity may be rooted in the participants' experiences within care institutions, where their autonomy and decision-making opportunities were likely limited. The transition from a highly structured environment to one where they are expected to take full responsibility for their lives could be overwhelming, leading to feelings of inadequacy in fulfilling adult roles.

Furthermore, other male participants shared similar sentiments, hesitating to confirm their adult identity primarily due to their frustrations with family formation. For them, forming a family seemed to be a key marker of entering adulthood, reflecting traditional Chinese cultural values that place significant emphasis on family responsibilities:

> *"From society's perspective, I am an adult. But from a family perspective, I am still an unmarried child. So, I am not an adult."- CL24.*

Such insights suggest that some young people with care experience recognize the significance of life events, such as marriage and family formation, in marking adult status. However, their inability or unwillingness to achieve these milestones may lead them to question their status as adults. This internal conflict highlights the tension between societal expectations and personal experiences, particularly for those who have not followed the conventional path to adulthood.

On the contrary, one participant acknowledged the value of socially defined markers but emphasized that they do not constitute an absolute criterion for adulthood, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be an adult:

> *"These markers are meaningful criteria, but I think they are not the absolute answer. Adult markers mainly depend on personal abilities and how one behaves…" – CS01.*

CL24 further elaborated:

> You also have to be filial to your parents, love your spouse, teach your children well, and take responsibility for everything. These are what make a person a qualified adult. But many people can't achieve this and even perform badly. They don't deserve to be called human.

These perspectives suggest that while participants recognize the cultural importance of certain life events, they also believe that personal qualities and behaviors play a critical role in defining adulthood. This view challenges the conventional notion that adulthood is primarily defined by external achievements, instead emphasizing the importance of internal maturity and social responsibility.

Some participants even challenged the conventional view that leaving school, entering the workforce, and establishing a family are definitive markers of adulthood. As one female participant argued:

> *"Well… in this respect, it seems relevant to me, but not that much. You see, I've graduated, entered the workplace for many years, and I have my own family, but I still feel like I don't seem like an adult…"- CL11.*

This indicates that even after achieving traditional adult milestones, some individuals may still feel unprepared or inadequate as adults. This could be due to lingering effects of their experiences in care, which may have delayed or disrupted their development of a stable adult identity.

Overall, it is evident that young people with care experience do not fully agree with the conventional perspectives on adulthood commonly held by the general population or constructed by society. Their experiences and perspectives challenge the notion that adulthood can be universally defined by specific milestones, highlighting the need for a more flexible and inclusive understanding of what it means to be an adult (Clark, 2005).

Self-defined adult markers among young people with care experience

Independence as an adult marker

When it comes to self-perceived adult markers, independence emerged as the most significant criterion among participants. Likely influenced by their prolonged periods of dependency and constraints within care institutions, participants view independent living- a life without relying on others in day-to-day activities- as a significant achievement. In other words, this life change represents a departure from their lives in care settings and signifies their embrace of adulthood.

For these individuals, independence entails breaking free from the patterns of being cared for and establishing a new relationship with society. It carries immense significance, as it marks their transition from dependency to autonomy, a critical aspect of their adult identity. Specifically, living independently involves having a self-reliant mindset and the financial capability to sustain oneself. Two participants described this as follows:

"If one can make money by himself, has his own independent thinking, can undertake certain responsibilities, and no longer relies on others, he is an adult." – CL08.

"How to say it… I think the markers of being an adult now are being able to earn and save money. These are the standards of adulthood… Not only earning money but also being able to save it and manage finances well." – CL05.

This emphasis on financial independence and self-sufficiency likely stems from their previous experiences in care, where financial decisions and responsibilities were often handled by others (Shang & Fisher, 2017). Gaining control over their finances represents a significant step toward establishing their identity as independent adults.

Moreover, this independence extends to the ability to navigate the complexities of adult life. As adults without the safety net of parental support and with few external support networks, participants may perceive adulthood as a daunting and challenging terrain. Consequently, some view specific personal attributes and skills as essential prerequisites for adulthood. These attributes include problem-solving abilities, fearlessness, and adaptability in interactions with others, all of which are crucial for adult life and mark adult identity:

"(As an adult) You have to be able to solve problems. You can't run away from difficulties. You have to face them head-on. Adults must have the ability to solve problems in advance. Whether you're doing badly or doing well, the most important thing for adults is to learn to face problems instead of running away from them…" —CL16.

"I think the standard of adulthood is the ability to respond confidently in any situation and face anything…" –CL23.

"An adult should be able to deal with people and situations flexibly. When meeting different people, especially those with different personalities, adults can always handle them in different ways, not just using one method."—CS09.

These responses highlight the participants' understanding that adulthood involves more than just financial or physical independence; it also requires emotional and psychological resilience. This resilience is particularly important for young people with care experience, as they often face unique challenges and a lack of support that others might take for granted.

Mental maturity as an adult marker

In addition to independence, participants in this study believe that mental maturity, particularly the absence of childishness, is crucial to defining their adult identity. This marker requires young people to speak and behave in line with societal norms and expectations associated with adulthood. It suggests that adulthood is perceived as performative or processual, contingent on fulfilling responsibilities to an acceptable standard. Failure to adhere to these social and contextual norms may erode their perception of adult identity (Valentine, 2003).

While both male and female participants underscored the importance of mental maturity, their accounts revealed gendered differences in emphasis. Male participants often linked maturity to responsibility and accountability in family and work roles, reflecting cultural expectations of men as providers and protectors. For instance, one explained:

"My understanding of adults is calmness, patience, accountability, and responsibility, which are the most important qualities. Especially in the family, being responsible for your spouse and children is crucial. Without a sense of responsibility, the family will break up sooner or later. Be careful, be patient, and be responsible at work." –CL12.

The emphasis on calmness and patience further suggests that participants see adulthood as a role that involves not just personal growth but also social responsibility. For them, adulthood means being accountable for one's actions and fulfilling one's duties to others, particularly within the family and work settings. By contrast, female participants were more likely to frame mental maturity in terms of moral conduct, empathy, and relational responsibility. CS01, for example, emphasized moral values and principled behavior:

"An adult should have their own opinions and correct outlooks, and they should not hold extreme views. Good moral values, self-discipline, and principles are essential. At the very least, they shouldn't do bad or extreme things. They should also integrate into society and understand teamwork, always doing things according to the rules. They can't do things that harm others." –CS01.

Two other female participants expressed similar sentiments, asserting that adults engage in thoughtful and sophisticated thinking aligned with societal codes and values before taking any action:

"Adults should be calm and steady, having their own logical thinking when facing problems, but not deviating from conventional moral codes and values, even if they hold different opinions…"—CS05.

"Adults should handle things appropriately, not blindly or impulsively, or doing whatever they want. Now we think before we act, 'Oh, should we do it? Is it appropriate? Is it right?"—CL09.

The above insights seem to reveal a consensus regarding the importance of young people's adherence to social norms and expectations of adulthood in determining their adult identity. Those who violate or deviate from these norms are not considered mentally mature and, consequently, are not recognized as adults by the participants. This focus on responsibility and accountability aligns with traditional views of adulthood but is also colored by the participants' experiences of instability and the need for a stable environment, which they may have lacked during their time in care (Yin, 2024e).

In addition to self-conduct, mental maturity, as described by the participants, extends to one's capacity to care for or think of others. One female participant articulated this concept by contrasting adults with children, arguing that the ability to consider others distinguishes someone as having transitioned into adulthood:

"Unlike children's thoughts, which only consider themselves, adults think more comprehensively. Children only think about whether something benefits them, not considering the broader context. So, I think I will judge others from this aspect."—CS12.

Another female participant, CL03, described how her outlook had shifted as she matured, now centering on the well-being of family and friends:

"…my mind is different (than that in childhood). My thoughts right now are different than those used to be, too. My only thoughts are to keep family members safe, work smoothly, and wish my friends around me lead a good life. That's it. My mind is much more mature." –CL03.

These differences may suggest broader Chinese cultural expectations, where men are often associated with breadwinning and leadership within the family, whereas women are linked to caregiving, nurturing, and the maintenance of relational harmony. Thus, participants' understandings of mental maturity not only illustrate their personal growth and values but also mirror gendered cultural norms that shape how young people with care experience construct their adult identities.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how young people with care experience in China perceive and construct their identities as adults, highlighting the complex interplay between socially defined markers and self-perceived markers of adulthood. The 34 participants' perceptions reveal a paradoxical and multifaceted experience: despite their age indicating adulthood (being over 18), a significant proportion expressed uncertainty about their adult status. Many participants identified as adults in some aspects of their lives, yet not in others. This ambivalence resonates with broader research in China indicating that young individuals often exhibit contradictory attitudes toward their own adulthood (Badger et al., 2006; Kuang et al., 2024; Zhong & Arnett, 2014). It suggests that the concept of "emerging adulthood," as articulated by Arnett (1994, 2000, 2003), is also relevant to young people with care experience in China, even including those over 30 years old, thereby extending our knowledge of this life stage.

The participants' hesitance to fully embrace their adult identity is influenced by several factors. For some, a sense of immaturity created a dissonance between their chronological age and their self-perceived level of maturity. This dissonance challenges the social expectation that age is sufficient to be considered an adult indicator. Such a situation can be explained that the structured and often restrictive environment of care institutions may have limited their opportunities to develop autonomy and decision-making skills, which are typically associated with self-perceived adulthood (Melendro et al., 2020). Other participants, particularly males, hesitated to confirm their adult identity due to frustrations related to family formation. Some of them, due to prolonged living experiences in care, still feel unprepared or inadequate as adults, even though they have acquired all socially endorsed markers. These findings underscore the importance of personal life experiences, social and contextual factors in shaping one's self-concept as an adult and highlight the variability in how adulthood is experienced and understood (Settersten et al., 2015).

Despite their various degrees of agreeing with socially defined adult markers, young people with care experience demonstrated their own understanding of adulthood. Independence emerged as a central and highly prioritized marker. For these young individuals, adulthood is intricately intertwined with the notion of self-reliance and the ability to lead a life not contingent on the support of others. This emphasis on independence challenges conventional narratives that often link adulthood solely to age-related and/or socially endorsed milestones such as education, employment, marriage, or parenthood (Eliason

et al., 2015; Green, 2016; Johnson et al., 2007). Instead, the participants' perspective suggests that the transition to adulthood is a deeply personal journey that hinges on one's capacity to navigate life independently. This different perception appears to stem from their experiences of long-term dependency within care institutions and the constraints associated with such environments. Moreover, the participants' conception of independence extends beyond mere physical and financial self-sufficiency. It encompasses the ability to approach life's challenges with self-reliance, problem-solving skills, confidence, and adaptability, highlighting emotional and psychological resilience. This finding adds to research on young adults' understanding of independence in other contexts (Arnett, 2015; Arnett & Schwab, 2012; LaFreniere, 2024), yet it brings into focus the unique challenges faced by young people with care experience, who often lack the support systems that others may take for granted (Liu et al., 2022). They have no choice or control during the transition to adulthood but to strive on their own.

In addition to independence, mental maturity emerged as another critical marker of adulthood for the participants. Mental maturity was defined as the absence of childlike behavior and adherence to societal norms and expectations associated with adulthood. This construct highlights that adult identity is perceived as performative and processual, shaped by an individual's ability to fulfill responsibilities to societal standards, rather than by socio-demographic milestones (Valentine, 2003; Wright & von Stumm, 2024). The participants' perspective further emphasizes that mental maturity is not solely an internal state but is also reflected in one's interactions with others. Being an adult involves the ability to consider and care for others, particularly family members, in contrast to the self-centered perspective associated with childhood. This resonates with broader research on Chinese emerging adults, which shows that psychological maturity and norm compliance are consistently valued as markers of adulthood, alongside independence (Kuang et al., 2024; Zhong & Arnett, 2014). While such expectations reflect cultural traditions that emphasize relational obligations, the findings here extend this understanding to care-experienced youth, a group rarely represented in the literature. They suggest that mental maturity is not simply an individual attribute but is embedded within relational and cultural frameworks. The findings also suggest subtle gendered nuances in how mental maturity was articulated. Male participants tended to highlight accountability in family and work roles, aligning with traditional expectations of men as providers and protectors. By contrast, female participants were more likely to emphasize empathy, moral conduct, and relational responsibility, reflecting cultural associations of women with caregiving and maintaining relational harmony. Although these differences were not sharply divided, they mirror broader Chinese collectivist values in which gendered expectations remain influential (Ma, 2025). Adulthood, in this sense, is experienced as a fluid and relational construct, influenced by social roles, personal responsibilities, and the collective expectations of family and community.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the support and guidance provided to young people with care experience as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Firstly, recognizing the paramount importance of independence in their self-perceived markers of adulthood suggests that efforts to facilitate their transition should prioritize the development of self-reliance and life skills. Programs and interventions that foster financial literacy, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability could be instrumental in empowering these young individuals to achieve independence. For instance, life skills training that focuses on budgeting, decision-making, and conflict resolution could help these young people build the confidence and capabilities necessary for independent living. Secondly, the participants' emphasis on mental maturity as performative underscores the need for support systems that facilitate their adherence to societal norms and values. Providing opportunities for them to develop a strong sense of responsibility, ethical conduct, and effective interpersonal skills may contribute to it. This could involve mentoring programs where young people are paired with role models who exemplify these qualities, as well as workshops that teach communication, teamwork, and ethical decision-making.

Moreover, it is crucial for support systems to acknowledge the complexity of the transition to adulthood for young people with care experience. This transition often involves navigating a unique set of challenges, particularly living with weak social networks and the limited formal and informal support (Yin, 2024d; Stein, 2019; Shang & Fisher, 2017). Tailored support that addresses these specific challenges and provides guidance on self-reliance and responsible decision-making is essential. Policymakers and practitioners should consider developing targeted programs that address the psychological, social, and financial needs of care-experienced youth, helping them to build resilience and foster a sense of belonging in society.

While this study has uncovered valuable insights into the self-perceived markers of adulthood for young people with care experience in China, it has limitations. The sample size, although representative, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within this population. Future research could explore the experiences of young people with care backgrounds in greater depth, considering regional and cultural variations across the country. For

instance, studies could compare the experiences of care-experienced youth in Eastern coastal areas versus Inland cities or among different ethnic groups within China. Additionally, quantitative studies could provide a broader perspective by examining the prevalence and significance of these self-perceived markers among a larger and more diverse population. Such studies could also investigate the long-term outcomes associated with different markers of adulthood, helping to identify which factors most strongly predict successful transitions.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the transition to adulthood by providing a nuanced understanding of how young people with care experience in China perceive and construct their adult identities. The findings underscore the importance of independence and mental maturity as central markers of adulthood, while also challenging conventional narratives that equate adulthood with specific life milestones. By situating these perspectives within the Chinese cultural context and drawing attention to the distinctive challenges faced by care-experienced youth, this research provides valuable insights for scholars and practitioners seeking to better support this marginalized population in their journey to adulthood.

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Author contributions Dr Shian Yin is solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data. He drafted, revised, and finalized the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission.

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Data availability Data selected and analyzed in this study are confidential and will be available on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham (Reference: 2021-053-PGR), where the author was affiliated, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines.

Competing interests The author declares no financial or non-financial interests that are directly or indirectly related to the work submitted for publication.

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