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Poverty and agency among children in urban China

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Abstract

Scholars of childhood typically view children as agentic; poverty researchers, aware that poverty reduces children's life-chances, may be tempted to consider them as victims. Adults experiencing poverty report feelings of powerlessness, and, by analogy, poverty may reduce children's agency. However, comparatively little is known about the impact of poverty on child agency or the extent to which children use their agency to mediate the effects of poverty. Therefore, 55 low-income children from two Chinese schools were invited to participate in group discussions and qualitative interviews spread over several hours. Considering poverty to be multidimensional, children identified that their agency was restricted both by poverty and their status as children but argued that they were not without agency. This was confirmed in interviews with parents and teachers. Six strategies were identified that children use to ameliorate poverty's effects. The strategies group into three pairs, the first strategy in each pair reflecting a child's decision to accommodate to their circumstances with the second being an attempt to alter them. The first pair (norm adaptation and active communication) comprised coping strategies addressing the present; the second pair (self-improvement and self-sacrifice) were expressions of constructive agency; and the third pair (lowered expectations and rebellion) were partially acts of despair. Giving greater recognition to children's attempts to improve the lives of their families and themselves may lead to more effective modes of policy intervention.

Keywords: Child agency, multidimensional poverty, strategies, punishment, China, culture

Poverty and agency among children in urban China

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3 Unlike adults, children are rarely blamed for their poverty. Instead, they are frequently seen as ‘victims’,
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5 lacking agency, unfortunate to be born in the wrong place, at the wrong time, or to the wrong parents who lack
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7 the human, social or moral capital adequately to provide for them (Ho et al.,2022; Cooper, 2021; Holmes et al.,
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9 2018). The extensive literature on the scarring effects of childhood might, taken at face value, offer support to
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11 the notion of children being victims of poverty (Visser et al. 2022; Lesner, 2018.Miller and Chen, 2013).
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14 In contrast, child agency has been emphasised since almost the inception of childhood studies in the 1980s
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16 (James, 2013; Esser et al., 2016). Based on scholarly usage, Montreuil and Carnevale (2016, p. 510) have
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18 suggested that:

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20 Children’s agency could be defined as children’s capacity to act deliberately, speak for oneself, and
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22 actively reflect on their social worlds, shaping their lives and the lives of others.
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25 It should be acknowledged that there is increasing debate about what precisely child agency means. Some have
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27 questioned whether the concept is culturally bound and whether the reality differs by context (Esser et al.,
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29 2016). In some cases, child agency may be too constrained by adult power to be even registered by children
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31 themselves.
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34 One conclusion that might be drawn from the unusual juxtaposition between child agency and child victim is
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36 that poverty denies children agency. Certainly, studies of adult poverty, especially those that define poverty in
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38 multidimensional and relational terms, point to a close association between poverty and powerlessness and
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40 victimisation (Pickering-Saqqa, 2019; Narayan, 2017). Interestingly, though, deeply participatory studies that
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42 include adults experiencing poverty within the research team identify a dimension of poverty that they label
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44 ‘unrecognised contribution’, noting that the ‘knowledge and skills of people living in poverty are rarely seen,
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46 acknowledged or valued’ (Bray et al., 2019, p.22). Children in poverty may be doubly powerless being both
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48 poor and children (Schweiger and Cabezas, 2017).
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51 However, relatively few studies have explored agency among children and young people experiencing poverty.
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53 These, though, have hinted that children may well exert agency (Middleton et al., 1994; Ridge, 2002). This
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55 points to children negotiating for their share of the limited resources available but also engaging purposively in
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57 labour to boost family incomes. This raises the possibility that children may actively try to mediate the effects
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59 of poverty.
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1 The intention in this article is, therefore, to further explore children’s agency when confronting poverty by
2 drawing on research conducted in two urban centres in China. China is a particularly interesting case with both
3 unique characteristics and others that might enhance the generalisability of the research findings. It has
4 implemented an exceptionally rigid population control strategy that has dramatically reduced the birth rate and
5 increased the social and economic importance of children in the context of urban China. More typical of rapidly
6 developing countries, economic growth has been accompanied by large-scale rural-urban migration with
7 migrants being heavily stigmatised in their destinations. Poverty, too, is much stigmatised in a culture that now
8 prioritises economic success (Yang and Walker, 2020). Education is widely viewed as an important good, a
9 means of escaping intergenerational poverty through social mobility (Ponzini, 2020; Zhu and Chang, 2019).
10 Children, though, are generally perceived to be ‘adults in waiting’, members of families - even their possessions
11 - whose agency is not much acknowledged in traditional and current parenting practice (Huang,2023; Zhou and
12 Jia, 2022).

27 **Poverty and child agency**

28 As already mentioned, literature that addresses child agency in the context of poverty is relatively limited.

29 There are, though, vast literatures that consider each topic separately.

34 ***Poverty and child poverty***

35 Poverty is increasingly recognised to be multidimensional. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) adopted
36 by UNDP embraces three dimensions (limited education, poor health, and low living standard) based on 12
37 indicators, but it is recognised that more child-specific indicators are required (Vaz et al., 2019; Omotoso and
38 Koch, 2018). The Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA), pioneered by UNICEF, focuses on
39 child-relevant indicators and, reflecting child development, has two specifications: one for infants aged 0 to 4;
40 and one for children and youth aged 5 to 17 (Carraro and Ferrone, 2020). It embraces more dimensions than the
41 MPI (14) including violence and negligence, child labour, access to information, leisure, and social
42 relationships.

43 Explorations of poverty that have included input from children have added several dimensions (Bray et al.,
44 2019; Kahn et al., 2019). The most comprehensive study, a precursor to the research reported below, involving
45 detailed research with children aged between eight and 11, identified nine dimensions of child poverty (Figure
46 1) (Yang et al., 2023). Four dimensions were viewed by children to be structural and beyond their control, three

1 were relational and two – shame and presumed lack of agency – were pervasive perhaps comprising, to borrow
2 Amartya Sen’s words (1983, pp. 32-3), ‘the absolutist core’ of the experience of child poverty.
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4 **FIGURE 1 HERE**

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7 **Figure 1: Dimensions of childhood poverty**

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9 As a social phenomenon, there is ample evidence that poverty is a personal and social ill. It causes stress,
10 suffering and mental and physical ill-health (Adamkovič and Martončík, 2017; Walker, 2014). Children brought
11 up in poverty-stricken households often do less well at school, are stigmatised, prone to ill-health and at risk of
12 various forms of abuse by hard-pressed parents and risk being economically and emotionally scarred for life
13 and, while they are not condemned to permanent poverty, their chances of achieving prosperity are much
14 reduced (Naven et al. 2019, Wan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2018).
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22 Some research has focussed on the resilience of children experiencing poverty. That which has engaged directly
23 with children has revealed survival strategies that children use (Knight et al., 2019; Middleton, et al., 1994).
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25 These include sophisticated negotiation strategies with parents and other adults to acquire extra resources,
26 attempts to penetrate friendship groups despite being stigmatised by poverty, and mental games played to cope
27 with rejection (Muschamp et al., 2009). There are competing accounts of whether children reduce their
28 consumption demands, ‘learning to be poor’, or become more sophisticated in terms of ‘making do’, or more
29 forceful and rebellious in laying claim to resources (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999; Middleton, et al., 1994).
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36 Ge and Ngai (2020), working within the resilience tradition, have generated counterintuitive findings for China.
37 They report that, as anticipated, multidimensional poverty (measured as the MPI) reduces the self-efficiency of
38 children aged 10-15, the resources that families save to cover education costs, and the quality of schooling.
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40 These, in turn, serve to lower academic achievement (as assessed by parents). Unexpectedly, though, they find
41 that poverty increases education-related behavioural performance (as reported by children). This they speculate
42 is due to children experiencing poverty adopting ‘positive coping actions or adaptation behaviours in response to
43 the adversity’ (Ge and Ngai, 2020: 7).
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51 **Child agency**

52 The emphasis given the child agency since the 1980s – especially under the rubrics of the ‘new sociology of
53 childhood’ – has recently been questioned as representing an Anglo-Saxon approach to children’s studies that
54 focusses on micro processes revealed by ethnographic studies. As such, it fails to take adequate cognizance of
55 Scandinavian and German scholarship which has sought to explain how child agency is framed and constrained
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by macro-structures as varied as culture, law, social work, and deprivation (James, 2013; Honig, 2009; Fuchs, 2001). A separate characterisation of this distinction is between those scholars who take a constructivist approach to childhood and those who have adopted a structural stance. Alanen (2020), for example, has argued that child agency is bounded by generational order as a structural category that, while not always paramount, imposes rules or regularities on both children and adults.

Some authors have argued that the concept of child agency is too substantialist, divorced from cultural influences and devoid of historical perspective (Haring, et al., 2019). Childhood in the developing world, it is suggested, is profoundly different from that experienced in the individualist global north (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Often more collectivist, children in developing countries are therefore frequently socially constructed as members of, and as resources within, a family or clan; hence, they are expected to fulfil roles deemed suitable for a child of a particular age by fully participating in the economic productive life of the collective (Jenson, 2014). Through this lens, childhood does not exist as a clearly defined life-stage given over to personal development through play and study; children's agency is thus, it is argued, much 'thinner' in developing countries (Klocker, 2007; Kayser, 2016).

Yet others have opined that a child's agency differs according to context – school, home, neighbourhood – and, indeed, that it is socially constructed through relationships which mean that a child is not solely in control of their agency. In Sweden, for example, children report most agency with peers and the least with teachers (Gurdal and Sorbring, 2019). But relationships with parents are, of course, critically important with agency increasing, albeit not with necessarily positive outcomes, as parenting styles differ from authoritarian through authoritative and permissive to uninvolved (Sanvictores and Mendez, 2022). Moreover, poverty itself has consistently been reported as a stressor that leads to harsher parenting practices - even abuse - and consequently poorer parent-child relationships (Beasley et al., 2022; Ho et al., 2022; Bywaters and Skinner, 2022). Therefore, agency is envisaged as the developing outcome of bilateral and multilateral processes (Gurdal and Sorbring, 2019). In clinical and behavioural development research, attempts have been made to measure and actively to enhance children's agency in particular settings (Lennings and Bussey, 2017; Pendry et al., 2013). For example, in situations of parental conflict, there has been a focus on children's problem-solving (proactive) behaviour, on avoiding misreading events (maladaptive cognitions) that might engender inappropriate self-blaming, and on preventing maladaptive behaviour (Lennings and Bussey, 2017).

In summary, child agency may best be conceptualised as a continuum that varies in degree and perhaps in kind across and possibly within cultures according to setting (Abebe, 2019). The important questions then become

whether poverty impacts on child agency and if child agency can mediate the effects of poverty.

Method

The research was conducted between 2019 and 2020 in two schools located in Beijing and Hangzhou, China. The design and the implementation of the research were both affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Originally intended as single site project conducted in a River School (a pseudonym) in Beijing, this was prevented by lockdown and social distancing. In the event, the main fieldwork had to be moved to Stone School, Hangzhou, a nine-grade school of nearly 3,500 students, open exclusively to migrant children (Figure 2). The research was funded by UNICEF-China, with UNICEF's (2015) procedures for ethical standards in research being strictly followed throughout. In light of the children protection and least harm principles, the research team worked in hand with psychology teachers at both schools and professionals from Beijing Normal University to establish a referral system for crisis cases.

FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2 Study design

In Stone School, 36 children - 19 boys and 17 girls - were drawn from two school years (Grade 3, ages 8-9, and Grade 5, ages 10-11). With guidance from teaching staff drawing on school records, children were first divided into small groups of between three and six, homogenous in terms of age, family, economic, and migration status. Each group convened on three occasions, moderated by two members of the research team, and respectively discussed school life (especially interaction with peers), home life, and self-image and aspirations. Children were subsequently invited to participate in mixed groups. Groupwork comprised a mix of 'participant observation, role play and narrative techniques (such as drawing and writing about experiences and concepts) with observers noting group dynamics. Altogether 36 group sessions were held averaging approximately 45 minutes in length. In addition, each child was later interviewed in depth on between four and six occasions for about three hours in total. This was necessary to cover the range of topics while being sensitive to the age and span of concentration of each child. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with parents and with 24 teachers, class teaching was observed systematically and between half a day and a day was spent observing each of 10 families. Per capita household income for the whole sample was just 20 percent above Hangzhou's 'poverty line'.

River School, located in a low-status neighbourhood, accepted children born locally and others that had moved

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to the city, residency status (*hukou*) being a major social divide in China (Zhang, 2016). Covid-19 control procedures in Beijing's River School meant that children had to be interviewed by telephone or online and no group-work was possible. Nineteen children from Grade 4 (ages 9-10) and Grade 6 (ages 11-12) were interviewed for an average of about 50 minutes spread over several occasions. Drawn at random from those identified by school staff as experiencing material deprivation, the sample included nine girls and ten boys. Whereas none of the Hangzhou children had a local residency (*hukou*), seven of the Beijing children did so. The family incomes of the children were very similar to those in Hangzhou but because the cost of living in Beijing is higher, their standard of living was somewhat lower. All but three of the children in Beijing lived in households with incomes below the city's low-income line.

While the principal objective of the research was to better understand children's experience of poverty, it became evident that children talked and thought primarily about their actions and interactions with peers and with significant adults. In this sense, agency became a rather unexpected focus of the fieldwork and subsequently of the analysis which was conducted systematically by all Chinese speaking members of the research team of nine. Codes were developed iteratively and further interrogated assisted by NVivo-12 software. In presenting the findings priority is given to accounts provided by children. Where necessary and appropriate, these are elaborated or corroborated through reference to the views of teachers and parents. Quotations are illustrative not definitive since there is seldom a one-to-one correspondence between concepts developed from the totality of the data and short quotations from individuals.

Findings

As revealed in Figure 1 discussed above, the core experience of poverty for children in both the Hangzhou and Beijing schools comprised the shame attached to poverty and their presumed lack of agency. The shame arose from comparisons that they drew between their life experiences and those of their less-poor peers and was reinforced by the negative discourse they heard from adults explaining poverty in terms of personal failures rather than structural factors. Teachers often failed to appreciate the difficulty of children's home lives and accused them of laziness or worse. They also found themselves excluded by peers 'because we have nothing to share' and felt unable to participate because they had little of material value to give. However, while their feelings of shame paralleled those of adults, they were additionally burdened by the negative side of being a child. They were repeatedly told that, as a child, they did not understand and could do nothing to help. Participation in the research was, therefore, in stark contrast to their day-to-day experience:

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...because you are the only ones who carefully listen to us, to enable us discharge the full anger in our stomach

9-year-old, XJX(M) Stone School

At the same time, children were the embodiment of their families' futures, and much was expected of them. They had to succeed academically for the sake of the family but, with little informed guidance from home and no access to expensive extramural classes, they were denied access to the cultural capital that supported their prosperous peers. Gender expectations were very traditional meaning that, in the eyes of children, poverty might prevent a girl from marrying well and a boy from becoming an astronaut. Teachers, when aware of the children's poverty, were frequently despairing due to their limited ability to create the opportunities that most children in poverty lacked.

Children strongly rejected the notion that they lacked agency and inductive analysis of their accounts suggests that they employ six agentic strategies in response to their circumstances as children experiencing relative poverty (Figure 3). Three strategies (norm adaptation, self-improvement, and lowered expectations) indicate children accepting their fate and seeking to accommodate to it, whereas the other three (proactive communication, self-sacrifice, and rebellion) reveal them seeking to alter their circumstances.

FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3 Institutional framing of child agency in China

The six strategies may also be grouped in pairs. The first two (norm adaptation and active communication) address the present and seek instant rewards in terms of either social acceptance or material change. The second two express strategic or constructive agency, the former (self-improvement) benefitting self, the latter (self-sacrifice) helping the family. The final pair are akin to acts of despair, the first (lowered expectations) implies children accepting that their initial aspirations will not be fulfilled, the second (rebellion) represents a bold and perhaps pyrrhic rejection of their fate.

It is important to recognise that this typology of child agency is an inductive simplified model of a complex reality. Children did not consciously list the six options and choose between them before acting. Nor would every child have responded in the same way any more than adults given a similar problem. However, most of what children described as their agency, purposive action, fitted the model typology and might often be justified by the children with respect to poverty defined according to the nine dimensions that would recognise.

Present focussed agency

1 Life, of course, is lived in the present and, for adults and children experiencing poverty, this necessitates
2 repeatedly coping with an immediate lack of resources, material, temporal or social. As explained in this
3 section, on some occasions children might actively seek the means to fulfil their material and emotional needs.
4 At other times, they - or other children – might be more passive, adapting to social norms and accepting the
5 status quo.
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8 *Proactive communication*

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10 Faced with scarcity, children frequently sought proactively to bid for resources of time, money, love and/or
11 understanding. In so doing, they used multiple tactics including strategic compromise with adults and peers,
12 offering a medium of exchange, careful selection of who and when to target, persistent persuasion, and seeking
13 help from external parties.
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17 **Interaction with peers:** Children had to negotiate three dimensions of inequality in their everyday social
18 interaction with peers: finance, adult approval; and physical maturity. First, money mattered in demarcating
19 friendship groups, making some children leaders, and relegating those from poorer homes to friendships on the
20 margin or to relative isolation. Secondly, teachers, without a full awareness of the consequences, typically
21 appointed the most academically successful children, who were less likely to suffer from poverty, as model
22 students and class leaders. The appointees thereby acquired the power to administer class activities and to
23 control their peers' behaviour. Thirdly, differences in nutrition and rates of maturation tended to create an
24 exceptionally diverse range of physiognomies among children aged 8 to 12. Poorer children were rarely among
25 the leaders. This was perhaps because they lost out nutritionally, tended to be smaller, and so could not
26 dominate physically. Equally, they did not benefit from extramural tuition that might have attracted favourable
27 treatment from teachers. Therefore, most chose to relate carefully and purposively with their more powerful
28 peers rather than to 'mess-with' with them.
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46 *FJX (F), I am jealous of those who are popular among classmates. There is a guy who knows everyone's*
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48 *[social media app.] moments.*
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53 8-year-olds Group discussion, Stone School

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55 **Negotiation with adults:** Children had an acute awareness of their inferior status when interacting with adults.
56 While seldom entirely passive, children often chose strategically to compromise to please adults and avoid
57 conflict. Obedience, be it genuine or fake, was a typical manifestation of this strategy seen by children as being
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1 a down-payment in reciprocity that they hoped would be rewarded at some point in the future. However, for
2 children living in impoverished families, where competition for limited resources was frequently intense, the
3 returns to obedience were often not great. In such circumstances, it is understandable that children might
4 become more rebellious, and that might, in turn, provoke the greater recourse to corporal punishment observed
5 in poorer households (Ho et al., 2022). However, there is also evidence of children being more sensitive to
6 income shortages and less persistent or more strategic in their requests.
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12 Another popular strategy was to make an implicit bargain based on reciprocity explicit by proposing a medium
13 of exchange. There is evidence that parents in China are increasingly offering material incentives to motivate
14 performance at school and good behaviour generally (Zhang and Yao, 2020). Children felt that they were able
15 to ‘turn the tables’ proposing bargains rather than merely responding to parental offers and appeared, according
16 to their own accounts, quite skilful in their negotiations.
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23 Similar incentive mechanisms were used at school life, with reward systems, for example, a ‘personal honour
24 bank’ with credits for performance accumulated into class or school awards. While children actively sought to
25 gain resources from these mechanisms, they had little ability to negotiate the terms of exchange and hence, for
26 them, they constituted a one-way bargain.
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31 **Targeting:** Children reported that they could increase the chances of getting things that they wanted, or wanted
32 to do, by choosing the ‘right’ person with whom to negotiate and by marshalling good arguments and external
33 support. Their decisions of targeting were usually based on the understanding of parents’ different roles in the
34 family and habits of consumption.
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41 *I realised that I became short-sighted the other day. If I had told mom, she would probably have beaten*
42 *me for not cherishing my eyes and bemoaned the money to be spent in the opticians. Instead, I chose to*
43 *tell dad. He said nothing and brought me to the shop for a pair of glasses that I love. I made a wise*
44 *choice.*
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11-year-old, WZX(M), Stone School

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Norm adaptation

1 Children adapting to social norms might be construed as a passive alternative to active communication.

2 Conscious of their low status being in poverty and rural migrants, following social norms helped children
3 achieve a degree of social acceptance or, if not that, at least a modicum of comforting invisibility, therefore
4 avoiding attracting further opprobrium. In their everyday lives, three sets of norms were pivotal: general moral
5 standards; class rules and school regulations; and home rules.
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10 **Morality and school rules:** Formal instruction around social norms was mainly acquired through school
11 lessons on ‘Ideological and Moral Cultivation and Basic Law Education’ but the influence of the media,
12 especially television and the internet were evident. Children were often able to state specific moral standards
13 but found it difficult to give a clear account of morality. Nevertheless, while they could not specify how to live
14 morally, all agreed that they wanted to be moral people.
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21 Formal instruction on morality and class and school rules were often compartmentalised, not necessarily seen as
22 different but equally not thought of together. Rules encouraged students to be considerate: for example, not to
23 eat snacks on campus, not to show off material possessions, to clean the campus as told, to keep quiet in the
24 classroom, and to finish homework on time. There were also rules corresponding to the state policy, such as a
25 ‘no waste food rule’ following the national ‘Clean the Plate’ edict.
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31 Teachers employed various techniques to ensure compliance with the school and class rules. Enforcement,
32 intervention, and suppression were the techniques most often observed, the first relying on strict instruction, the
33 second being incentive-based, and the third employing some form of sanction including corporal punishment.
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37 Most children chose to obey their teachers and to abide by the school and class rules. Those breaking rules
38 tended to be older (in higher grades) and physically stronger (raising the possibility that they could resist any
39 physical attempt to restrain or to punish them).
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44 Beyond rules, children understood norms from the attitudes and behaviour of teachers. They saw good
45 behaviour, but especially academic achievement, rewarded and poor performance punished. Given that success
46 was frequently dependent on expensive extramural education, children from low-income homes seldom gained
47 recognition for their schoolwork and were often shamed, reducing self-confidence. Moreover, the presumption
48 of teachers was often that the children’s parents, poor and migrants, were poor parents.
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55 *Parents of the students in this school seldom set a positive and good example to the children, nor do*
56 *they successfully intervene to correct children’s bad behaviour... Sometimes, the parents who are not*
57 *well-educated cannot tell good from bad themselves... Consequentially, we assume the role of parents*
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to put pressure on children and correct their everyday behaviour.

Teacher, Stone School

Children's process of normative acculturation was, therefore, largely instrumental. With a commonly accepted yet vaguely defined goal of morality in place, children had to narrow down their scope and tally with the moral discipline at school in everyday circumstances. Rules were followed to avoid punishment and, among the more deprived children, to avoid further social exclusion.

Homelife and family resources: At home, children were required not only to listen to parents, but also never to challenge them, a rigid manifestation of generational order consistent with Confucianism (Wan, et al., 2021; Wang and Liu. 2014). As their filial duty, they were also expected by parents to look after younger siblings and to set good examples for them. Corporal punishment was widely used, seemingly more frequently in the most disadvantaged homes, to ensure compliance with domestic rules which children generally accepted as normative.

NZ (F): *Dad always says to beat is to care and to scold is to love, and that to get beaten and scolded is the approach to becoming a useful person. I think children who do not obey their parents will not have a bright future.*

9-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

Girls seemed to be more often sanctioned than boys, possibly because they were expected to carry a greater burden of child and house care responsibilities than their brothers. Echoing Confucian priorities, though, parents seemed to consider it to be more acceptable to hit girls than boys; girls, however, may have been more prepared to admit to being punished. This finding departs from evidence from a national survey based entirely on parental reports; although the prevalence of corporal punishment did not vary between boys and girls; boys were reported to be punished more frequently (Wang and Lui, 2014).

In choosing to follow the various school and home rules, children more or less willingly became socialised into Chinese norms that attribute moral authority to social hierarchies based on generation, lineage, political ordering and increasingly on economic status (Alanen, 2020; Yang and Walker, 2020). When learning to become moral persons and effective citizens, those from the least affluent households were most at risk of being subjected to emotional and physical abuse, both at home and at school (where corporal discipline had only nominally been abolished). Parents, such as a mother of an 8-year-old at Stone School, explained how this stemmed from their own inadequacies:

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Because I am poorly educated, I cannot supervise my children. If they cannot do their homework by themselves...the only thing that I can do is to shout at them.

At school, among peers, family resources enabled children to become moral role models and to receive praise in being ‘supportive to the community and generous to others’.

LYH’s parents run a fruit business. Each time, in a school sports meeting or a spring outing for example, he brings fine fruits to the class to share with us. No wonder he got the most attention from the teacher and the most support from us in the election.

11-year-old, LQJ(M), Stone School

Strategic agency

While children often responded in the moment, they also sought to be strategic – through considered decisions and actions focussed on future outcomes that they hoped for - although their decisions were necessarily constrained by limited information and experience. Strategic agency did not always focus on the goal of self-improvement, which is discussed first; sometimes children chose actions that prioritised other concerns.

Self-improvement

Children generally aspired to become rich and to be able to provide their family with better living conditions. Ambitious, they perceived the need to work hard, to be academically successful and, as a by-product, to gain the respect of others (Huang and Yang, 1998; Huang et al. 2003). However, as a response to poverty, children’s conception of self-improvement and self-respect was largely a projection of their parents’ expectation rather than a reflection of agency gained from self-cognition and self-evaluation.

Children in River School had more opportunities for self-improvement. This was primarily because of greater resources offered by the school but possibly also because the family incomes of some of the children were higher in absolute, if not in relative, terms. Even so, the children were generally heavily constrained in terms of their agency by their parents’ expectations, the latter feeling that it was their responsibility to set goals for their offspring.

Most children adopted the adult logic of education leading to a good university, although very few of the

1 children had any idea of what university was or the kind of careers that would be opened by obtaining a degree.
2 Instead, they envisaged almost unimaginable wealth that would free them from the constraints of their current
3 existence and a lifestyle that they often modelled on the lives of celebrities.
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6 *I read a lot of books about celebrities. They changed their life by studying hard. Without studying, they*
7 *were but useless people without knowledge or skill.*
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11 11-year-old, SZX(F), Stone School

12 Children typically did not aspire to wealth for its own sake. Rather they saw it as a means of fulfilling their
13 obligations under the principle of filial piety, and thereby to demonstrate their high moral character. In this,
14 their views corresponded closely to the moral education that they received at school and at home.
15 Furthermore, they tended to view themselves as their parents' investment in the future and, hence, that it was
16 incumbent on them to ensure that their parents achieved a good return.
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23 *YZH(M): [When I have a lot of money,] I will pay all the bills for my parents and buy them*
24 *furniture. They raised me up, so I want to pay them back and show them that their investment pays*
25 *off...*
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29 YZH(M) (Grade 3), in a focus group activity, Stone School

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31 In a profound sense, therefore, they saw themselves as the object of their parent's lives rather than the subject
32 of their own. This constrained their agency and curtailed rebelliousness, arguably making them mature
33 before their time and reducing the relative freedom of childhood.
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37 It is important, though, to recall that many of the children's teachers realised that for most students in their
38 charge hard work would not generate success because of restricted opportunities. A few children also
39 acknowledged this though, at the age of 11, their typical response was to try harder, chasing after opportunities
40 to realise their own dreams although with what degree of success cannot be known.
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46 *GMW(M): It is important to seize every opportunity if you want to become a star... Do not wait a star*
47 *finder to discover you. You will need to find a star finder yourself.*
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51 11-year-olds, group discussion, Stone School

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53 Children's commitment to self-improvement was, therefore, driven by their wish – reflecting that of their
54 parents - to make a return on the parental investment by escaping from poverty and from the stigma of their
55 families' low social status.
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60 *Self-sacrifice*
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1 To make life easier for their financially hard-pressed families, many children made decisions that were
2 seemingly against their long-term interests: self-sacrifice trumping life-course ambition. Examples included
3 offering to assist parents with chores and childcare, foregoing money of their own and not asking for things that
4 they wanted. It is difficult to know for sure how much of this activity was truly altruistic, freely motivated by
5 the desire to help others, and how much was dutiful, perhaps based on reciprocity, or the result of parental
6 coercion. However, it was clear that some children were aware how tight money was in their family and how
7 stressed their parents were, deliberately acting accordingly. For the most part, children did not spell out to
8 parents the consequences of the sacrifices that they made and so parents remained unaware of the shame and the
9 sense of powerlessness that children sometimes experienced as a consequence.

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18 Self-sacrifice took many forms. One was children's spontaneous transfer to their parents of the right to make
19 decisions about their life paths and how they spent their time and money. Teachers reported that migrant
20 children took more notice of their parents and tried harder to fulfil parental and social expectations, especially in
21 relation to studying hard even when parents were unable to help them with schoolwork. Hence, children had
22 little time for play and recreation, for personal development, or even for social time and friendships.

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29 In addition, some children took on adult responsibilities caring for siblings and earning money to support the
30 family income. Scavenging, for example, was repeatedly mentioned by children in Stone School as a strategy to
31 boost family income and to provide a safety net in the event of future financial crises.

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36 *I tended to spend my weekends collecting cupboards and cans and send them to the recycle centre. I have*
37 *already made tens of yuan out of it... I wanted to learn piano. I needed to save enough money for the piano*
38 *lessons so mom didn't need to pay for my lessons out of her pocket.*

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9-year-old, XJH (M), Stone School

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9-year-old, WDT (F), Stone School

51 Likewise, in River School, children talked about their tentative ways of making a living even at such a young
52 age. A girl aged 12 had already set up a business selling her paintings to 'rich ladies' in her network albeit for
53 pitifully small sums.

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When children had younger siblings, they were frequently asked to help them with homework or to care for them when parents were absent or sleeping. Parents, speaking with pride about the maturity of their children, described them as ‘little grown-ups’, and children were certainly expected to think and act like adults when undertaking caring and other duties in the home. Children themselves took pride from being considered ‘thoughtful’ and ‘mature’ while begrudging their loss of freedom.

In contrast to proactively assisting parents, a further form of self-sacrifice required passivity from children, namely the uncomplaining acceptance of the multiple privations that accompanied a childhood spent in poverty.

We rent an apartment with another family, so it is eight people living under the same roof... They are by no means strangers as we have lived together for many years; they have become my family and good friends... My friend’s mom, the ‘aunty’, looks after me and my sister. She cooks for the four kids at home and helps us wash our hair.

9-year-old, JJX(M) , Stone School

Children’s silent acquiescence meant that parents often failed to notice, or deliberately chose not to acknowledge, the hardship that their children endured because of poverty: lack of privacy; humiliation at school; and sometimes social exclusion.

Agency from despair

Adults report lack of agency, powerlessness or disempowerment as being fundamental to the experience of poverty (Bray et al., 2019). While stressing their agency, children were aware that it was limited. Even with the odds of success often knowingly stacked against them, some still acted - rationally on certain occasions, impulsively on others. As explained below, sometimes this meant lowering expectations, but it could also involve acts of ‘rebellion’.

Lowered expectations

Faced with the constraints imposed by poverty, a further strategy adopted by children was to lower their expectations with respect to both the immediate needs and pleasures of life but, more particularly, their long-term dreams and aspirations. In essence, lowering expectations is but another form of the sacrifice discussed in the previous section and one that stands in opposition to self-improvement. However, passive rather than active, it may be viewed as a rational response to material privation and a restrictive home, social, and school environment. In other settings, it might reflect a disjuncture between the perceived role of formal education in

1 the countryside and in cities focussed on reproduction and innovation respectively (Charvon and Chase, 2016;
2 Bray et al., 2010).

3
4 Given the reality of poverty, some children simply gave up their dreams for the future, stopping the pursuit of
5 preparatory activities, abandoning hobbies, and spending less time and resources on personal development. For
6 some, this meant less commitment to schooling although most continued to believe in education as their only
7 hope of a better life. Sometimes children's actions were a response to negative comments from parents and
8 others that who pointed out the gaps between their aspirations, their personal characteristics, and their
9 circumstances, declaring - rightly or wrongly - that they harboured unrealistic fantasies.

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11 On other occasions, children found themselves outmanoeuvred by parents. A common parental response, for
12 example, to requests to participate in expensive extramural activities was to suggest that children took the free
13 trial classes with the tacit agreement that children quitted the classes once the trial ended.

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24 CZH(M): *I took part in a lot of extra curriculum classes... at least three.*

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26 Mother: *[laugh] They were free classes for experience during summer vacation. You are not the type of kid*
27 *with good concentration, so I took you and sister for the free trials. If you learnt anything, it was our gain.*
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29 *Otherwise, we did not lose anything.*

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33 9-year-old, CZH(M) with mother, Stone School

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35 Children's strategic silence in foregoing their dreams was a pragmatic response to poverty and to the limits to
36 their agency as children. In the short-term, it had practical benefits, avoiding disharmony within the family,
37 perhaps attracting a reputation for maturity and, on occasion, partially fulfilling the desire to do something new.
38 Longer-term, the consequences were likely to have been almost entirely negative, something that children
39 recognised.

40 41 42 43 44 45 46 **Rebellion**

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48 Rebellion, action taken or imagined that falls outside the norms of accepted behaviour, was the most extreme
49 agentic response by children to the constraints imposed by poverty. The children in Hangzhou and Beijing
50 typically resorted to rebellious action when they wanted something over which they had no direct control, and
51 this could happen at school or at home. In real life, rebellion took the form of challenge, threats, and
52 occasionally theft. In the world of fantasy, as revealed in group exercises in which children were asked to think
53 about solutions to poverty, it often took the form of violence, especially among younger boys.

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In focus groups children from more financially disadvantaged households participated in an activity called ‘brainstorming how to become rich’, ‘Robbing a bank’ and ‘stealing expensive pictures from an art gallery’ were among the suggestions that children proposed for ending poverty instantly, and it seems likely that such ideas were transferred from the criminality to which children were exposed on television and in digital gaming. Children were clearly aware of the moral hazards of violence and crime, and their suggestions were not offered with substantive intent. Rather they were proposed as ‘a bit of fun’ or, perhaps, by some children, to attract attention to themselves. Children narrated the scenarios cautiously using the third person to protect themselves against any accusation of complicity. However, the narratives do point to the enormity and incomprehensibility of poverty when viewed through the eyes of children. They also echo the ‘Robin Hood’ trope of taking from the rich to give to the poor embedded in Chinese folktales such as the Tales of the Water Margin.

While robbing a bank was a fantasy, threats of bad behaviour were strategies that children were prepared to use to make a claim on resources or to elicit attention. YJY, a 9-year-old girl, explained how she had told her parents that because they were ‘mean’ to her, she would be cruel to her younger brother when they were out’. Threats seemed more prevalent in the poorest households where children’s requests would most often have been refused and where awareness of privation was most acute. For example, WYJ, an 11-year-old girl from Stone School, threatened to jump off a building after her parents repetitively refused to buy her a bottle of Coke (an item of inconsequential value in a Chinese middle-class home). However, the range of bad behaviours that children could pursue if their bluff were called was quite limited, and such threats were therefore probably made mostly when other negotiating strategies had failed.

In school, some children tended to disguise their social distress, often poverty-triggered, with a strong defensive persona. CXZ(F) (aged 10) from River School, for example, chose to establish a public image as an ill-tempered and self-willed ‘bad girl’ with attitude. She said that, by doing so, she could ‘tell the true friends’ who genuinely appreciated her and her friendship regardless of financial background.

Children also strategically challenged their parents’ authority. Frequently this happened in negotiations over resources but occasionally children were brave enough to challenge parental behaviour, for example to intervene in the use of corporal punishment.

I do not dare to stop parents beating the younger brother. I do not even dare to see it because it is cruel, and I am afraid of being involved and getting beaten as well... My elder sister is braver than me. She once grabbed the hanger from mom’s hand and stopped mom from beating me and my brother.

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2 Children reported challenging their parents' authority in different ways. These included citing the opinion of
3 other authorities, notably teachers, allying with siblings, deliberately bullying siblings, or turning to other
4 people, often relatives, as substitute parents who might themselves be able to respond directly to the need or
5 persuade their parents to do so. However, children from the most disadvantaged families with limited social
6 capital would characteristically have had few other adults to whom they could turn for financial assistance.
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12 *After the birth of the younger sister, LJ changed a lot. She often has small fractions with her sister.*

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14 *Sometimes, she grabs snacks from her sister in front of us. This reminds us parents to distribute attention*
15 *evenly between the two kids.*
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20 Mom of LJ (F), 12-year-old, River School
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22 Finally, as rebellious acts, children reported the occasional theft. Most discussion related to instances at school
23 by people unknown which teachers said did happen. Only two specific examples came to light during the
24 research which involved the student participants. One related to the theft of money that a child had brought to
25 pay for school meals, while the second involved a child stealing money from their father's wallet. On both
26 occasions, the proceeds of the theft were used to buy food.
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32 The strategies of rebellion adopted by children to lay claim to resources, or, on occasion, simply to attract
33 parental attention, reflected the limitations on the agency of migrant and impoverished children especially in
34 Stone School. Taking the confrontational methods of challenge and threat, the former is more likely to have
35 been successful while the latter would more often have been pyrrhic. Both were high risk strategies often driven
36 by desperation.
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46 **Discussion**

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48 To focus on child agency in the presence of financial hardship is not to downplay the suffering that poverty
49 causes or to negate its scarring effects on children's lives. Rather it elucidates some of the pathways through
50 which scarring occurs while also acknowledging that children make choices, some of which may ameliorate the
51 immediate impact of poverty for themselves and their families.
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57 Recent literature posits children's agency, the ability to speak and act for themselves, as a continuum forged out
58 of interactions with other actors and framed by context and culture which, for any one child, may vary across
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1 different fields or domains (Haring et al, 2019; Gurdal and Sorbring, 2019). The principal macro-social
2 institutions framing the children's experiences in Hangzhou and Beijing were poverty, experienced as privation,
3 humiliation, exclusion, and reduced agency but also migration, institutionalised as discrimination and inferiority
4 and, of course, Chinese culture within which both were embedded: collectivist; Confucian; deferential with
5 respect to generational order; and patriarchal. The intersection of these forces, together with the status of being
6 a child, shaped children's experience of poverty; it felt different from, and generally less agentic than, that of
7 either adults or other children (Figure 3).

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14 But according to children, less agentic did not mean non-agentic. Indeed, agency was necessary to ameliorate
15 the negative dimensions of poverty. This was perhaps most evident when children engaged in proactive
16 communication. At home, this was often an attempt to negotiate resources by carefully choosing who and when
17 to ask for things, and by being prepared to offer additional school or housework in return. It is difficult to know
18 how often a bargain was struck, presumably less often for those from the most disadvantaged homes, although
19 parents admitted that they entered into such negotiations. Children's requests were frequently driven by other
20 dimensions of poverty, shame and exclusion at school with the desire to break into friendship groups by having
21 the things that others had – possessions as tokens of membership. The almost universal aversion to playing with
22 children who were seen as poor, and the common view that children from lower income homes became the
23 victims of bullying, suggests that their agency in the school playground was heavily circumscribed (Yang et al.,
24 2023).

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37 Self-improvement, the initial desire of most children, to work hard, to become rich, and to escape poverty was
38 for some children strongly agentic. There was, in addition, intense pressure from parents to chase riches 'for the
39 sake of the family', and from teachers to work hard albeit teachers, especially in Hangzhou, believed that
40 academic failure was almost inevitable because of poverty and inadequate parental support. This may explain
41 Ge and Ngai's (2020) survey findings that children experiencing poverty in China report working harder at
42 school than those from more prosperous homes but that their academic success as assessed by parents is less;
43 parents generally expect much but commonly lack the social and financial capital adequately to foster their
44 children's progress. Moreover, childhood aspirations and dreams to grow up to be an astronaut, doctor, or
45 popstar were frequently curtailed by the scepticism of peers who seemed to relish deflating others with reference
46 to their poverty, gender, lack of ability and practical constraints. Such children were left with the narrow
47 instrumental desire to get rich, but without any strategy or a self-affirmative vision.

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60 Children often rationalised the strategy of accepting adult norms at school and at home as a deliberate choice,
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1 but their agency in this respect was thin. What poor children heard in ethics classes, and more generally from
2 adults, was that economic success resulted from hard work and obeying rules. This accorded with children's
3 ambition to be successful but led them to recognise their lowly status as 'poor children' and to blame their
4 parents who, logically from instruction, must have been lazy or not followed rules, a belief that was frequently
5 reinforced by teachers' casual remarks (Yang et al.,2023; Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2015). This, in
6 turn, brought children into conflict with teaching on filial piety and generational ordering, respect for the
7 authority of parents as parents and as adults (Alanen, 2020). To be ashamed of their parents placed children
8 outside societal norms. It may have precipitated instances of rebellion with direct challenges to parental
9 authority and fuelled the corporal punishment that made homelife so difficult, even frightening. In addition,
10 parents, without the time or ability to help their children with schoolwork, often sought to enhance the norms of
11 hard work and educational achievement through further corporal punishment.
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22 While children making sacrifices was not always a reflection of agency, it was invariably a cause for self-
23 reflection. Caring for siblings while parents were working, doing household chores, forgoing education to
24 support a brother attending college were perceived to be natural and necessary responses to the demands of
25 parents. Such actions only rarely solicited praise from parents; they were a duty expected of a child, particularly
26 a girl. Children, though, were aware of the personal costs of such sacrifices and even begrudged them. When
27 not recognised by parents, it could feel like exploitation. More agency was evident in children's decisions not to
28 ask for things they needed, to save money rather than spend it, and to work to add to family finances; often,
29 though, such sacrifices went unnoticed adding to children's belief that their agency was never acknowledged by
30 adults.
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41 The final strategy adopted by children, lowering expectations, might be seen as a denial of agency. Upward
42 social mobility in China has been remarkable in recent decades facilitated by economic opening up, rural-urban
43 migration and the expansion of education, but the prospects of such advance are markedly less for the
44 generation still in school (Xie, et al., 2022). The multiple dimensions of poverty and relative deprivation in
45 terms of learning opportunities were, for some, added to by the stigma of being a migrant. The resultant lack of
46 confidence, rarely the realistic appreciation of the obstacles that lay ahead, made lowering expectations seem
47 like a logical, agentic, short-term strategy. It took pressure off their parents and themselves and prepared them
48 to be able to cope with disappointment. While rational in the short-term, it must have contributed to further
49 lowering the odds of social mobility, condemning children to failure from an early age.
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1
2 **Conclusion**
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5 Children in Beijing and Hangzhou identified that their agency was restricted both by the multiple dimensions of
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7 poverty and their status as children but argued that they were not without agency. From their accounts,
8
9 supported by parents and teachers, they clearly made proactive choices to ameliorate the negative dimensions of
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11 poverty, trading-off their needs against those they perceived confronted their families.
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14 Inevitably there was not a one-to-one correspondence between aspects of agency and the nine dimensions of
15
16 poverty nor was the application of agency necessarily demonstrably successful. Self-sacrifice mediated the
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18 dimension of material deprivation but can also be seen as a response to constraints of the home environment.

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20 Indeed, sacrificial behaviour was, on some occasions, additionally an attempt to ameliorate or contain the
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22 negative consequences of poverty on family relations, partly to manage conflict between modern values
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24 acquired in the school environment and traditional ones encountered at home. Rebellion was an alternative
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26 reaction to scarcity and lack of opportunity but also to the shame of poverty, to adult rejection of child agency
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28 and, as reported above, to violence, both in seeking to challenge its use by adults but also, in school, less
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30 constructively, to retaliate or engage in bullying.
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33 Children believed that through strategies of careful negotiation they personally gain a larger share of family
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35 resources, material as well as parental time and attention. They could seek adult approval and engagement by
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37 adapting to prevailing social norms and by focussing on self-improvement; if successful, this might - in the
38
39 short-term - boost sagging confidence while ultimately bringing wealth to the family and ending the stigma of
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41 being poor. Some, though, faced with restricted opportunities engendered by limited educational and home
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43 resources, consciously took the decision to let go of their aspirations thereby taking pressure off themselves and
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45 their families.
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48 There are some parallels between the six strategies identified and the clinical notions of proactive and
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50 maladaptive behaviours and maladaptive cognitions discussed above (Lennings and Bussey, 2017). However,
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52 whereas clinicians might teach children to be agentic in given social circumstances, social justice demands that
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54 policymakers proactively address the multiple dimensions of poverty to enhance child agency. In this regard, it
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56 must be acknowledged that corporal punishment in schools was made illegal in China in 1986 and parental use
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58 is discouraged - although Confucian notion that 'to beat is to care' is still widely respected (EVAC, 2020).

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60 Shortly after the original research was made available to the State Council and Ministry of Education, moves
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1 were taken to ensure that schools truly do eliminate corporal punishment (Xinhuanet, 2021). The extramural
2 educational industry was also closed down, although anecdotal evidence suggests that more affluent parents are
3 finding alternative means to ensure that their children retain a competitive edge (Xinhua, 2021; Olcott, 2021).
4 Increasing the opportunities for children to escape poverty is still necessary although made more difficult at a
5 time when slower economic growth constrains the expansion of the middle class, thereby risking increased
6 downward mobility as is happening in several Western countries (Bukodi et al., 2020).
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12 No study is definitive, and the restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult fully
13 to disentangle the shame associated with poverty from that attaching to rural migrant status as had been the
14 initial intent. (The sources of shame appeared to be mutually reinforcing although there was no evidence that
15 the agency expressed by migrant and local children differed in kind.) However, the study foregrounds the
16 poverty experience of children and acknowledges their agency, identifying six strategies that children
17 themselves would recognise and which were often confirmed by both parents and teachers. It draws attention to
18 the complexity of family dynamics in mediating the immediate impact of poverty on individuals and points to
19 factors that might interrupt, or indeed reinforce, the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Although the
20 research is necessarily context specific, it seems likely that children in poverty elsewhere will also claim a
21 modicum of agency, and that all interested in alleviating poverty and its effects would be wise to respond
22 positively to children's attempts to make life better for their families and themselves (Schweiger and Cabezas,
23 2017)
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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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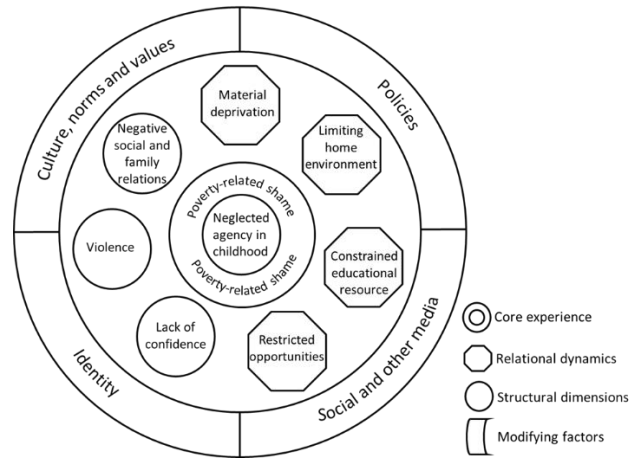


Figure 1: Dimensions of childhood poverty

#ALT TEXT

The manifestation of childhood poverty is summarised as three structural dimensions (negative social and family relations, violence, lack of confidence) and four relational dynamics (material deprivation, limited home environment, constrained educational resource). Culture, norms and values, policies, identity, and social and other media constitute the modifying factors of childhood poverty. These factors jointly shaped the core experience of children, namely poverty related shame, and resulted in neglected agency in childhood.

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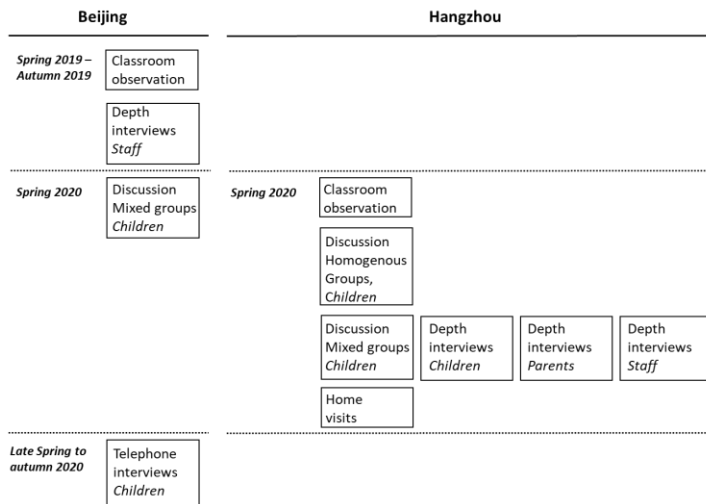


Figure 2: Research design

#ALT TEXT

Researchers carried out classroom observation, mixed group discussion, and telephone interviews with children at River School in Beijing. Researchers organised classroom observation and focus group activities with children at Stone School in Hangzhou. Researchers also implemented in-depth interviews with children, parents, and staff from Stone School.

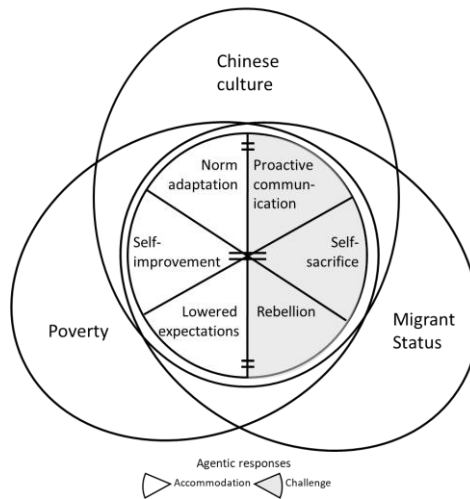


Figure 3 Institutional framing of child agency in China

#ALT TEXT

Chinese culture, poverty, and migrant status jointly frame child agency in China. In some cases, these were accommodated by children’s norm adaption, self-improvement, and lowered expectations, whereas in other cases, children adopt proactive communication, self-sacrifice, and rebellion to challenge these factors.