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‘How Does Living in Institution Impact Young Lives?’—Insights From Young People in *Ci’aiyuan*

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ABSTRACT

Institutional care often carries a negative reputation due to its perceived adverse effects on children and young people. However, it remains a significant form of alternative care in China. In Xiangxi, childcare institutions, known as *ci’aiyuan*, have been further expanding by involving wider populations in recent years. However, little knowledge is known about this new practice. This study sought to explore lived experiences in one such institution by involving 14 young people who were 15–18 years old and lived in *ci’aiyuan* at the time of data collection. Through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the findings revealed three overarching themes. Living in *ci’aiyuan* has impacted young lives through (i) providing more supportive relationships in their social networks, (ii) increasing their self-perceived social support and (iii) facilitating positive life trajectory shifts for certain individuals. The findings present a softer and more compassionate aspect of institutional reality, even though this represents a minority experience, challenging the dominant criticisms typically directed at institutional care. However, this study maintains that continued efforts are needed to address the complexities and challenges associated with such care settings.

机构养育因其可能对儿童和青少年产生的不良影响,在国际上长期饱受争议。然而,作为一种重要的儿童替代性照料形式,机构养育在中国仍具有重要地位。在湘西地区,儿童福利机构(又称“慈爱院”)近年来通过吸纳更广泛的服务人群,呈现出进一步扩展的趋势。然而,对于这一新兴实践的研究却仍然相对稀缺。本研究以某慈爱院为案例,通过邀请14名年龄在15至18岁之间、在数据收集时居住于该机构的青少年参与,深入探讨其生活经历。基于半结构式访谈,研究结果总结出三个核心主题:第一,慈爱院的生活通过提供更加支持性的人际关系,扩展了青少年的社会网络;第二,提升了其自我感知的社会支持水平;第三,促进了部分个体积极人生轨迹的转变。研究结果揭示了机构养育实践中的温情一面,尽管这一视角可能仅代表少数经验,但对传统上针对机构养育的主流批评提出了有力挑战。然而,本研究同时指出,仍需持续努力应对机构养育环境中的复杂性与挑战,以推动此类实践的进一步优化。

1 | Introduction

Institutional care, as the term suggests, refers to a form of alternative care provided within a residential facility marked by clear boundaries that restrict residents’ freedom to come and go at will. Such childcare settings are often characterised by their large-scale, standardised care arrangements and the somewhat isolating environments they create (Hope and

Homes for Children 2019; Chen 2019). A recent report provided a further definition of an institution, describing it as any care setting meeting three key criteria: (1) Isolation from the Wider Community and/or Forced Cohabitation: In such facilities, users typically find themselves separated from the broader community or are compelled to reside together with others. (2) Lack of Sufficient Control over Lives and Choices: Users within these institutions often experience limited control over their lives and

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are afforded restricted choices regarding their daily routines and decisions. (3) Compromised Individualised Needs: The organisational structure and requirements of these facilities tend to undermine the fulfilment of the individualised needs of the users, potentially resulting in less personalised care (Šiška and Beadle-Brown 2020). These characteristics effectively encapsulate the essential differences that distinguish institutional care settings from more community-oriented or individualised care environments. Despite a long history, institutional care has garnered international notoriety due to allegations of child abuse and shortcomings in adequately safeguarding children and young people (Kendrick 2013; Shang 2002). Evidence suggests that children in institutional care often suffer from attachment disorders and developmental delays spanning social, cognitive, physical and neurological domains (Johnson, Browne, and Hamilton-Giachritsis 2006; Petrowski, Cappa, and Gross 2017). In response, policy reforms, particularly in Western contexts, have aimed to reduce institutional care provision and emphasise family-based alternatives, such as family foster care (Newton 2017).

However, the landscape of institutional care in China presents a unique perspective. With the persistent issue of orphaned or abandoned children drawing civil attention, institutional care was historically regarded as a viable solution (Shang 2001). Today, this form of alternative care remains crucial. Recent data from the China Civil Affairs Yearbook 2021 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021) reveals that over 50 000 young individuals reside in 539 childcare institutions, constituting 30.6% of those in need of alternative care. Meantime, it is worth noting that the overall care-receiving population has been gradually declining over the years (Yin 2024a). Moreover, a noteworthy development of institutional care is observed in some regions, where this form of care provision has expanded in recent years. Referred to as *ci'aiyuan*, this practice involves a broader spectrum of recipients beyond orphaned or abandoned children. However, the lived experiences in such institutions remain unexplored.

1.1 | Institutional Care in China: General Understanding

In China, the responsibility for providing this type of care falls upon three distinct types of organisations: *fuli yuan* (including Children Welfare Institutions and Social Welfare Institutions), SOS Children's Village International and private orphanages (Yin 2024a). This section will specifically focus on *fuli yuan*, which stand out due to their state ownership. Since 1949, it has been the state's mandate to protect vulnerable children and manage all *fuli yuan* under the full jurisdiction of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA). Most of these institutions are situated in urban areas, catering primarily to orphaned or abandoned minors (Shang, Chen, and Yang 2008). For decades, the Chinese government has regarded institutional care as a suitable method for safeguarding parentless young individuals, also viewing it as a way to showcase the benefits of socialism (Shang 2001). The childcare system has been guided by the principles of *Yang* (fostering), *Jiao* (education) and *Zhi* (treatment) (Yao and Liu 2018; Wan and Ma 2018). Despite the exact total number remaining unknown, scholars reported that institutional care has rescued many of these

young individuals from the perils of starvation and homelessness (Shang, Saldov, and Fisher 2010; Shang and Li 2015; Wang 2016).

However, as society has evolved, concerns surrounding this form of care become more pronounced. Over the decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of orphaned or abandoned children who are in demand of institutional care (Shang 2001; China Philanthropy Research Institute 2010). Concurrently, the Chinese government has faced challenges in allocating adequate funds to address this challenge (Shang 2002; Shang, Wu, and Wu 2005), sparking debates against institutional care. Critics argue that it often neglects educational and individualised needs, including conditions like dyslexia and dyspraxia, as well as mental health concerns (Shang and Fisher 2017; Zhu 2018). Moreover, it has been accused of inadequate financial provision, the presence of caregiving misconduct and the enhancement of social isolation, creating unfavourable environments for the development of its young residents (Chen 2019; Jia, Li, and Wang 2019; Yin 2024b). Conversely, scholars in China have increasingly recognised the necessity of providing a family environment for these individuals (Shang 2002; Zhao 2017). Family foster care, for example, tends to equip children and young people with appropriate life and social skills for a successful transition to adulthood (Xu et al. 2020). Despite this, institutional care remains important in China. With continuous efforts in fiscal investment and legislative implementation in recent years, the care quality and living conditions within *fuli yuan* have significantly improved (Yin 2024a). In certain regions, this form of alternative care is even experiencing an expansion with the inclusion of larger segments of the population.

1.2 | Ci'aiyuan: An Emerging Childcare Practice in Xiangxi

Xiangxi, situated in the mountainous northwest of Hunan province, China, grapples with significant poverty-related challenges. It is characterised by its remote location, high poverty rates and significant ethnic minority populations, and has long faced the harsh reality of providing inadequate care for children affected by parental loss, incapacity or absence (Peng 2020). Among them, there are 1891 orphans being officially identified, whose one or both parents are deceased, missing or imprisoned (China Child Welfare 2024). In this context, young lives are susceptible to various risks and adversities. Research indicates that chronic poverty-related stress can impact their development across various domains, including intelligence, health, mental well-being and academic attainment (McLoyd and Wilson 1994; Engle and Black 2008). Due to the absence of parental care or dysfunctional family dynamics, the social networks of these individuals are often fragmented. Consequently, they are less likely to receive the same range and depth of support compared to those not facing similar circumstances. Lived experiences from deprivation of parental care and support can further lead to low self-esteem, diminished self-efficacy and a sense of insecurity among young individuals (Stein 2008; Schofield, Larsson, and Ward 2017).

In response to the dire socio-economic circumstances in Xiangxi and as part of the ongoing poverty alleviation campaigns, the local governments decided to care for vulnerable young people collectively in *ci'aiyuan*, childcare institutions bearing a name that signifies 'Compassion' and 'Love'. The first one was founded in 2015.

Over the past several years, its number has increased to eight that are currently sheltering 1053 children and young people from various challenging backgrounds (China Child Welfare 2024). Similar to *fuliyuan*, *ci'aiyuan* is entirely funded and overseen by the local government and its supervisory department, the Civil Affairs Bureau. Living arrangements are managed by paid childcare professionals, adhering to the same care standards and practices with those in *fuliyuan*. They aimed to offer a centralised, resource-efficient solution for young people in need. However, what sets *ci'aiyuan* apart is the diversity of family backgrounds from which its care recipients originate. Residents in *ci'aiyuan* often consist of de facto unguarded children, those cared for by kinship caregivers, those living in extreme poverty and those under other challenging circumstances. Prior to entering care, they typically resided with at least one family member in villages, such as grandparents, uncles or aunts; however, the quality and conditions of their living circumstances were often substandard. In general, common characteristics among *ci'aiyuan* care recipients include: (i) under 18 years of age, (ii) lack access to their parental care and/or (iii) receive inadequate support from their families. This is in contrast to *fuliyuan*, which typically admit young individuals who have completely lost contact with their families, such as those who were abandoned or orphaned at a very young age (Shang, Chen, and Yang 2008; Wang 2016; Zhu 2018). In most instances, institution residents in both *fuliyuan* and *ci'aiyuan* are required to remain within a campus-like environment with limited freedom to leave and a routinised lifestyle. However, this dynamic may slightly differ for individuals in *ci'aiyuan* during winter and summer holidays, as they typically have the option to leave for their families of origin.

1.3 | Current Study

Despite nearly a decade since *ci'aiyuan* has been established, it remains an understudied childcare practice. A literature search of international databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science and PubMed, reveals a dearth of information regarding this practice and the care experiences of its recipients. How living in *ci'aiyuan* may have impacted on its recipients is not understood. To address this gap in knowledge, this study aims to investigate the experiences of care among young individuals living in such institution. The primary research inquiry of this paper is, 'How does residing in *ci'aiyuan* impact young people?' Given that *ci'aiyuan* is a relatively recent practice and there are limited instances of young people transitioning out of care, this research will engage current recipients of care aged 15–18 in face-to-face interviews to elucidate their experiences living in *ci'aiyuan*. The outcomes of this investigation will provide valuable insights for policymakers and local authorities, informing decisions regarding the feasibility and necessity of implementing such institutional care practices in the specific region.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin 2014). This method facilitates an in-depth examination of the lived realities of young people residing in institutional settings, emphasising the interplay between individual experiences and their specific

social and institutional contexts. It is particularly useful for uncovering the complex and layered aspects of these experiences, which might be overlooked in studies with a broader focus.

2.2 | Sampling

The study concentrates on young people aged between 15 and 18 years old, aligning with the UN definition of youth (15–24) and the age criteria for receiving care in China (under 18). Furthermore, this age bracket may possess a heightened cognitive capacity compared to younger cohorts, making them more adept at engaging with the study. This serves as the first inclusion criteria for participant recruitment. Secondly, participants must be residing in *ci'aiyuan* at the time of data collection. Thirdly, participants and their legal guardians (grandparents, close relatives or the institution manager) must provide informed consent for participation in the study. Lastly, participants should be able to communicate their experiences and perspectives effectively. This criterion was assessed through an informal conversation conducted prior to the interview, along with input from their carers. There are no exclusion criteria for participants in this study.

Purposive sampling was employed, whereby participants were recruited based on their residence in childcare institutions (Hiles et al. 2014). Due to constraints in time and finances, the author randomly selected one of the eight *ci'aiyuan* in the region. In this *ci'aiyuan*, there were 124 young individuals in total from various family backgrounds, ranging from 4 to 18 years old at the year of data collection (2024). Twelve staff members, including 1 manager (the institution director), 1 officer and 10 caregivers (referring to 'teachers' in the context of *ci'aiyuan*) were working with them at this venue. Prior to commencing the study, the author obtained approval from the manager and the relevant authority (the Civil Affairs Bureau) to facilitate access to participants and ensure adherence to institutional policies and procedures. These individuals acted as the gatekeepers for this study. With their permissions, the author visited the chosen *ci'aiyuan* and approached all young people aged 15–18 individually. Those who agreed to participate and met all the study's criteria were enrolled as participants.

2.3 | Participants

Eventually, a total of 14 young people (15–18 years old) joined this study (Table 1), including 6 females and 8 males. They were receiving secondary education at a mainstream school at the time of data collection. Most of the participants joined *ci'aiyuan* in 2016 when the institution was first established. Regarding their reasons into care, most of the participants grew up in parentless environments or in situations where their parents were unable to provide adequate care. For many participants, the loss of a father due to accidents or fatal diseases was a recurring theme. In some cases, following the father's demise, the mother would leave the family, leaving the children under the care of the paternal side of the family. Others faced the tragic loss of both parents. Additionally, economic hardships forced some parents to seek employment in distant cities, rendering them unable to provide regular parental care. Physical or mental impairments further hindered some parents from adequately attending to their children's needs.

TABLE 1 | Basic Information of Participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Age into care	Duration in care	Reason into care
P1	F	15	7	8	Father is dead; Mother left
P2	F	16	8	8	Father is dead; Mother lives with mental impairments
P3	F	15	7	8	Extreme poverty
P4	M	17	12	5	Both parents are dead
P5	M	17	9	8	Both parents are dead
P6	M	15	7	8	Mother left; Father lives with physical impairments
P7	M	16	11	5	Parents divorced; Father is dead
P8	M	18	10	8	Father is dead; Mother is missing
P9	M	15	7	8	Father is dead; Mother is badly ill
P10	M	17	9	8	Father is dead; Mother remarried
P11	M	17	9	8	Father is dead; Mother remarried
P12	F	17	9	8	Father is dead; Mother lives with physical impairments
P13	F	17	9	8	Father is dead; Mother remarried
P14	F	17	9	8	Both parents are dead

Note: Data presents participant demographics including age, gender, when into care, duration in care and reason into care.

2.4 | Data Collection Method

Scheduled face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants in a private and secure setting within the care institution. The interviews were semi-structured (McLaughlin 2012), allowing for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences in the institution. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, ensuring that participants could express themselves comfortably and effectively. On average, each interview lasted approximately 30 min, though the length varied depending on the depth of the participant's responses. The interviews were completed in one sitting.

The data collection took place in April 2024 and was carried out by the author, who was trained in qualitative interviewing techniques. To ensure accuracy and maintain the integrity of the data, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

2.5 | Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Coventry University Ethics (Ref.: P174336). Participant information sheet, containing comprehensive information about this study, including its objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and consent form were presented to both participants and their legal guardians. A verbal explanation of the forms was provided, ensuring they fully understand the study's purpose and their rights. Emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation, with participants having the freedom to refuse or withdraw consent at any time without consequences. Explicit verbal consent was also captured at the beginning of the interview, with participants clearly stating their agreement to participate. Following verbal consent, participants and their legal guardians were

asked to sign the informed consent form to acknowledge their understanding and agreement. In cases where parents, grandparents or other relatives were unreachable, the institution manager signed the consent form on their behalf. During interviews, the author employed active listening skills and demonstrate empathy to create a supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere. At the end of each interview, the author ensured that participants feel comfortable and offered the opportunity for debriefing if they have encountered any emotional distress during the interview process. Throughout the process, moreover, participants were assured of confidentiality and privacy measures to protect their identity and personal information.

2.6 | Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study followed the thematic analysis steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving a systematic process of identifying, organising and interpreting themes within the data. The analysis was entirely inductive and data-driven, with no predetermined codes from the literature or conceptual framework guiding the analysis process. Data items were interpreted at a semantic level, and empirical codes were developed during the analysis process, consisting of short phrases and sentences.

The author first reviewed the raw data, which had been transcribed and translated verbatim by the author from Mandarin into English. This step allowed the author to gain a comprehensive understanding of the main ideas discussed by participants regarding their lives. In the second step, codes were generated to represent key ideas that emerged from the data during the initial readings (Braun and Clarke 2006). These codes were developed through open coding, where the author identified and labelled segments of data encapsulating meaningful concepts or themes related to the research question. Similar codes were then

grouped together, helping to identify recurring patterns and overarching themes within the data.

Subsequently, the themes were reviewed, refined and validated through a systematic process. This involved examining the coherence and consistency of each theme across the dataset and evaluating how well each theme captured the essence of the participants' experiences in *ci'aiyuan*. Each theme was precisely defined and given a descriptive name to clearly communicate its content and relevance to the research question.

Finally, the findings were interpreted and presented in the findings section of this paper. This involved synthesising the themes and illustrating how they contributed to a deeper understanding of the impact of institutional care on young individuals. Quotations from participants were included to demonstrate the prevalence and validity of the themes, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

3 | Findings

3.1 | Theme 1: Providing More Supportive Relationships in Young People's Social Networks

Responding to how living in *ci'aiyuan* impacts young lives, the first theme identified is that it has provided more supportive relationships in young people's social networks. As mentioned earlier, participants in this study exhibited diverse family backgrounds and life experiences prior to their admission to *ci'aiyuan* (see Section 2.4). A common and notable characteristic among them was the fragility and vulnerability of their pre-care social networks. Both close and weak ties in their social networks were limited, largely due to their challenging family circumstances. Upon entering *ci'aiyuan*, however, the young individuals experienced a profound transformation in their social networks. The shift from solitary or limited family interactions to communal living within the institution expanded their social circles, introducing a multitude of supportive relationships with people around them. Such relationships can come from staff members in *ci'aiyuan*, which are mentioned as 'warmth and trust' and 'akin to familial bonds'. While participants did not refer to the staff in kinship terms, they unanimously appreciated their role acting like their own parents. As articulated:

Yeah, so the teachers [Note: they call caregivers in *ci'aiyuan* as teachers], they're like always on it, you know? Like, they're not just teachers; they're like our second moms and dads. They're always looking out for us, reminding us about the weather and stuff, making sure we're all good. They take care of all the little things. That's so true. It's like being at home, you know? I feel super looked after.

(P1, 15-year-old girl)

Small gestures of care and attention from staff members were particularly valued, fostering a sense of belonging and security among participants:

Like, one time, my kicks were soaked in the rain. A cold winter day, it was freezing. But then, no idea of when, *ci'aiyuan*'s teacher saw this. She came into my room and surprised me by giving me cotton-padded shoes. It's the little things, you know? Makes you feel like they're watching out for you, just like your folks. They're always on it, looking out for us, even before we realize something's up.

(P12, 17-year-old girl)

Simultaneously, the introduction of new peer relationships within *ci'aiyuan* marked a significant positive change in the participants' lives. Many of them had experienced loneliness and emotional voids prior to entering care due to their limited interactions with peers in their previous family settings. However, participants viewed every peer in *ci'aiyuan* as siblings, and these close interactions enriched their lived experiences in the institution. As P2 expressed the impact after entering care:

Yeah, it's like a whole new place, you know? Back then, I was all about that lonely life. But now? There are a lot of people my age or younger or older. We play with each other everyday. I've made so many friends. We had so much fun, crazy. No more solo missions for me, that's for sure.

(16-year-old girl)

Due to living in *ci'aiyuan*, diversified friendships blossomed, transcending age and educational boundaries, and fostering a sense of unity akin to that of a large family:

Before, I rarely talked to other boys. My younger bro used to be my only friend, and I almost stayed with him every day. But now I have a lot more friends. Guys, girls—you name it, I'm hanging with them. It's like a big family, and I'm loving it.

(P14, 17-year-old girl)

Yeah, it's like one big family here, you know? The older high school folks, they're always coming down to chill with us [Note: people there are living in separate floors]. And we're all about it. We play with the little kids, run around, scream, just have a blast. It's all love here, no drama, no fights. We're just one big happy family, vibing together.

(P2, 16-year-old girl)

These newfound social connections not only mitigated feelings of loneliness but also nurtured participants' social skills and mental well-being. Many reported a positive shift from introversion to greater sociability, attributing this change to the supportive environment provided by their peers and staff within this institution. As expressed by P13:

After I came here, I slowly changed. Like, before, I was all about keeping to myself, you know? But now?

It's like I've got a big family, and we're always hanging out. It's changed me, for real. I'm not as shy anymore, 'cause I've got all these friends to kick it with.

(P13, 17-year-old girl)

When we live in *ci'aiyuan*, those teachers often encourage us to introduce ourselves and speak in front of our friends on the same floor. So, I get more used to it [Note: public speaking] and thought it was no big deal. At the beginning, I was shy. Later on, I practised a lot, so I am not shy anymore.

(P8, 18-year-old lad)

However, they might have not been able to experience such relationships and changes if not joining the *ci'aiyuan*.

3.2 | Theme 2: Increasing Young People's Self-Perceived Social Support

Another theme regarding how living in *ci'aiyuan* impacts young lives is that it seems to have increased their self-perceived social support. As mentioned, the loss of parents or their incapacity to provide may have severely limited the availability of deserved support and resources to young individuals. For instance, P6 grew up with his father and older sister after his mother's departure when he was just 1 year old. His father, living with physical impairments, struggled to secure stable employment due to limited physical capabilities. Despite financial hardships, his father always prioritised the well-being of his children. The participant noted:

My dad's like, both my mom and dad rolled into one. Life's been tough, you know? But he's always put me and my sis first. Even when he barely had anything nice for himself, he'd make sure we got the best stuff. We've really struggled. Barely had enough to get by. But he's always been there, trying to make it work.

(P6, 15-year-old boy)

His father's selflessness and sacrifices were evident, yet their lives were surrounded by extreme poverty and challenging living conditions. While some participants' families received limited support from extended families, neighbours or local authorities, these contributions did not significantly alleviate their circumstances. In dire financial situations, a few used to resort to theft as a means of survival. According to P5, it was just '*taking away from others to make up for ourselves*.'

However, the establishment of *ci'aiyuan* in the local area brought about significant changes, offering more self-perceived support for these young individuals. An obvious change is that participants emphasised the availability of diverse options for seeking assistance, contrasting with their prior experiences of isolation or coping with difficulties alone. For example, P9 remarked on the newfound accessibility of support:

Yeah, it's like, here in this place, you know? Whenever something's happening, we can always hit up a

teacher. They're always there for us. It's like they've got our backs, you know? And if we're feeling down, we've always got our friends to talk to. It's a whole different vibe from before, you know? Back then, it was just us dealing with stuff on our own, but now? We've got this whole support, and it's pretty awesome.

(15-year-old boy)

Furthermore, *ci'aiyuan* and local authorities play a pivotal role in providing instrumental support, including tangible resources and financial aid. According to the participants, they can benefit from a spectrum of provisions from living in care, including food, accommodation, clothing, transportation, educational opportunities and medical services. They attested that living in *ci'aiyuan* significantly eased the financial burdens on their families and elevated their living standards. P14 shared her perspective on the change in her living conditions:

You know, living here is way better than being back home. Like, if I didn't come here, it'd be all on my grandma. She'd have to support me all by herself, and I can't even work yet to help out. It'd just be too much for her. But here? It's a whole different story. The vibe is good, and there's this dope learning environment, with a library and everything. And when it comes to life stuff, we're all sorted. Food, clothes, everything for life, we got it. Plus, they even take care of my tuition fees. Pretty sweet.

(17-year-old girl)

In addition to these, staff members have assisted the participants in developing essential life skills and effective stress-coping mechanisms, enabling them to manage negative emotions and transition towards independent living. For example,

Back when I was a kid, I was like, super irritable, you know? But the teachers here, they were always cool about it. They'd sit down with me, talk things out, teach me how to deal with my emotions and stuff. And they always made it clear that I could hit them up whenever I needed help. It was a game-changer. Slowly but surely, I started getting rid of that bad temper of mine.

(P3, 15-year-old girl)

The teachers here at *ci'aiyuan*? They're like our life coaches. You got me? They teach us all sorts of stuff, like the little things that you don't really think about in life. Like, back when I was a kid, I had no clue how to make a bed, right? But they showed us, and now I'm a pro. Same goes for folding clothes, doing laundry, keeping the room clean—all that stuff. It's like living in this big family has made me way more independent, you know? I can handle things on my own now.

(P8, 18-year-old lad)

Moreover, the transition to a new school environment, often necessitated by entering care. This is because the participants used to live in rural areas before entering care, while *ci'aiyuan* is located in urban sites. However, they mentioned that this transition process was facilitated by schoolteachers who provided them with invaluable emotional and informational support. As described by many participants in this study, these educators paid special attention to young people living in *ci'aiyuan*, supporting them in adjusting to the change and helping in various aspects of their school lives. For instance, one participant recalled the regards he received during an illness:

I'll never forget this one time. My schoolteacher, Mr. Yang, he went above and beyond. I was feeling sick, and outta nowhere, he shows up at the institution with a bunch of fruits for me. He kept checking in on me, even after I got back to school. It was pretty impressive, you know? Like, he really cared about my health and stuff.

(P7, 16-year-old boy)

Another participant appreciated the small presents from his teacher at school:

My schoolteacher is the real MVP. He knows where we are coming from [Note: *ci'aiyuan*] and often makes sure to look out for us. So nice. He'd even surprise us with gifts sometimes, like this one time he hooked me up with a badminton racket. And it wasn't just about the gifts, right? He was always there to help me out with my studies too. He had our backs, for real.

(P11, 17-year-old boy)

Additionally, individuals and organisations from broader communities also contributed to their lived experiences in *ci'aiyuan*. These entities, including university students, company employees, government officials and diverse community members, regularly visit the institution during holidays and traditional festivals, donating money, goods and services while celebrating and interacting with the participants. These activities are voluntary and without profit, serving as vital sources of emotional and material support to address the vulnerability and scarcity experienced by these individuals. Like what participants shared:

It's pretty cool how people out there in society really look out for us. Like, there's this pharmaceutical company, they swing by every winter, donating clothes and whipping up dumplings with us. And get this, the boss even brings his whole employee team along. And then there's these other groups, they come through *ci'aiyuan* with all sorts of goodies, you know? Food, clothes, everything. Oh, and the barbershop. They're always hooking us up with free haircuts. It's pretty sweet, gotta say.

(P7, 16-year-old boy)

Every year, it's the same heartwarming scene. Like a cherished tradition, this local pharmacy in our neighbourhood generously extends their support. They hand out lucky money, these little red envelopes filled with goodwill, especially during the Lunar New Year festivities. It's a time when we all come together, cooking up dumplings and sharing in the joy of community. These moments, they're more than just gifts; they're symbols of care and connection that uplift our spirits and make us feel truly valued.

(P13, 17-year-old girl)

All participants expressed contentment with their involvement in these charitable activities, fostering a sense of love and support. The interactions further contributed to nurturing a positive outlook towards society and other individuals, cultivating altruistic motivations among the young people:

Being here, it's like being wrapped up in love and support, you know? It's like this warm, cozy vibe that just makes you feel good inside. And you know what? I wanna spread that love. I wanna pass it on to others in the future, for sure.

(P9, 15-year-old boy)

Evidently, sources of support that participants can benefit from now encompass the care institution itself, staff members, peers, schoolteachers, local authorities and broader community entities, representing a significant expansion compared to life before entering care.

3.3 | Theme 3: Facilitating Positive Life Trajectory Shifts for Certain Individuals

Beyond these immediate impacts described above, living in *ci'aiyuan* may have reshaped the life paths of some individuals. A few participants mentioned they had previously struggled with 'problems', including school absenteeism, involvement in delinquent activities, and stealing. However, interventions by staff members and the influence of positive role models among peers may have instigated notable changes in their behaviours. They shared:

Yeah, I gotta admit, back then I was kinda all over the place, you know? Skipping class, not really doing what I was supposed to. But then, the teachers here at *ci'aiyuan*, they kinda called me out on it, you know? Held me accountable. And you know what? It made a difference. After that, I started buckling down, behaving better (laugh)

(P4, 17-year-old boy)

Yeah, back then, we were kinda infamous, you know? Me and my bros, causing trouble, getting into all sorts of stuff we shouldn't have. But then there's this one

dude (in *ci'aiyuan*), tall and slim, you can't miss him. He's like my hero, man. Always on my case about staying focused, studying hard. I mean, sure, it's annoying sometimes, but without him? I'd probably still be up to no good.

(P10, 17-year-old boy)

These narratives underscore the potential of institutional care to furnish a structured and supportive environment, guiding individuals away from risky behaviours or unfavourable outcomes in education. The newly formed supportive relationships with both staff members and peers in care seem to have played a crucial role in redirecting the lives of some participants. Likewise, one participant highlighted the profound impact on his life trajectory:

Yeah, you know, if it wasn't for *ci'aiyuan*, I'd probably be out there, grinding away as a migrant worker in Guangdong (province), you feel me? But being here, it's changed things. It's given me opportunities, you know? Like, I'm thinking maybe I could even go to college. It's like *ci'aiyuan* opened doors for me that I never even knew existed.

(P5, 17-year-old boy)

In this light, *ci'aiyuan*, offering supportive relationships and varied forms of social support, may have facilitated extended educational pursuits and heightened educational achievements for certain individuals. This, in turn, will enhance their prospects for the future, such as more high-paying opportunities in the labour market.

4 | Discussion

4.1 | Interpretations

This study focused on 14 young people aged 15–18 with lived experiences in *ci'aiyuan*, an emerging childcare practice in a specific region of China. Based on thematic analysis of qualitative data, three overarching findings have been identified. Participants' accounts revealed that living in this institution impacted them by providing more supportive relationships in their social networks, increasing their self-perceived social support and facilitating positive life trajectory shifts for certain individuals. Before entering care, the participants had typically experienced isolation and a lack of companionship due to challenging family circumstances. Parental loss, incapacity or prolonged absence had resulted in limited opportunities for meaningful social interactions for them. However, the transition to living in *ci'aiyuan* introduced them to a diverse set of network members and opportunities to establish supportive relationships. Particularly, relationships formed with staff members provided emotional security and stability, often missing from participants' prior family lives.

The findings align with previous research emphasising the critical role of caregivers in creating a nurturing and supportive environment and the importance of social support networks for people in care (Stein 2006; Gilligan and Arnau-Sabatés 2017; Frimpong-Manso 2020). Those connections help gain re-deemed family relationships and provide substantial values to

individuals in care (Hiles et al. 2013; Kendrick 2013; Stein 2008). Predictably, they can further prepare for a successful transition to adulthood for individuals with care experience (Van Breda and Dickens 2017; Keshri 2021). Other than that, the findings indicate that peers in care possess the capacity to cultivate a nurturing atmosphere through constructive social interactions, a facet often overlooked in current literature. This dynamic could stem from the concerted efforts of staff members or a positive environment within the selected *ci'aiyuan*. The collective living arrangement itself may also foster stronger bonds and attachments among individuals, compared to more prevalent family foster care models typical in Western contexts with only a few individuals per foster family. Alternatively, these mutual bonds among young lives may be attributed to the insufficiency of formal support system. They have no choice but to turn to the peers in care when emotional difficulties are being raised.

Institutional care is often viewed with scepticism and concern. Many argued this type of alternative care in China has paid little attention to residents' educational attainment, emotional interactions and long-term development outcomes (Chen 2019; Shang 2002; Jia, Li, and Wang 2019). Nevertheless, lived experiences shared by the participants in this study offered a different narrative. The study highlights that social interactions within *ci'aiyuan* often resemble those among family members and friends rather than conventional professional relationships between caregivers and recipients. Caregivers (referred to 'teachers' by participants) were reported to be involved in various activities beyond basic care, including education, mentoring, as well as life-skill and social-skill preparation, which the young people involved found highly beneficial. Moreover, the interventions of staff members and the influence of positive role models among peers in care were noticed. These have caused notable improvements in behaviour and/or educational attainment for certain individuals. Such engagement with *ci'aiyuan* even appears to play a protective role in preventing early drop-out and juvenile delinquency (see Section 3.3). Additionally, living in *ci'aiyuan* has significantly increased social support that participants can benefit from. The care institution itself, local authorities, staff members, peers in care, schoolteachers, as well as individuals and organisations from the broader community all contributed to this change. As opposed to peers who mainly receive support from family networks (Gordon-Hollingsworth et al. 2016), this strengthening in social support networks allowed for a broader range of assistance and resources available to the participants. These discrepancies between studies may be attributed to varying levels of staff commitment among childcare institutions. Nonetheless, this paper sheds light on an important aspect of institutional care that often goes unnoticed or is overshadowed by concerns and negative perceptions. These positive experiences challenge the prevailing narrative of institutional care as inherently detrimental and emphasise that there can be variations in the quality of care provided. Most importantly, the findings illustrated a few glimpses of a softer and gentler version of the institutional reality, which may sometimes be part of lives for individuals involved. Knowledge of institutional care is therefore extended, even though these may be minority experiences.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the complexities of institutional care. The positive outcomes observed in this study may

partly reflect the participants' precarious pre-care backgrounds. For many, *ci'aiyuan* represented a significant improvement over prior circumstances characterised by instability, poverty or neglect. Therefore, the outcomes are likely influenced by both the quality of care in *ci'aiyuan* and the contrast with participants' challenging pre-care environments. Additionally, these findings do not negate the global call for gradual de-institutionalisation. Instead, they emphasise the importance of improving the quality of care within existing institutions while alternative models are being developed and implemented. In countries where institutional care remains a predominant option, the lessons from *ci'aiyuan* could inform best practices to ensure that young people experience a safe, supportive and growth-oriented environment.

While *ci'aiyuan* demonstrates promising practices, it still fails to address critical concerns such as forced cohabitation, limited personal autonomy and compromised individual needs (Šiška and Beadle-Brown 2020). This type of placement may serve as a temporary refuge for individuals facing acute crises rather than a widespread solution. Based on fieldwork observations and participant interviews, *ci'aiyuan* appears to admit primarily non-disabled individuals, raising concerns about inclusivity. Future efforts should address accessibility and the needs of young people with disabilities. Furthermore, caregivers in *ci'aiyuan* face an overload of responsibilities, including day-to-day care, education, mental counselling and activity organisation. These demands may exceed their training and expertise. Introducing specialised roles, such as social workers, could distribute responsibilities more effectively and provide comprehensive support, including case management, family engagement and transition planning. Additionally, the transition from institutional care to independent living remains a significant challenge (Yin 2024c). Although not addressed by participants in this study, leaving-care experiences require further exploration to ensure young people are adequately supported during this critical phase.

4.2 | Limitations

Regarding limitations, this study focused on a specific age group (15–18) from a single childcare institution, and the findings may introduce sampling bias, i.e., participants' experiences may not fully represent the diversity of young people living in *ci'aiyuan*. Also, the data collected through semi-structured interviews are subject to self-report bias, as participants may provide socially desirable responses or withhold sensitive information (McLaughlin 2012). Given this, they may have intentionally described the glorified image of *ci'aiyuan* where they live to avoid embarrassment. Although confidentiality was emphasised across the research process, this bias could still impact the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Moreover, the process of transcribing and translating interviews into English may introduce errors or inaccuracies, potentially leading to misinterpretation of participants' responses. In addition, the study primarily invited young people living in *ci'aiyuan*, with limited insight into the views of other key stakeholders, such as caregivers, institution staff or policymakers. A more comprehensive understanding of institutional care would require input from multiple perspectives, which could be done in future research.

5 | Conclusion

In the case of *ci'aiyuan*, this paper serves as a reminder that institutional care, when well-implemented with a focus on holistic development, adequate resources and nurturing relationships, can make a positive difference in the lives of young people and act as a vital safety net. This calls for a re-evaluation of preconceived notions about institutional care and a more nuanced understanding of its role, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where such care remains a predominant solution. This study reinforces the idea that every child and young person, regardless of their background, deserves the opportunity to thrive. It invites ongoing dialogue and research to further refine the role of institutional care within the broader landscape of child welfare systems globally.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was approved by the Coventry University Ethics (Ref.: P174336).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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