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## **Yanyan's Sister and the Pig: agency, structure and educational opportunity in China**

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### **Background**

This is a case study of a single individual's experience from a larger study of young people's transition from school to university in China. It is set in the context of massive expansion university enrolment and wider, unprecedentedly rapid and deep socio-economic change.

This individual ('Yanyan') comes from an extremely poor, peasant farming family of seven daughters. Despite the potentially crushing disadvantage of this background, Yanyan has succeeded in fulfilling her dream of going to university and is determined to help all of her sisters achieve the same.

The account begins with a 'critical incident' in the form of a passionate argument between her elder sister and her father, who was unwilling to allow this sister to proceed with high school education. Yanyan's reflection on this incident - involving the pig of the paper's title - reveals the paradoxical roles that cultural forces play in both inhibiting and facilitating her ability to seize the educational opportunity available in the 'new' China. This sets the theme for the main focus of the paper, which is to examine the interplay between Yanyan's expression of individual agency and the structural forces that she encounters, and to evaluate the explanatory power of different theoretical positions in understanding her experience.

### **Research Questions**

The aims of this study are:

1. To explore the narrative life history of an educationally successful individual Chinese student from an extremely disadvantaged background.
1. To explore the scope offered by material and cultural forces in the current Chinese context for individual agency in promoting educational success
1. To examine the applicability of different theoretical approaches to issues of agency and structure in a socio-cultural context of deep and rapid change.

### **Methods**

The larger study from which this case is drawn combined a questionnaire (n = 596) on the backgrounds and influences on the decision-making of first-year undergraduate students from seven universities in three cities with in-depth interviews of a smaller sample (n=28), representing both typical and unusual cases.

The focus here is on the interview data from a single individual whom earlier questionnaire data had revealed to be exceptional in terms of her materially disadvantaged socio-economic and demographic background but who gave responses similar to the majority on her perceptions of education and its personal value.

The data come from a single extended interview, with further clarification from subsequent contacts. The interview was conducted in Mandarin then transcribed and translated into English. It began by developing a central theme of the questionnaire - decision-making in relation to going to university - but then worked outwards to place this process in a wider life history narrative.

## Frame

The paper examines the usefulness of different theoretical perspectives in helping us to understand Yanyan's success in the face of severe disadvantage. An initial distinction is made between Rational Action Theory (Goldthorpe, 1998), with its focus on the autonomous individual agent, and various sociologically informed theories that explicitly address issues of agency and structure/culture. Yanyan's account is examined in relation to both types of theory, although the use of rational action theory here is framed by a perception of its explanatory inadequacy.

Amongst the sociologically inspired perspectives, Biesta and Tedder's (2007) 'ecological perspective' on agency 'in the lifecourse' is attractive because of its focus on individual engagement with 'contexts-for action' and the temporal contexts of agency that suit its application to life narratives. Giddens's (1984, 1991) concept of individual reflexivity is examined as an explanatory concept, particularly with respect to later parts of Yanyan's account.

Margaret Archer's (2003, 2007) theorisation of the culture-agency relationship offers two ideas of potentially considerable explanatory power: her analytical separation of agency and culture based on the necessary temporal pre-existence of culture over agency, and the concept of the 'internal conversation' by the agent as a form of individual mediation between structure/culture and agency. Their use offers a means of analysing both agency and structure/culture separately and then the interaction between them, thus avoiding the analytical difficulties that are presented by their conflation in Giddens's approach.

A further concern with these theoretical perspectives is the extent to which they are useful in the Chinese context of rapid and deep socio-economic change.

## Research findings

A key figure in Yanyan's story is her father, who - in the argument that opens the story - initially opposes the eldest sister's continuing with her education. This seems to be inspired by respect of his own parents but then presents him with a challenge to his own role as a 'good father'. The clash between father and daughter becomes a highly significant turning point and the father is the hinge upon which the forces of change accumulate.

But as well as change, there are strong currents of cultural continuity that become essential for Yanyan's subsequent capacity to exert effective personal agency. The traditional significance of parents and family not only survives this critical incident but becomes a source of strength and inspiration for Yanyan as she engages with the structures of modern China. Significant parts of her inherited culture act as a source of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1984) that is crucial to Yanyan's ability to negotiate successfully the opportunities opened up by social transformation.

Parts of Yanyan's account of her subsequent educational life history could be seen as a highly deliberative, rational engagement with contemporary social structures, but this misses the complex inter-relationship between traditional 'ideologies', the new structures and Yanyan's agential power. I suggest that Biesta and Tedder's work still places too much emphasis on the possibilities of agency rather than the relationship between agency and structure, that Giddens's work provides some useful concepts but lacks analytical clarity, and that Archer's analytical approach may offer the best means of understanding Yanyan's story.

A note of caution is sounded over the 'translation' of theory devised in one socio-cultural context into another that is radically different. In this case, conceptions of 'the individual' - crucial to the sense of agency - are discussed as a possible example of where such caution is necessary and may have consequences for theorisation in new contexts.