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ARTICLE



Breaking the cycle: an asset-based family intervention for poverty alleviation in China

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ABSTRACT

Limited attention is given to how the poverty alleviation benefits children's development and breaking the transmission of intergenerational poverty in China. Based on two pilot programmes, *Chunyu* and *Qianshou*, in Shan'xi province, this study presents the potential effects of an asset-based family intervention that incorporates Child Development Accounts (CDAs) and parental support services on children and families. This study finds that the implementation of the programmes has positive financial and nonfinancial benefits for children and their families. The CDAs may serve as a key mechanism to integrate and strengthen the effect of asset building and parental involvement.

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Introduction

China's rapid economic growth since the late 1970s enabled more than 700 million people to rise above the national poverty line, contributing to over 70% of the poverty reduced across the world (United Nation Development Programme, 2016). However, the dramatic socio-economic transition complicates the issue of poverty in China. The trickle-down effect of the initial natural economic growth has gradually weakened (Wang, Xu, & Shang, 2014), deepening the structural factors of poverty – namely, inequality and intergenerational poverty transmission. Addressing these issues requires sustained antipoverty measures and a strengthened social welfare system.

At the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, the Chinese government launched a new poverty alleviation plan in attempt to eradicate rural poverty and build an all-round moderately prosperous society by 2020. Featuring precise and targeted measures, the plan's primary goal is to ensure all of China's poor have enough to eat and wear, and receive adequate education, health services and housing. It emphasises the household as the unit of action, highlighting the importance of accurate poverty identification, appropriate project arrangement and accurate implementation to ensure that assistance reaches poverty-stricken households (Xinhuanet, 2016). Since 2013, this poverty alleviation plan has become the top policy priority at all levels of government, particularly in the west and in remote areas where poverty is critical.

Though the implementation of China's poverty alleviation plan has made great impacts, its sustainability has attracted increasing attention. The plan in many places largely follows the conventional understanding that poverty is merely a lack of income and basic living security, rather than the poor's capabilities for long-term development. Moreover, it is mostly adult-centred and gives limited attention to child development in poor families. China's current poverty alleviation plan does not adequately bridge the gap between vulnerable children in poor and non-poor households.

This qualitative study is based on two pilot programmes that incorporates Child Development Accounts (CDAs) and parental support services on children and families – *Chunyu* and *Qianshou* – implemented in Shan'xi province of China. It investigates the impact of these two asset-based family interventions on participating children and their families. The study begins by offering some background information about childhood vulnerability to poverty, parental practice and asset-building policy. The study's methods are reviewed before its findings are presented and discussed. It concludes with an exploration of how integrated CDA programmes can benefit China's poverty alleviation plan.

Background

This section provides context by reviewing the literature on intergenerational poverty and its relationship to childhood vulnerability and parental practice, asset-building policies across the globe and China's current research on asset-building policy to address intergenerational poverty.

Asset-based social policy and childhood poverty

Poverty and its relationship with social policy have undergone a paradigm shift since the mid-twentieth century. Though the traditional perspective of poverty focuses on deprivation of material goods in maintaining a basic living, the new consensus is oriented towards inequality and the poor's lack of capability to achieve meaningful development (Sen, 1999). Poverty is therefore viewed not as a static situation but as a dynamic process associated with vulnerability or poverty risks over a long period of time. A growing body of research has discovered the transmission of dynamic and chronic poverty across generations (Harper, Marcus, & Moore, 2003; Rank & Hirschl, 1999). In this regard, many countries have prioritised the strategies of investing in children to mitigate their vulnerability to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (Midgley & Conley, 2010).

Poverty begins at home, during childhood. Childhood vulnerability is an important predictor of intergenerational poverty. Children from disadvantaged families lag significantly behind those from the advantaged ones in various development outcomes (e.g. academic scores, post-secondary education enrolment) (Lareau, 2003). Parental practice is a crucial factor of child development (Heckman, 2011). The differences between wealthy and poor families in parenting practice predict diverging destinies of children (Kalil, 2015).

Household asset holding may interplay with parenting practices in affecting children's development outcomes. Asset-based social policy approaches provide an insightful

perspective on this. As noted by Sherraden (1991), *income* refers to the flow of resources, and is usually used for consumption of goods and services in a short time. In contrast, *assets* are the stock of wealth that can be used for cushioning people's income loss, education or business investment, or other activities towards developmental goals. The asset-based approach shifts away from needs-focused welfare, and moves forward to capacity building and development (Schreiner & Sherraden, 2007).

Asset accumulation not only creates economic opportunities, but also has positive socio-psychological effects on individuals and families (Paxton, 2001). Strong evidence exists on the impact of household asset holding on parenting, including parental expectation and investment towards the child's education (Kim & Sherraden, 2011; Yeung & Conley, 2008; Zhan & Sherraden, 2011). In particular, asset accumulation may motivate parents to invest in children, improve parenting behaviour and ultimately benefit children's development (Yeung & Conley, 2008). On the other hand, parental involvement, especially through parent-child communication and the transmission of parental educational expectations, may mediate the effect of asset accumulation, which in turn positively affects children's academic achievement and social-emotional development (Elliott III, 2009; Harkness & Newman, 2003; Zhan & Sherraden, 2011).

CDAs as an example of asset-based social policy

Inspired by asset-based theory, CDAs – savings or investment accounts for children with the purpose of developmental goals such as post-secondary education, home-ownership and career training – have been implemented in various countries worldwide (Loke & Sherraden, 2009; Sherraden et al., 2018a). Research demonstrates CDAs' positive impacts on the development of children and family as a whole (Clancy, Beverly, Sherraden, & Huang, 2016; Sherraden et al., 2018b).

The CDA intervention is based on the institutional theory of saving. It argues that people, particularly low-income people, require institutional support to accumulate and hold assets, and thereby build capability to combat poverty (Sherraden et al., 2018a). The CDA intervention has a positive impact on both children and families. Studies based on the SEED OK programme in the United States show that CDAs increase parental involvement in children and reduce the negative impact of family vulnerability on children's social and emotional development (Huang, Sherraden, Kim, & Clancy, 2014; Kim, Huang, Sherraden, & Clancy, 2017). In Uganda, for example, the CDA programme introduced a strong multidimensional development component to reduce family breakdown and provide effective and suitable care for vulnerable children (Curley, Ssewamala, Nabunya, Ilic, & Han, 2016).

In line with the asset-based framework, a growing body of research has investigated the effect of household asset holding on the development of children and youth in China (Deng, Sherraden, Huang, & Jin, 2013; Deng & Meng, 2013). Research calls for more progressive asset policy to address the challenges of poverty and long-term development of vulnerable children. Nonetheless, there has been limited research in testing the effect of CDA interventions in China's socio-cultural contexts. Less discussion involves connecting the CDA programme with more comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies to address intergenerational poverty transmission.

A national CDA policy could have important benefits for poverty alleviation in China. It could address intergenerational poverty transmission by not only providing short-term welfare services, but also enabling children to build assets to achieve life-long development goals. Though China currently has no established national CDA policy, two pilot CDA programmes, *Chunyu* and *Qianshou*, have been launched through collaboration between the local government and non-profit organizations in Shan'xi Province. This study investigates the effect of these asset-based family interventions on China's socio-cultural context.

Methodology

This section reviews the programme design of the two CDA programmes, their demographic characteristics and this study's data collection.

Programme design

Both programmes in this study target vulnerable children and families in rural areas, aiming to promote their asset and capacity building. The *Chunyu* programme was implemented in a state-designated poverty county, Baishui of Shan'xi Province. With informed consent, a total of 10 children aged 12–16 years whose parents were having disabilities were identified to participate in this 4-year programme (2017–2021). In the participant selection process, *Chunyu* programme administrators considered potential participants' household economic situation, age of the child and the caregiver's disability status – as children of parents with disabilities are often among the most vulnerable in rural China. *Chunyu* consists of three intervention components: CDAs, financial education and parenting support. Parents or caregivers agreed to open a CDA in the child's name to help them accumulate assets for educational development. The child and family save in the account and the agency provides one-to-one monthly matches ranging from RMB 50 (\$7.29 USD) to RMB 100 (\$14.57 USD) with a cap of RMB 100. Accountholders can access the savings in the accounts after 1 year for children's educational purposes such as tuition, after-school tutoring and study tours. In addition, *Chunyu* offers children 2-hour financial education classes every month, focusing on basic knowledge of saving, loan and financial planning for future development. It also provides parents or caregivers programme information and updates on their children's performance through a social media platform, Wechat. Parents are also invited to attend two 2-hour parenting workshops per year together with their children.

Qianshou was a 6-month programme (October, 2016–March, 2017) implemented in a rehabilitation service centre in Xi'an city of Shan'xi Province. Ten children and their parents or caregivers participated. Families were identified based on their economic situation and household registration status. Parents or caregivers, with informed consent, agreed to open CDAs for their children. Programme administrators provided an initial deposit of RMB 1500 (\$219 USD) to each account to encourage continuous savings. Families could receive a one-to-one match for their monthly savings up to RMB 50 (\$7.29 USD). In exchange for the matched deposits, parents or caregivers were required to carry out rehabilitation training for their children at home. *Qianshou*

provided financial education workshops for parents or caregivers on money management and financial planning. The programme also offered monthly parenting classes on how to take care of children with developmental disabilities.

Demographic characteristics of participants

For the *Chunyu* programme, of the ten children participants, six were girls and four were boys. The age range was 13–15 years old, with the average being 14.2. All children were in middle school when they were involved in the programme. There exists a large variation in their family living arrangements. Four children often live with only one parent. Among them, the parents of two children divorced, and the fathers of the other two children-worked in the city for most of the year. In addition, three other children families can be considered skip-generational, as both of their parents often work in cities. All children participants were from low-income households, among which three were identified as poor, according to the official poverty line of RMB 3,015 (\$443 USD) per capita.

In the *Qianshou* programme, the children participants consist of six boys and four girls, aged an average of 3.8 years. All participants were eligible for the government rehabilitation assistance programme for children with developmental disabilities younger than 6 years old. Though only one family is defined as income poor, all other families owed large amounts of debt from health care expenditure of their disabled children.

Data collection

For both programmes, the author serves as an external consultant and evaluator, and was involved in every stage of programme design and operation. Given the preliminary nature of the programme and the research, a qualitative approach was undertaken for a deep understanding of the project implementation process and experience of participants. A participatory approach was adopted for evaluation for more detailed reflection of the experiences, expressions and views of project participants and other stakeholders.

Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted with participating children and their caregivers, as well as case managers and the agency director. Other data sources were obtained from case records, document review and observation of activities. With the agreement of the participants, some interviews were audio taped and transcribed afterward. All qualitative data, including transcripts, ethnographic notes and bibliographic data, were systematically coded for subsequent analysis. The author deploys a grounded theory method for data analysis (Strauss, 1987). As a result, discourses concerning participants' feelings are captured and interpreted, and the outcomes, effects and challenges of the programme are tentatively evaluated.

Findings

The implementation of the programmes has shown some positive results on participating children and their families. The following section elaborates the two main findings:

the CDA programmes had (1) financial benefits for children and families, and (2) nonfinancial benefits for children and families.

Financial benefits for children and families

Through opening and managing CDAs and taking the financial education training, participants in both programmes gained better access to mainstream financial products and increased their financial literacy. As a result, participants strengthened their financial knowledge, enabling them to build assets for human development.

Many *Chunyu* participants lived in a state of asset deprivation, lacking access and the basic means to build assets for their family's economic development (e.g. secured savings, loans). Moreover, China's current adult-centred poverty alleviation plan did not effectively mitigate their vulnerability, leaving many to face serious economic insecurity in terms of education and health care. According to the interviews with participants, education and health care are the top of household expenditures. Though the compulsory education law covers tuition and fees for children at primary or middle schools, other school-related expenses such as food, after-school tutoring and transportation remain a relative high burden for them. The CDA component of *Chunyu* assisted participating families in managing their finances and securing investment in their children's education.

For families with children with developmental disabilities, household economic circumstances tended to be even more complicated. This is the key issue that the *Qianshou* programme attempts to address. Early rehabilitation is enormously expensive. Aside from the basic health care schemes, poor families with disabled children do not have enough accumulated assets to buffer the economic pressure of rehabilitation. In fact, the average debts for the participating families of the programme were more than 50,000 RMB (\$7276 USD). Therefore, the need for CDA programmes such as *Qianshou* is high.

In interviews, parents of children in both *Chunyu* and *Qianshou* expressed that they had never thought of opening an account for their children before. One major reason is that it is unusual to open a banking account in a child's name with local financial institutions. Though mainstream banking for children is legal in China, many institutional barriers exist in practice that exclude them. For example, in Baishui County, local banks require the child's birth certificate and identification card to process the account opening application. However, most rural parents do not apply for these documents for their children at birth, opting instead to handle it when their children go to work. In addition, local financial institutions usually charge annual fees on accounts with a low balance, which makes account opening unattractive for poor families.

By opening CDAs for children, both programmes helped children gain the access to banks for the first time, granting the opportunity to save and plan for the future. In an interview, an 11-year-old boy, MGY,¹ in the first year of middle school shared his learning experience in the programme after 1 year:

After joining in the programme, I had the opportunity to go to the bank with my mom to open my own bank account. It was my first time going to a bank. I learned how to deposit money and set a password at the counter. My mom gives me RMB10 every week for snacks and stationaries, and I can save some in my account. For example, if I have RMB30, I will leave RMB10 for later use, RMB5 for saving and the rest for current use.

Both programmes provide regular financial education workshops for children and caregivers. The workshops deliver basic financial knowledge, including saving and withdrawing procedures, how to set an appropriate saving goal that aligns with developmental needs, and how to avoid online financial fraud. A programme case manager mentioned that children could learn and practice financial-related knowledge through these workshops, but have almost no chance from their formal school education. She noticed that children actually had great interest in learning financial knowledge because it is practical and useful.

In addition to the children gaining financial knowledge and skills, their parents or caregivers also benefited from attending workshops and managing the accounts. One example is the case of ZXF, the father of a 3-year-old girl with cerebral palsy in the *Qianshou* programme. ZXF had always been anxious about his daughter's rehabilitation. He had spent much money seeking and experimenting folk prescriptions and owed a large amount of debt. Since joining *Qianshou*, he had become more aware of his family's economic situation. He was more willing to listen to other people's suggestions and learn to spend more rationally and wisely, trying to balance the expenditure on his child's health care and other family living expenses.

A mother of a 6-year-old girl also talked about how the CDA changed her thinking and behaviour about saving and spending:

Although a 100 RMB deposit each month does not seem a large amount of money, accumulation of one year's savings can really help to solve some bigger problems. I think this plan pushes me to think of my spending and the family's financial life over time. The savings are required to be used for children's education and rehabilitation, not for eating or clothing. This is good to plan my child's health care and other expenditures now and in the future.

Participants in both programmes had actively engaged in financial asset building for children's education and health care. The *Chunyu* programme offered a 1:1 matching deposit for any amount of saving from RMB 50 to the cap of RMB100, and all participants except one chose the maximum amount of saving after 5 months. One and half years later, the total amount of savings reached RMB 20,100, with nine participants holding RMB 1800 respectively and one RMB 900 in the CDAs.

The children participants were relatively younger in the *Qianshou* programme. Parents or caregivers therefore took the main responsibility to open and manage CDAs. The parents or caregivers understood that the goal of the CDA was to save money to meet the development needs of children. According to the case manager, all caregivers expressed that they would continue to save for their children even after the programme ended.

The above qualitative evidence suggests that CDAs may become a critical vehicle to nurture and increase the family's financial awareness, helping them plan family spending on children's development and other consumption items. Children were able to access financial products in early ages and likely established a good saving habit.

Children from poor households are often excluded from the institutional opportunity to accumulate financial assets and lack of financial literacy (Sherraden, 2013). The CDA and financial education components in *Chunyu* provide them with an opportunity to engage in and benefit from the asset-building process. In *Qianshou*, the saving

goals were more concrete and designed to be achieved in a shorter term because participants faced greater economic burdens due to their children's disability status. Both programmes offered financial benefits for participants.

Nonfinancial benefits for children and families

Participating in either *Chunyu* or *Qianshou* also offers nonfinancial benefits. Participating children and their parents or caregivers demonstrate stronger future orientation and improved parent-child interactions. These effects result from a mutual enhancement of asset-building and parental support strategies.

The CDAs enable a shift in the parents' cognitive focus from daily stressors to future development. The families participating in the CDA programmes had long been struggling with multiple challenges, including health problems, unemployment, care for children with disabilities and debt. Entangled with short-term livelihood needs, parents and caregivers tend to concentrate on the problems rather than the potential advantages of their families (Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013). The CDA programmes provided opportunities for families to make decisions for their children's future.

In addition to building assets, CDAs also change attitudes towards future development, such as educational expectations. Children and parents often have different educational expectations. The baseline assessment in *Chunyu* programme found that parents had high educational expectations for their children, but many children tended to view their educational future as very gloomy. The preliminary evaluation shows that participation in the project has greatly improved children's confidence in future development. By combining asset-building and parental support services, the CDA programmes contribute to these positive changes by offering opportunities to develop financial knowledge and skills. In addition, the intervention targeted parent-child interaction to create opportunities for two generations to communicate with and ultimately understand each other.

In the *Chunyu* programme, most parents noticed and were excited about the changes in their children's attitudes and behaviours. The programme case manager indicated that participating children could better understand some abstract concepts such as life goals and future planning:

Usually when you teach children about future development, they cannot understand the contents and tend to have no interest. But if they have knowledge about saving, they often could understand that it is related to their future development. This way of learning therefore is a very specific and useful method. From my understanding, the CDA programme could help the children form good morality and behaviour, which will definitely benefit their school study and future education.

Intergenerational communication benefits both children and parents/caregivers by enhancing their mutual understanding and forming positive attitudes towards each other. Both programmes emphasise the importance of more parental involvement in children's education and health care. Indeed, by gaining financial knowledge, children can better understand their parents' difficulties in earning a living. On the other hand, parents have the chance to see and think about their children's future and life goals. An

interview with one parent of a boy aged 14 years old, LS, who was enrolled in *Chunyu* reflected this point:

We don't have much money as parents, but we still give our kid some pocket money every week, as he needs to buy necessities at school. He also receives red packets in the lunar New Year. Since participation in the programme, he has learned to save money. Last month he did deposit some money in his CDA. I became more aware of his future and often discuss with him about the future plan, such as 'what you want to do if you are not able to enter college', 'what do you really like to be when you grow up', 'what you can do', etc. I think he can understand more about these questions now.

A mother of the child aged 13 years from *Chunyu* shared her experience:

I think that the CDA programme helps to develop children's financial planning awareness and also is good for developing a self-management habit. It teaches children the sense of valuing, not only valuing the money but more importantly valuing other people including his parents. Before, when we bought something for him, he was not respectful. After joining the programme, he has learned to save money. Now when he wants to buy something, he will think first if it is really necessary. He learned how to value something. I think this is the biggest change for my child.

The *Qianshou* programme had more requirements for parents' or caregivers' involvement in rehabilitation training at home for their disabled children. Taking care of a child with disabilities is difficult, especially for low-income families. The asset-based family intervention with a CDA component helped build family capability in the process of a child's rehabilitation. It enabled parents or caregivers to think beyond daily life difficulties and plan their child's future development.

In *Qianshou*, parents and caregivers received more intensive parenting support services, including workshops on how to provide quality caregiving to a child with cerebral palsy and how to budget the children's health care expenditure. The parenting support services taught and reinforced basic parenting skills, such as how to communicate effectively with children. In the parenting workshops, peer family groups formed an informal network through which they could support each other on parenting and financial decision-making.

The existing research has demonstrated that parents from the disadvantaged families, compared with their counterparts from advantaged ones, often do not have future-oriented planning for their children (Kalil, 2015). Related research in behavioural economics reveals the impact of parents' financial stress on children. Parents who must devote the majority of their cognitive attention to balancing the daily family expenses leave little room to follow through on decisions that can affect their children's future development (Mani et al., 2013). Such households trapped in the cycle of poverty often face asset constraints, meaning they lack adequate assets to meet their development needs beyond current consumption. Nonetheless, conventional family service programmes targeting parental behaviour change have been deemed ineffective due to failure in motivating family asset building and parental involvement in a sustainable way (Wagner, Spiker, & Linn, 2002). Built on the vehicle of CDAs, the *Chunyu* and *Qianshou* aim to develop family capabilities through monitoring the saving and asset accumulation process. The establishment of CDAs may motivate parents to invest in

their children. Furthermore, by incorporating the component of goal-directed parenting support services, the two programmes would reinforce the association between asset building and the development of the whole family.

Discussion

China's new poverty alleviation plan places great emphasis on adapting targeted measures to lift individuals and families out of poverty. The asset-based policy approach can provide important insights for the outcome and sustainability of poverty alleviation. By focusing on breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty transmission, this qualitative study based on two small-scale programmes aims to examine the potential effects of the asset-based family intervention that incorporates CDAs and parental support services on vulnerable children and families. Preliminary evidence provides evidence that the implementation of the programmes has positive financial and non-financial benefits for children and the family.

First, by opening CDAs, children and parents/caregivers gained greater access to financial products that benefit their future development. They had opportunities to engage in the whole process of accumulating financial assets including opening, managing and saving in an account. In the meantime, they acquired relevant knowledge and skills of asset accumulation through attending regular financial educational trainings. Furthermore, participating children and parents/caregivers showed positive changes in developing future orientation and improving parent-child interactions.

From the participatory evaluation of the project implementation process including in-depth interviews with participants, this paper argues that there is a positive correlation between asset building and family support interventions. As an important mechanism, CDAs play a key role in promoting or maximising the interactive effects of asset building and parental involvement.

Asset-based family interventions, such as CDAs, have great implications for China's poverty alleviation plan. Though the plan is greatly beneficial to extremely poor households, the vulnerability of many of these families will likely pull them back into poverty, given the nature of intergenerational poverty. Their asset constraints may lead to deprivation of children's development opportunities, which are often neglected or sacrificed when families lack adequate economic resources. Parental practice plays a critical mediating role between household economic circumstance and child development outcome. However, the current parenting programmes in China's poverty alleviation plan do not go far enough to produce sustained effects on children. Therefore, implementing a national CDA policy could become an important way to strengthen China's poverty alleviation plan. It could address intergenerational poverty transmission by not only providing short-term welfare services, but also enabling children to build assets to achieve life-long development goals.

Study limitations

The limitations of this study should be noted. First, the two programmes are relatively small in scale, and their evaluation is still preliminary. The two projects also have some comparability problems. Though both have core elements of a CDA intervention, there are significant differences in project design, project duration and participants; therefore, the conclusions drawn should be interpreted carefully. Second, though the qualitative approach of this study can help describe the implementation process of the project and the participants' feelings, the intervention effect calls for more rigorous experimental design methods to verify. Continuous evaluation of the project would provide more supplementary information. It is expected that future CDA projects can be expanded to provide more rigorous evaluation and research data information.

Conclusion

After 40 years of reform and opening up, China's poverty problem and its characteristics have undergone significant changes. The issue of poverty has increasingly been linked to inequality and vulnerability resulting from the dramatic socio-economic transition of recent decades. The changes call for more innovative social policies and a strengthened social service system. Though income-based poverty alleviation strategies are still fundamental, changing social risks require more progressive social policy interventions to promote asset building of poor individuals and families to achieve long-term social protection (Deng et al., 2013). The asset-based family interventions examined in this study are expected to not simply have positive effects on children, but also help the whole family build capabilities through promoting the family's asset accumulation and positive parenting practices. The implementation of these two programmes, though still ongoing, has important implications for China's poverty alleviation strategies in the new era of socio-economic development.

Note

1. We use initials of the interviewee's name for anonymity (same as below).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Suo Deng is an Associate Professor at Sociology Department of Peking University. His research focuses on poverty and social policy, particularly in the area of asset building and child welfare policies. Dr. Deng currently serves as Deputy Director of Peking University- Hong Kong Polytechnic University China Social Work Research Centre.

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