

**In-work poverty among precarious workers in western China:
Structural risks and their influence on personal agency and capability deprivation**

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Statement of originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

Precarity in the labour market and in-work poverty have received little attention in China, primarily because this is a recent phenomenon, triggered by China's rapid socio-economic transformation over the last four decades. Furthermore, existing literature on the topic narrows the focus on economic poverty and fails to outline a consistent explanation for the causes and processes influencing this phenomenon. The present research aims to understand the experiences and dynamics of in-work poverty in China within the capability framework. Based on the risk society theory and the capability approach, the research defines precarious employment as employment characterised by uncertainty and risk, which is in turn related to instability and insecurity. In tandem, it understands in-work poverty as having a job with capability deprivation. Within this framework, the research investigated the causes and the consequences of precarious employment and in-work poverty through five sub-questions relevant to the roles played by the labour market, the family, social relationships, social welfare (the Urban Minimum Livelihood Guarantee programme and Public Welfare Job programme) and personal agency. Based on the lived experiences of 46 participants, the research found that most precarious workers continue to face the risk of in-work poverty (capability deprivation). Through examining the above five stakeholders' reactions in the context of normalised precarious employment and life in China, the research argues that the capability deprivation of precarious workers is a result of a risk society that not only precludes them from institutional protection, but which also destroys their aspirations to pursue a better life. Using an evidence-based approach, the research provides a more authentic and comprehensive picture for understanding the in-work poverty phenomenon in western China.

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Table of contents

Statement of originality	I
Abstract	II
Acknowledgement	III
Table of contents	V
Lists of tables and figures	VII
Glossary of Chinese Terms and Acronyms	VIII
Chapter 1 : Introduction	1
1.1 Precarity in the risk society	2
1.2 Contextualising the precariat in China	7
1.3 Gaps in academic literature and new conceptual framework for understanding precarity and poverty	16
1.4 Research aims and questions	18
1.5 Methodology	19
1.6 Research results	21
1.7 Contributions	25
1.8 Structure of the thesis	26
Chapter 2 : Review of the Literature	29
2.1 Precariousness and in-work poverty	29
2.2 Empirical research on precariousness, family, social assistance and in-work poverty	33
2.3 Poverty conceptualisation and identification within the capability framework	48
2.4 This research	58
Chapter 3 : Methodologies	61
3.1 Operationalising and adapting Sen's capability approach	62
3.2 Dialectic discussion about subjectivity and objectivity in the capability approach	70
3.3 Research design	85
Chapter 4 : Precarious Employment and Precarious Life	93
4.1 Experiences of deprivation among precarious workers	96
4.2 Precariousness and risk control in COVID-19 Crisis	111
4.3 Conclusion	117
Chapter 5 : Family Configurations, Support Responsibilities and Wellbeing	120
5.1 Intergenerational support enhances younger generation's wellbeing	121
5.2 Reconciling family support responsibilities and capability deprivations	128
5.3 Guilty parents and intergenerational transmission of precarious employment	134

5.4 Conclusion	139
Chapter 6 : Dependency on Social Capital and Isolation in Social Relations	141
6.1 Incentives to develop broader social links	147
6.2 Available resources for developing social capital	156
6.3 Productivity of investment and obligation exchange of social capital	160
6.4 Conclusion	163
Chapter 7 : The Effect of Social Assistance Policy on Precarity and In-work Poverty	166
7.1 Individualised risk in social assistance and its effect on the capability set	169
7.2 Individualised risk and its impact on capability deprivation	188
7.3 Conclusion	195
Chapter 8 : Subjective Wellbeing, Agency and Coping Strategies	198
8.1 Pressure and happiness under structural limitations	202
8.2 Masking agency and the illusory good life	208
8.3 Adaptive preference and risk aversion	217
8.4 Conclusion	225
Chapter 9 : Conclusion – Capability Deprivation in the Risk Society	229
9.1 The story of the precariat	230
9.2 Significance, contributions and implications	234
9.3 Limitations and future research	241
Bibliography	245
Appendix 1: Ethics Approval	283
Appendix 2: Outline of Semi-structured In-depth Interview	284
Appendix 3: Reasoning Process Behind Tentative Basic Capability List and Aggregation Guideline of Capability Deprivation	290
1. Dimensions, capabilities and indicators in the tentative list	290
2. Formula for calculating capability deprivation	300

Lists of tables and figures

Figure 1.1	19
Figure 3.1	65
Figure 4.1	98
Table 7.1	192

Glossary of Chinese Terms and Acronyms

<i>bi shang bu zu bi xia you yu</i> (比上不足比下有余)	while worse off than the upper classes, [they were] better off than the lower classes
<i>bu xiang dong nao jin</i> (不想动脑筋)	do not want to think
<i>bu yao pan bi</i> (不要攀比)	not comparing themselves with others
<i>cha xu ge ju</i> (差序格局)	social circle
<i>danwei</i> (单位)	employment/work unit
<i>dibao</i> (低保)	Minimum Livelihood Guarantee
<i>dibaohu</i> (低保户)	<i>dibao</i> household
<i>gai ge kai fang</i> (改革开放)	'open-door' strategy
<i>gan yi hang ai yi hang</i> (干一行爱一行)	[you have to] love whatever job you take up
<i>gang wei bu tie</i> (岗位补贴)	post-employment subsidies
<i>gao/la guanxi</i> (搞/拉关系)/ <i>guanxixue</i> (关系学)	Establishing social connections
<i>getihu</i> (个体户)	individual (private) employers
<i>gong yi xing gang wei</i> (公益性岗位)	Public Welfare Job (PWJ)
<i>guanxi</i> (关系)	social connection/relationship
<i>guo you qi ye</i> (国有企业)	State-Owned Enterprise (SOE)
<i>hukou</i> (户口)	household registration status
<i>jiedaoba</i> (街道办)	Residential District Office
<i>jing zhun fu pin</i> (精准扶贫)	Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA)
<i>jiu ye jiu zhu</i> (就业救助)	Employment Assistance (EA)
<i>lao dong zi zhu</i> (劳动自助)	self-reliance by labouring
<i>maiduan</i> (买断)	buy-off
<i>men dang hu dui</i> (门当户对)	matching the socio-economic background

	in marriage
<i>mei mian zi</i> (没面子)	losing face
<i>mianzi</i> (面子)	save face
<i>min bu gao guan bu jiu</i> (民不告官不究)	officials not take proactive actions without civilians' complaints and prosecution
<i>neijuan</i> (内卷)	involution
<i>neitui</i> (内退)	early retirement
<i>ren qing wang lai</i> (人情往来)	favour exchange
<i>sanwu</i> (三无)	three-withouts/three-nos
<i>shequ</i> (社区)	community
<i>shi</i> (氏)	lineage
<i>sheng huo suo po</i> (生活所迫) / <i>wei le sheng huo</i> (为了生活)	forced by life
<i>shun qi zi ran</i> (顺其自然)	whatever will be, will be
<i>sui hang jiu shi</i> (随行就市)	going-rate pricing
<i>sui yi er an</i> (随遇而安) / <i>sui bo zhu liu</i> (随波逐流)	going with the flow
<i>sui yuan</i> (随缘) / <i>sui xing</i> (随性)	go with fate/following nature
<i>ti zhi wai ren yuan</i> (体制外人员)	work-unit outsiders
<i>tie fan wan</i> (铁饭碗)	iron rice bowl
<i>ting tian you ming</i> (听天由命)	resigned to my fate
<i>tong zao chi fan</i> (同灶吃饭)	eating together
<i>xiagang</i> (下岗)	laid-off
<i>xiangqin</i> (相亲)	blind date
<i>xiangzhen</i> (乡镇)	villages or towns
<i>wenbao</i> (温饱)	the most 'basic heating and food'

yi ci xing bu jiao (次性补缴)

contribution paid in full

zhi zu chang le (知足常乐)

contentment brings happiness

zhuanzheng (转正)

formalisation

zou yi bu suan yi bu (走一步算一步)

proceed without a plan

zu (族)

clan

European Union (EU)

Gross Regional Product (GRP)

Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD)

Participant information statement (PIS)

Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA)

Chapter 1 : Introduction

Work in the capitalist industrial society was highly standardised with full employment, performed as collective lifestyle with risk controlled by institutions (Beck, 1992, 1999, 2000a). Work was not only a means to earn a living, but also had the function of personal identification as to one's demands, abilities, socio-economic relations and position in society (Beck, 1992; Kalleberg, 2009; UNDP, 1997). However, since entering into the 'risk society' from 1970s onwards, employment has changed dramatically. It has become common for risk and insecurity to run through almost the whole employment system (Mythen, 2005), passed from the collective to the individual (Beck, 1992, 2007). A majority cohort is now identified as the 'precariat', as their employment is associated with labour-related insecurity, instability and uncertainty (Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Standing, 2011a). It is thus understandable that having a paid job may still help (Bárcena-Martín & Moro-Egido, 2013), but does not necessarily allow a person to overcome poverty and sustain his/her wellbeing (Baker, 2009; Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Maitre et al., 2012; Wagle, 2009).

This research identifies the causes and the consequences of precarious employment and in-work poverty, and examines the stakeholders' responses to the changes in the context of employment in China. Precarity means a status of uncertainty (also referring to unpredictable future) mainly related to insecurity, which can thus also be linked to risk – potential threatening events. Given that the increase in the number of precarious workers in China is primarily a result of state development strategy, the research contextualises this structural influence on employment within the framework of the 'risk society', to highlight the feature of individualised risk distributed by state actions on the labour market and social welfare systems. This process creates precarious employment, shown as short-term unstable employment without enough security, such as insufficient and unstable income packages, restricted career mobility, and a lack of in-work protection. These passive employment experiences further derive in-work poverty, when those workers' families are also poor. That says, a precarious worker might not face in-work poverty if his/her family could provide enough protection. The present research thus defines poverty as

multidimensional capability deprivation based on the capability approach to study poverty. It brings focus on the 'structures of living together' alongside personal agency (choice) and their links to people's wellbeing deficits. Through these frameworks, we can understand the complex causes (macro and micro) and dangerous results of precarious employment, beyond material security to include the social and psychological aspects influencing people's wellbeing outcomes.

This introductory chapter introduces the background of China's precarious employment and the key focus of the research. It is organised as follows: Section 1.1 uses the concept of 'risk society' to explain precarity; Section 1.2 contextualises how China (a socialist market economy) mirrors the elements of the risk society and the related precarity; Section 1.3 briefly presents the existing gaps in the academic literature around precarity in China, as well as outlining the conceptual framework – poverty defined as capability deprivation – of the research; Section 1.4 presents the aim and research questions of this research; Section 1.5 introduces the methodology of the research; Section 1.6 puts forward the argument of the research and its key findings; and Section 1.7 summarises the contributions of the research, before Section 1.8 outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Precarity in the risk society

Precarious employment is usually studied from the viewpoint of the 'flexible labour market', a scope of the users of labour and their market strategies (Allen & Henry, 1997). Flexibility in the labour market generally means that the number of workers, the labour relations, the labour process and the production mode, the job structures and skills, and the wage system are flexible and easy to adjust (Standing, 2011a, 2012). It is a proposition of neoliberalism that encourages market principles (Harris & Scully, 2015; Kalleberg, 2011; Standing, 2011a, 2012). Flexible labour market, as a way towards cost-effectiveness (Allen & Henry, 1997), is no doubt a reasonable framework to use for researching the precarious nature of work in terms of job stability – the length and continuity of employment (Allen & Henry, 1997). However, only focusing on flexible labour market alone may not

be enough to explain precariousness in employment, especially where cultural differences may also influence work practices.

John Allen and Nick Henry (1997) used Ulrich Beck's concept of 'risk society' as a new framework for analysing precarious employment. By using this framework, they emphasised the shift from employment length to job insecurity, meaning employment-related rights defined by the laws, and the experience of workers who are forced to cope with risk and uncertainty in their employment (Allen & Henry, 1997). This is an innovation in the study of precarious employment. The following section introduces Beck's 'risk society' theory to refine the analysis of precarious employment. It argues that flexibility essentially means that risk is (re)distributed from the collective to individual persons (Beck, 1999), where insecurity occurs. The 'risk society' theory provides a new focus on how individualisation of risk radically impacts on social inequality, as well as how institutions (for the purpose of this research the labour market and the state) become sources of risk (Beck, 1992, 2000a, 2013).

1.1.1 The flexible labour market in the risk society

Beck (1992) argued that individualisation and the distribution of risk are interrelated processes that result in a systemic transformation of traditional employment relations (Mythen, 2005) towards de-standardisation. This translates into a de facto institutionalisation of flexible and pluralised underemployment in 'labour law, work site and working hours' (Beck, 1992, pp. 140–142), along with the emergence of new and greater inequalities in the redistribution of incomes, social and labour protections, and career mobility (Beck, 1992, 2000a). Two core concepts in the risk society framework are thus individualisation and risk (Mythen, 2018).

Individualisation in risk society theory is a crisis process, whereby the individual is detached from the collective (Beck, 2007). As for risk, Beck defines it as an 'anticipation' of future threatening

events (Beck, 2006), an expectation that something 'bad' will happen¹ (Curran, 2013). In modern societies, risk is based on decisions, with a man-made characteristic and produced by the society (Beck, 1999). Risk is natural (part positive and part negative), but the distribution of risk and its consequences are unequal (Beck, 1992, 2006). This means that some, usually those more advantaged, are able to define and deal with it, while others do not (Beck, 1992, 1999; Curran, 2013).

This unbalanced, individualised distribution of risk in the labour market can be located in precariousness, also a man-made risk brought about by neoliberal flexibility. The decline of collective structures follows neoliberal 'market principles', including the preference for individualism, a self-regulated market, decentralisation and de/re-regulation to boost resource allocation and competitiveness (Harris & Scully, 2015; Kalleberg, 2011; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Standing, 2011a, 2012). This situation has made individual persons the 'reproduction unit of the social in the lifeworld' (Beck, 1992, p. 90,130), where they are assumed to make decisions by themselves (Mythen, 2005). In other words, workers have to act in an individualised manner to plan, organise and struggle for their survival and life (Beck, 1992; Mythen, 2005). This process produces risk for both the individual and society (Beck, 2007). A new division within the social strata occurs in terms of employment stability and security, and thus the certainty of living standards, by which those who face higher risk become part of the precariat (Standing, 2011a, 2012). They do not belong to the traditional working class or the proletariat, which mainly consists of manual workers who usually have long-term, fixed-hour employment, with wages based on collective agreements (Standing, 2011a). Nor do they belong to a middle class, with a stable, predictable salary and fringe benefits (Standing, 2011a). Rather, the precariat permeates all employment sectors, including professional and managerial jobs that were once regarded as 'safe' and 'good' jobs (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011), but which through flexible employment arrangements have now become insecure jobs. The

¹ Beck (1992, 2006) also uses 'risk' related to hazards, crisis and catastrophes.

'risk society' reflects a trend of 'radical uncertainty' (risk) that exists everywhere permanently in modern society (Beck, 1992, 2006).

1.1.2 Globalisation

The context of risk, unpredictable insecurity and uncertainty exists across not only social strata, but also along geographical boundaries (Beck, 1992, 2000a). Generally, globalisation is defined as intensified social relations of distant localities connected throughout the world, by which what happens in one locality may influence others (Giddens, 1990). Addressing globalisation, Beck (2013) argues for a methodological break from nationalism, to show the interplay and interdependency relationships across geographical borders (Beck, 2000a, 2000b), particularly from the 1970s onwards (Standing, 2011a). Although unemployment and precarious work have been social issues ever since the emergence of paid work (Kalleberg, 2009), globalisation has made these two phenomena some of the most critical problems facing almost every contemporary society (Beck, 2000b).

Capital flows cross countries and breaks the previous spatial limitations in terms of production and competition, reshaping and relocating the relation between capital and labour (Beck, 2000a). Basically, capital is where there is a possibility to earn money and thus where the labour force is (Tang, 2009). The (im)migrant workers, usually staying temporarily at one place (McDowell, 2018), and the cheaper labour supply from poorer areas become part of flexible labour in richer areas, as a way to attract capital (Beck, 2000a; Standing, 2011a; Vosko, 2010).

The risk brought about by global competition eventually distributes to workers. For increasing competitiveness, some companies adopt the strategies of either 'low roads'², by reducing labour cost and increasing flexibility or 'high roads', by introducing more advanced technologies

² A powerful example of 'low roads' is outsourcing in supply chains; that is, seeking partners to undertake some production tasks rather than doing that by themselves (Standing, 2011a). Those partners are probably in informal production units, such as the firms with casual/subcontracted workers, the self-employed and household producers (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013).

(Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). Workers compete not only with the surplus labour force supplied globally, but particularly with technologies and automation, which have already replaced some low-skilled jobs (Baker, 2009; Beck, 2000a). Consequently, either precariousness becomes more prevalent (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011a) or else job opportunities diminish (Beck, 2000a, 2000b).

1.1.3 The state as a source of risk

In the unsatisfying circumstance where a large number of people have insecure, temporary work as a result of structural factors, the state has a responsibility to address precariousness (Standing, 2011a). However, state institutions may not be consistent with the new climate in the labour market, but contribute to more precariousness in employment (Harris & Scully, 2015; Standing, 2008).

Globalised individualised risk with more unforeseeable manufactured risks (Beck, 1992, 2006) unavoidably poses new challenges for local regulations (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; Beck, 2000a). Welfare states and nation-states aimed at making people secure and maintaining full employment in industrial society is a result of 'collective success' (Beck, 1992, 2007). But under individualised risk distribution, the classes further fragment, and individual persons have to manage global risk by themselves, even if this responsibility seems to be related to institutions (Beck, 2006; Standing, 2008). The rapid changes have gone beyond the ability of the existing social system to provide 'safety' and 'security' (Allen & Henry, 1997; Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Beck, 1992; Mythen, 2005, 2018). Some core institutions of modernity, such as the state, the market, politics and legislations, that previously promised to manage risk, now seem to induce risk, becoming part of the problem they previously needed to resolve (Beck, 1992, 2006; Kalleberg, 2009). Risk is thus also socially constructed (Beck, 2000a).

1.2 Contextualising the precariat in China

The study of the precariat in China provides an example as to why the 'risk society' provides the most useful framework to understand the phenomenon of precarity. There is an ongoing debate as to whether China's reforms since 1979 represent a form of neoliberalism based on its key measures, which include anti-collectivism, encouragement of marketisation, commodification and privatization, and the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare model (I. M. Weber, 2018). However, using the West-favoured neoliberalism framework to explain China likely misses some important aspects of China's reforms, such as the strength of the state, the mixed economy and the grassroots level's reaction to socioeconomic changes (Zhou et al., 2019). In fact, to distinguish precarious workers produced by China's transformation from those generated by Western neoliberalism, scholars argue that Chinese precarity is primarily state-led, rather than market-led or the result of global-capital-competition (Harris & Scully, 2015; Lee & Kofman, 2012; Yan, 2009). Further, they argued that state-driven social protection (a mark of de-commodification and which neoliberalism hopes to remove) has been kept and even extended (Harris & Scully, 2015). In addition, in the process of Chinese modernisation since the Maoist era and the road to national revival, some argue, individual interests and needs have been ignored by the state (H. Lu, 2013), although collectivism, a longstanding tradition in China³, has been weakened in this new era. The compulsive self-determination created by modernity (new institutions) in decision-making is distinct from the neoliberal principle of unrestrained pursuit of self-interest (Yan, 2009). The emergence of China's precariat cannot thus be explained solely as the result of neoliberal flexibility, even though neoliberal flexibility may nonetheless have contributed to the expansion of this phenomenon. Hence, while not solely focusing on employment, Yunxiang Yan (Yan, 2009, 2010) localised 'risk society' in China and argued that contemporary Chinese society has experienced a process of individualisation. This section will explain how the 'risk society' can serve as a useful framework for understanding the

³ Differing from the widespread individualism tradition in the Western world, collectivism has dominated East Asia, and in particular China, where individualism (which neoliberalism pursues) is a symbol of selfishness and a threat of solidarity (Hoi Yee, 2006; H. Lu, 2013; Yan, 2009).

emergence of China's precariat; in other words, how institutions, including the labour market and the state, became sources of precarity through the individualisation of risk distribution.

The 'open-door' strategy (*gai ge kai fang* 改革开放) and economic reform from the late 1970s was critical in changing China's employment and social structure. At that time, as a developing country and for the purpose of economic growth and social prosperity, China joined the global production networks. Attracting foreign capital (Standing, 2011a; Zhou, 2013) was a core step in that process. At the same time, market principles began to be encouraged in China. Economic reform initiated during that same period introduced a series of market-oriented measures to encourage domestic capital to compete, including breaking the lifetime employment system and related comprehensive welfare entitlements, enlarging the labour pool, and legalising triangulated employment relations. Along with the state development, those strategies also engendered a side-effect of soaring precariousness in all employment sectors (Zhou, 2013).

It was after the market-oriented economic reforms of the 1980s, especially as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were reduced in number, that precarious work in China became widespread (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). Low pay and reduced benefits, high labour intensity, and a poor working environment became common (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Standing, 2011a). Furthermore, while ending employer-provided comprehensive welfare, the newly instituted social security system⁴ tended to require individuals to manage risk by themselves, thus expanding precarity. Against this background, the following section reviews the 'low-cost' economic development strategy and social assistance, to provide evidence of how individualised risk contributed to creating the Chinese precariat.

⁴ This is an umbrella concept, including social insurances – pension, medical, maternity, unemployment and work injury, see (Hoi Yee, 2006) –, social assistance (final safety net for the poor and the most disadvantaged), and social welfare (social services for senior citizens, the disabled, orphans and so on). China prefers to use 'social security' to describe what Europe calls 'social welfare', although they are different in details. To keep in line with Chinese context, in this section 'social security' will be used, equivalent to the concept of social welfare.

1.2.1 Low-cost economic development strategy and precarious work

From the late 20th century, China's economic growth was led by market principles (Harris & Scully, 2015). Due to the fact that, at that time, China was at the bottom of global value chains (Huang et al., 2018), national/local companies (both state-owned and private) had to focus on low cost, both as a 'survival strategy' and in order to pursue profitability (Tang, 2002b). Traditional labour relations and the labour system thus needed to be redefined (Hoi Yee, 2006). Cheap and flexible labour were hence given top priority (Tang, 2002b; F. Xu, 2013), primarily through three measures.

The first measure involved breaking the collective employment patterns in the city, by dismantling lifelong employment. To begin with, SOEs were reformed to distance them from the state, in order to make them more economically efficient (Yan, 2010; H. Zhu & Walker, 2018). Between 1949 and the late 1970s, China followed a 'socialist planned economy', in which production activities and staff recruitment were based on state plans, rather than market principles (F. Xu, 2013). Once people were employed, they enjoyed lifelong employment, the so-called 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fan wan* 铁饭碗, mainly shown as full employment, egalitarian wages and a wide range of generous welfare with state-employer mode) (Hoi Yee, 2006; Sun, 2014; F. Xu, 2013). This reform assumed that surplus labour with a lifelong dependency resulted in high personnel costs and welfare expenditure for SOEs (S. Yao, 2004) and reduced efficiency, and thus there was pressure for this employment system to be broken (H. Zhu & Walker, 2018).

In the late 1980s, in order to foster SOE's competitiveness, the economic reform granted greater autonomy to SOEs to lay off workers, resulting in the dismissal of tens of millions of workers (Z. Cheng, 2014), especially those older, unskilled and less educated (Solinger, 2003; Tang, 2001). The number of formal jobs dropped considerably (Luo, 2011; Tang, 2001), as a large number of unprofitable companies were closed down. Low income (and, more importantly, poverty), absent social security, emotional problems, as well as other problems (Z. Cheng, 2014) were common among laid-off workers. Dorothy J. Solinger (2003, 2017) thus argued that the previously respectable working class was relentlessly abandoned by the modernity led by the state, and henceforth became

the least desirable social class (Solinger, 2003, 2017).

At the same time, as another aspect of individualised risk, graduates and urban residents were no longer assigned a job (Guo & Cheng, 2010; F. Wu & Huang, 2007; F. Xu, 2013). In the planned economy era, the urban working class was seen as the cornerstone of state socialism (Sun, 2014). Thus most urban registered citizens were allocated jobs with lifelong tenure (Guo & Cheng, 2010; Hoi Yee, 2006) and ‘cradle-to-grave’ comprehensive welfare in state or collective sectors (Sun, 2014). That is, the government ensured the full employment for all urban citizens and avoided unemployment (F. Wu & Huang, 2007). The change occurred after the reform passed in 1978 that introduced ‘open recruitment’, which gradually gave people more autonomy, in relation to their employment choices (Hoi Yee, 2006; Zhao, 2016).

In the late 1990s, the job-allocation system ended (Zhao, 2016), largely because the state decided to change the paternalism and centralisation of employment, and hence its citizens’ dependency relationship in that respect (Hoi Yee, 2006; Zhao, 2016). Instead, a ‘labour contract’ system was introduced from 1986, which dismantled the previous ‘iron rice bowl’ system by introducing fixed-term contracts in new recruitments⁵ (Hoi Yee, 2006; F. Xu, 2013). The collective power of labour was cut further through booming individual contracts that allowed companies to draft contracts with different pay and conditions, and which often involved exploitative employment relations (Standing, 2008, 2011a).

The second measure used to increase labour flexibility and cheap labour followed the pattern of collapsing collectivism and globalisation. It involved letting the rural labour force enter the cities, thus breaking the spatial limitations the labour force had endured (Yan, 2009, 2010). Before 1980, rural citizens (peasants), who comprised more than 70 per cent of the whole population, were not allowed to work in urban areas (Hoi Yee, 2006; F. Xu, 2013). However, the agrarian reform triggered by economic reform had also dismantled collective farming, giving farmers the opportunity

⁵ Those who had already been permanent employees were gradually converted into contract workers (Hoi Yee, 2006).

to seek work in the cities (Hoi Yee, 2006; F. Xu, 2013). In particular, the influx of foreign capital and the related demand for cheap labour put rural labour in high demand (Hoi Yee, 2006). The 'special economic zones' in the eastern coastal areas, forerunners of the 'open-door' strategy, attracted most of that global capital investment, and thus they also became magnets for a large number of rural migrant workers (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; Hoi Yee, 2006).

The rural workforce was indeed part of a low-cost strategy through cheap labour (Arnold & Pickles, 2011), and faced the problem of exploitation and social exclusion, in relationship to both employment and citizenship rights (Guang, 2005; Tang, 2009; F. Xu, 2013). Youthfulness is a typical advantage of these workers (J. Yao, 2009). Nevertheless, they are highly likely to work in the informal sector (Guo & Cheng, 2010), occupying dangerous, difficult jobs with low wages (often not paid on time), and frequently working overtime and being unpaid for their work (Feng, 2019b; Guang, 2005; F. Wu, 2004; F. Xu, 2013). And some of them face a very high risk of being dismissed arbitrarily (Feng, 2019b), as in the example of the 'guerrilla' workers⁶ in the construction industry (Guang, 2005). These workers are less educated (average middle school education) and less skilled than the average urban worker (Guo & Cheng, 2010). They often lack social networks in the cities, which could help them find better jobs (Guo & Cheng, 2010; F. Wu, 2004). Moreover, the traditional dual system between rural and urban citizens (linked to their household registration status, or *hukou* 户口) allows for the exploitation of their labour and citizenship rights, even when they have resided in a city for a long period (Feng, 2019b; Guang, 2005; Hoi Yee, 2006; Lee & Kofman, 2012; F. Xu, 2013; Yan, 2009, 2010). As the entitlement to urban benefits and social security is based on *hukou* status (F. Xu, 2013; Zhou, 2013), migrant workers' rural *hukou* makes them ineligible for those benefits. Hence, for these workers, the high price of living in the city is largely beyond their affordability (Feng, 2019b; F. Xu, 2013). They constitute a large proportion of the working poor in urban areas (Guo & Cheng, 2010; J. Yao, 2009).

⁶ The author (Guang, 2005) used this concept to show that rural migrants' work has no regular schedule and fixed work sites, and they are in temporary work teams, thus sometimes have no work to do, like seasonal workers.

Lastly, the third measure of the 'low-cost' strategy was the legalisation of multi-party employment relationships (for example, outsourcing, labour dispatch and agency labour) including the Labour Law, the Labour Contract Law and the Interim Provisions on Labour Dispatch (Feng, 2019b, 2019a; F. Xu, 2013). Outsourcing and dispatch tend to be an example of the combination of individualised risk, globalisation and deregulation. The ready supply of cheap and flexible labour has indeed attracted much foreign capital, bringing keener competition and also providing a 'model' of survival (using flexible, cheaper labour force) for domestic companies from the 1990s onwards (F. Xu, 2013). Local governments and companies thus further encourage and rely on precarious workers to be able to compete in the global market, to the extent that some workers are offered no (or little) protection (F. Xu, 2013). Labour dispatch companies and labour exchange centres (also foreign labour service companies after 2001, when China became a member of the World Trade Organisation) have sprung up to provide low-end and/or high-end labour services, by which both manufacturing workers and professionals become 'flexible' workers (F. Xu, 2013). It is common to see that, in a company, most employees are labour dispatch workers, while a tiny minority are contract labourers (F. Xu, 2013).

The triangulated employment relationship is a way to increase profits and reduce unemployment (F. Xu, 2013), but it has the potential for employers to avoid the legal responsibility and accountability in labour protection (Feng, 2019a; F. Xu, 2013). Increasingly, workers' employment benefits have been harmed by outsourcing and recruitment without contracts (F. Xu, 2013), mainly because both user companies and labour agencies have focused more on reducing costs (exploitation), in relation to payroll taxes, personnel costs, wages and social security (Feng, 2019a; F. Xu, 2013). Regulations on the multi-party employment relationship, to protect workers' rights, wages and social security, still cannot prevent the exploitation of workers (Feng, 2019a; F. Xu, 2013). For example, despite the requirement of 'equal pay for equal work', in practice, employers implement 'tactics' to give different compensation to formal and dispatch workers, or to not let them do 'equal work' (Feng, 2019a). This can be partly attributed to the close connection between local

governments and companies; that is, the former prefer to 'protect' the latter rather than the workers, because of their common interests (economic prosperity and higher employment rate) (Feng, 2019a; F. Xu, 2013). It can also be attributed to those workers themselves, who accept those non-legal or less protective activities⁷, as a result of insufficient state power (Guang, 2005).

In summary, while having obtained more freedom in employment, workers are forced to improve themselves and deal with uncertainty under the market-oriented reforms (Hoi Yee, 2006; Yan, 2009). Urban unemployment comes from the structural restructuring, where capital-intensive, technology-intensive and knowledge-intensive industries are needed, but the limitations in ages, education and skill of the laid-off workers and the rural migrants are even more apparent (Z. Cheng, 2014; F. Wu & Huang, 2007). With abundant labour supply, employment is harder to get, and wages are depressed (Tang, 2001). It is thus no wonder that so many families among the laid-off, the unemployed and even the employed (both urban *hukou* holders and rural migrants) become poor (Guo & Cheng, 2010; S. Yao, 2004).

1.2.2 Chinese social assistance and the precariat

Alongside the market-oriented reforms, the Chinese social security system has also shifted towards individualised risk. In the past, welfare was based at and delivered by work units (*danwei* 单位) and consisted of a non-contributory, state-employer mode. After the reform, a multi-tiered modern social security system has been developed, following the state-society responsibility mode. This requires individuals, employers and the state to share responsibility over the funding and financing of the system (Hoi Yee, 2006; Ngok et al., 2011; Solinger, 2003, 2017; Sun, 2014; F. Wu & Huang, 2007; H. Zhu & Walker, 2018). This change in the social security system became a source of risk for some workers, and may have contributed to driving them into precarity (Tang, 2002b; F. Wu & Huang, 2007). Developmentalism, the driving theme of economic reform, thus also became the

⁷ See Lei Guang's (2005) example about a local government trying to organise migrant renovators (Guang, 2005, p. 493) and the interview with Xu and You (Guang, 2005, p. 499).

point of social security reform, where (re)distribution primarily serves the goal of economic efficiency, rather than social justice (Sun, 2014). Chinese social security thus displays de-collectivising features, becoming the selective, residual mode championed by neoliberalism (Sun, 2014), which usually adopts a means test to exclude certain groups from social security programmes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sun, 2014).

In this research, only two of the most relevant social assistance programmes are examined. They are the (urban) Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*dibao* 低保, for short) and Public Welfare Jobs (PWJ for short), under Employment Assistance (*jiu ye jiu zhu* 就业救助, EA for short). *Dibao* emerged in response to high unemployment and poverty caused by the reform of SOEs in the 1980s (Gao, 2017; Hammond, 2019; Harris & Scully, 2015; X. Wu, 2011). It provided a basic livelihood guarantee for urban laid-off workers, who tended to fall into poverty in the cities (Solinger, 2003). It emerged chiefly in order to placate and silence those unfortunate, troublesome ex-workers, and maintain social stability (Gao, 2017; Hammond, 2019; Ngok et al., 2011; Solinger, 2017). Since 2007, *dibao* has become a 'universal means-tested income grant program' (Harris & Scully, 2015, p. 431) for both urban and rural poor residents (Gao, 2017; Hammond, 2019). Without a national poverty line for urban poverty (the national poverty line is only applied for rural areas), cities usually apply their own *dibao* standards as their official urban poverty lines (extreme poverty) (Solinger, in press).

Through either an assumption of welfare dependency (P. Li, 2017) or the pressure of welfare expenditure (Sun, 2014), the principle of the balance of right and obligation also received much support in social assistance. Some measures of Employment Assistance (EA) were thus introduced (Lan & Ci, 2016b; P. Li, 2017; Ngok et al., 2011) and attached to *dibao* (Wang, 2018), by which able-bodied *dibao* recipients were required to participate in EA. On the basis of a means test, the government provides money and employment services to the poor with labour ability, in order for them to overcome poverty (K. Han, 2016). In contrast to the cash assistance of *dibao* (aimed at overcoming survival crisis and maintaining basic life), EA focuses on providing services to help people gain employment as a way to exit poverty (Tang, 2017; Wang, 2018).

Both *dibao* and EA programs have shown a trend towards individualised risk, whereby recipients can no longer fully rely on the collective (the state) but are encouraged to shoulder the responsibility of addressing risks by themselves, though the state may still be able to provide some support. In fact, the predecessor of EA can be traced back to the Re-employment Programme deployed between 1998 and 2001, which targeted laid-off workers and the unemployed resulting from reform of the state sector (Ngok et al., 2011). One of the main initiatives of this programme was ‘re-employment service centres’, which were established to offer a basic living allowance, job training, job placement, small-scale loans and other social security to those former workers (Ngok et al., 2011; Solinger, 2003). By the end of the twentieth century, the principle of self-reliance by labouring (*lao dong zi zhu* 劳动自助) had been introduced into the *dibao*, and compulsory work requirement for able-bodied recipients (for example, accepting job offers and attending training courses) has been explicitly stated (Ngok et al., 2011).

The new version of EA in the contemporary era follows that same principle (it first became a formal system in 2014, see Han & Zhao (2017)). It requires recipients able to labour to engage in employment within a certain period, to accept jobs introduced by the government, to participate in community voluntary work (evolved into PWJ later in some cities), and to enrol in skills training, whether or not they are willing to do so (Lan & Ci, 2016b; P. Li, 2017). Refusing to follow those guidelines could result in the loss of, or a decrease in, their *dibao* benefits (Lan & Ci, 2016b; P. Li, 2017).

While the programme’s design may be helpful in minimising the possibility of welfare dependency (X. Wu, 2011; Y. Xu & Carraro, 2016) and in encouraging recipients to find a job (Lan & Ci, 2016b), the EA has not proven to be very effective in those respects (Gao, 2017; F. Wu & Huang, 2007; X. Wu, 2011; Xiao & Li, 2017; S. Yao, 2004). As has been the case with workfare programmes in the Western world (Baker, 2009; Standing, 2011b; Thompson et al., 2013), the intended aims of EA also appear to be superficial (X. Wu, 2011), as they tend to focus on getting recipients employed, but do not consider how long they might be able to hold those jobs, what kind of jobs they are, nor the

prevalent high risk of being unemployed again (Wang, 2018). Thus, by emphasising the need for recipients to get employment, these measures tend to reinforce precarious employment (Xiao & Li, 2017).

Limited employability and lack of work opportunities in the labour market remain the main reasons behind the inability of able-bodied *dibao* recipients to find a stable and better paid job (Wang, 2018; Xiao & Li, 2017). EA thus becomes a trigger for the expansion of the precariat.

1.3 Gaps in academic literature and new conceptual framework for understanding precarity and poverty

Theoretically, due to the characteristics of 'insecurity' and 'instability' combined with uncertainty/risk (see Chapter 2), precarious workers are less able to achieve a decent life (Standing, 2011a). They are permanently vulnerable in both employment and living, and thus may be trapped into poverty (Kalleberg, 2009). Those who are employed but who remain poor are referred as the 'working poor', and the phenomenon of working while poor is called 'in-work poverty'.

While the logic behind how structural transformation generates precarious employment and in-work poverty has been clearly articulated according to the risk society theory, there is a dearth of empirical studies about this phenomenon in China. Furthermore, various variables related to in-work poverty in Western countries are controversial in the Chinese context. Firstly, the role of choice and attitudes in making a precarious worker poor are not well studied, which could explain why the debate exists as to whether or not precarious work reduces or increases in-work poverty in the Chinese context, as some academics would describe precarious work as work to sustain livelihood. Secondly, the factors linked to family configuration and social assistance eligibility differ between Chinese and Western contexts, due to the different conceptions of family. For example, where the family can sometimes encompass the clan and related lineages, and where supporting networks derive from social circles. That complexity is further complicated by the existence of distinct or

differentiated social assistance programmes at the local level, which have undergone adjustments even in the post-Reform era. Thirdly, the concept of poverty has tended to be limited to the economically poor, ignoring other necessities apart from the income that constitutes one's basic life, while also presenting a methodological issue in the study of poverty. Therefore, the concept of poverty needs to be adapted to analyse how precarious employment leads to what kinds of wellbeing deficit those workers experience.

This study conceptualises poverty within the capability approach. Existing theories of poverty include the income approach, the utility approach, and the capability approach. The capability approach is selected as the conceptual framework in the research to study in-work poverty, in order to build a more holistic understanding of this complex phenomenon.

The capability approach focuses on what people can do (capabilities) and what they actually do (functionings) (Sen, 1984). It does not mean incomes and utility are not considered at all. In the capability approach, income stands for the 'means' to capabilities, and utility can be an 'end' in one's capability set (one of the elements in wellbeing). By integrating the concepts of 'structures of living together' (Deneulin, 2008) that refers to the influence from collective institutions such as the market, social policies, communities and so on, from means to the process of choosing, the capability approach is able to map poverty from start to end. That is (as shown by Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3), when the means (goods and services) were not problems, the conversion factor would influence means to capabilities, the range of capability set (the real opportunities one can assess); when the capabilities were obtained, the choice and agency would influence the conversion of capabilities to functionings, the eventual wellbeing outcomes. Both macro and micro factors are considered in the process of precarisation and in-work poverty, through the application of this approach.

1.4 Research aims and questions

This research aims to understand the experience and dynamics of in-work poverty in western China within the capability framework. The socio-economic capacity of this less-developed area tends to be worse than in the eastern areas – more likely to encounter in-work poverty. Based on Beck's risk society theory and the capability approach, the process by which individuals achieve wellbeing outcomes in any given society can be elucidated (see Figure 1.1). The risk society highlights the significance of institutional changes (modernisation, or de-traditionalisation/de-collectivisation/individualisation) creating new risks, and helps to tease out the systemwide responses to risk. And the capability approach studies the interlocked multidimensional wellbeing – material, relational, subjective (emotion) and agency –, and underpins the role of choice, which is also influenced by the institutions, in wellbeing achievement and deprivation. This research thus analyses the ways in which structural factors and individual choices combine to affect precarious employment and in-work poverty issues in less-developed western China. Through investigating how the stakeholders cope with the risks in China's employment context, the research can answer whether and why precarious workers suffer from capability deprivation in the risk society of China. Specifically, the research answers the following questions:

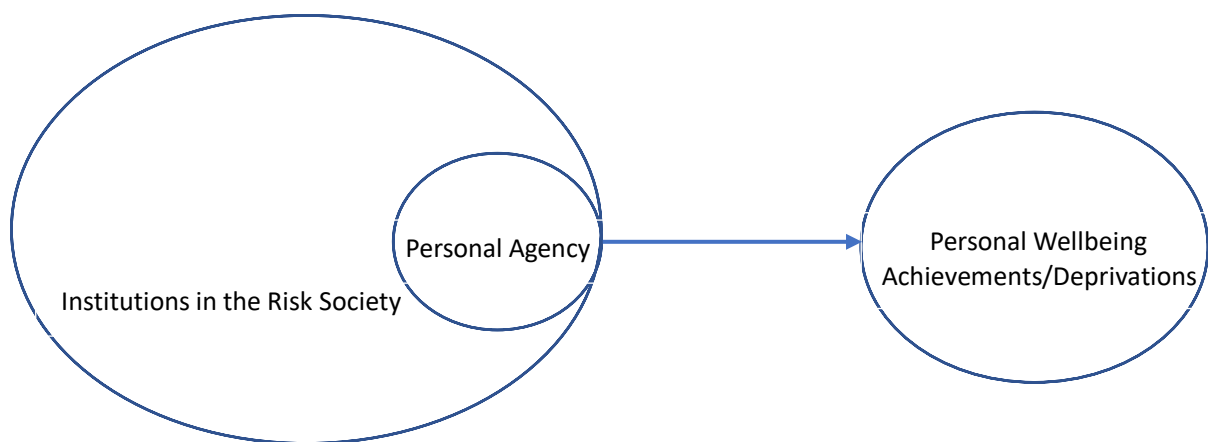
1. To what extent does the labour market influence in-work poverty?
2. What role does the family play in this phenomenon?
3. How do social relationships interact with the wellbeing of precarious workers?
4. As the safety net of last recourse, how is social assistance (*dibao* and PWJ) implicated in in-work poverty among precarious workers?
5. And lastly, what are those workers' attitudes and lived experiences towards work and wellbeing, in the context of normalised precarious employment and life?

The first four subquestions answer the role of institutions in making precarious workers endure capability deprivation. Starting with the labour market enables us to focus on the properties of precarious work under the context of de-collectivisation and how it influences all dimensions of

wellbeing. It thus made evident how the modern family, a relational dimension of wellbeing, is correlated to precarious employment and in-work poverty. When families could not provide enough protection, precarious workers' access to social networks, also a part of relational dimension of wellbeing, and the capacity and quality of their social relationships in helping them overcome hardships can be compromised. If the three institutions could be regarded as preventive devices to in-work poverty, then the fourth sub-question asks the extent to which the last social safety net, a reactive device, could be helpful when the preventive devices failed to deliver security. After studying the effects of institutions, the last question analyses how the results of institutional protection influence the subjective and agency dimension of wellbeing, and how the two dimensions of wellbeing in turn work on in-work poverty.

Figure 1.1

The logics of how wellbeing outcomes are produced



1.5 Methodology

To answer these questions, the first step is to form a basic capability list, as a means of distinguishing between 'poor' and 'non-poor' precarious workers. However, the biggest challenge in creating such a list is that capabilities tend to be unobservable, counterfactual, and to have subjective biases (Comim, 2008). This research justifies the use of subjective data with the capability approach, and uses the participatory approach to collect subjective experiences (Chapter 3).

After obtaining Ethics Approval (Appendix 1), despite the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fieldwork and data collection were carried out between January and May of 2020. Supplementary data was collected in July and September of that same year in the Tier 5 city of Ya'an, a prefectural-level city of Sichuan province (located in western China, the least developed region in China). Through snowball recruitment, the research recruited 46 participants, including two couples (each couple was recoded as a single participant). Thus 48 people participated in total. The gender balance of the sample consisted of 23 females and 25 males. At the time of interview, five participants were below the age of 30 and five were aged between 31 and 40; the remaining majority (37 out of 48 interviewees) were middle-aged (aged 41-60), with one participant aged 61. All participants had experienced precarious employment. At time of interview, all participants who held a rural *hukou* were living and/or working in urban Ya'an.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information regarding the lived experience of precarious work and in-work poverty, mainly around four topics: employment, family, social assistance and agency. Two participants attended a follow-up interview. Participants were first asked to name and rank wellbeing indicators that they considered were necessary for a minimum acceptable life. And when they ran out of ideas, they were shown a list of wellbeing indicators provided by the researcher to select from. A separate set of data was gathered from community workers (though not through a formal interview) in two local neighbourhoods plus random visits to three communities, where information about local *dibao* implementation was gathered from printed bulletins. Published policies and statistics of local social assistance programmes were also collected from the Internet.

The interview data was analysed and coded through thematic analysis using NVivo. However, the themes and codes were developed by the researcher from the data (inductive coding) and themes (deductive coding) informed by the research's conceptual framework. The voice recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and valuable data from those transcripts were translated into English, also by the researcher. The field notes by the researcher (primarily) and

a research assistant (when relevant) were integrated into the analysis.

1.6 Research results

Based on the participants' responses, the research found that most precarious workers continue to face the risk of in-work poverty (capability deprivation). The phenomenon can be interpreted as the result of structural factors and their influence on personal agency. Through examining the institutions of the labour market, the family, social capital and social welfare, and precarious workers' agency, the research argues that the capability deprivation of precarious workers is a result of a risk society that not only precludes them from institutional protection, but also destroys their aspiration to pursue a better life. Precarious workers tend to be the outsiders of the rapid socio-economic transformation.

The institutions are correlated in influencing the life of precarious workers. Firstly, the labour market is increasingly competitive. It was common for most participants' precarious jobs to have low rewards, long working hours, high spatial mobility and income interruptions. Also, most participants did not have a formal labour contract and were excluded from employer-funded social insurances. Furthermore, the high instability and insecurity of precarious employment experienced by participants were further aggravated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decrease of collectivism weakened the negotiation power of precarious workers to resist labour market deprivation and discriminatory unwritten rules. Thus, the labour market becomes the rule-maker, while the workers have no choice but to accept the unfair treatment, unless they exit the labour force. The empirical evidence from this research showed that precarious employment is usually linked to a precarious life.

The deprivation from the labour market expands to the families of precarious workers. The family structure in China has been the nuclear family model shaped by the former one-child policy, but interplay with the extended family is still strong. The tension between precarious work and

family responsibility brings about a 'both sides suffering' situation. On the one hand, the characteristics of precarious employment increase dissatisfaction within the family and thus its instability as well. For example, the divorce rate was significantly higher among participants than in the general population, while delayed marriage and childbirth were also commonly observed among the families of precarious workers. On the other hand, family-work conflict and the responsibility to provide support within the extended family further exposed workers to deprivation, from both the labour market and the family. For example, some participants prolonged their work as pensioner workers, and some participants provided childcare and income transfer to their children's family, even while keeping a low material living standard for themselves. Deprivation is not necessarily reduced by these financial transfers and support between generations. For example, due to a lack of sufficient parenting and educational investment, the children of precarious workers are likely to inherit precarious employment, causing a generational trap of deprivation.

Disadvantage in job and family further influences their social capital. Participants showed a high dependency on their existing social networks for help (for example, with finding a job). However, their participation in social activities was limited, due to time and money limitations – having to work and care for family members – which left them highly isolated. The traditional clan-based society rationale of bonding social capital, which had provided effective protection to its members, has been challenged by the downsized family structure, high geographical mobility, and the soaring of precariousness. Tapping into broader social networks (for example, of colleagues and friends) is difficult for precarious workers, because of a lack of incentive due to the distrust of the unfamiliar, the experience of pain from social interactive activities, and the unease and inability to build more diverse social circles. Their low socio-economic position arising from their precarious employment and limited available resources contribute to social isolation. Even when having some social capital, the homogenous background of their social circles and the expected obligations attached to accessing that social capital and networks are generally insufficient to more comprehensively improve their wellbeing.

Being unable to find appropriate protection through the labour market, the family and their social relations, precarious workers seek support from social safety nets as a last resort. The field research, however, found that individualised risk distribution in the social assistance system has narrowed the access of precarious workers to social welfare. Based on the examination of the *dibao* and Public Welfare Jobs (PWJ) programmes in Ya'an city, the fieldwork found that these social assistance schemes have not helped precarious workers overcome their capability deprivations. Inaccurate targeting remains a significant problem. In the past, the abuse of *guanxi* (social relationships or social capital) in resource allocation – including social welfare – triggered a general distrust of public institutions. While there is not enough evidence to prove that individuals are using *guanxi* to gain access to welfare money, the inaccurate identification of potential welfare recipients was identified during the field research. It was found that the eligibility criteria of living in absolute poverty for the *dibao* was very harsh, and thus significantly narrowed the target population of this welfare program. Other factors influencing the scope of the target population include the decline in protests by urban laid-off workers, the correction of funding misuse, and the shift toward a focus on rural poverty (Solinger, in press). This narrowed targeting was reflected in the dramatic drop in the number of urban *dibao* recipients, decreasing by 90 per cent since 2015 (YSB & YBNBS, 2014, 2016).

By contrast, the loose definition of relative poverty, as an eligibility criterion for PWJ, meant that non-vulnerable individuals could qualify for such jobs. The reduction in the welfare quota⁸ and the dismantled support of collectivism (community), have placed too much focus on an applicant's personal characteristics when assessing vulnerability, such as the ability to work and the stability of income sources, rather than the sufficiency of assets. But it ignores careful consideration of who are part of the 'household' when conducting the means test, producing more competition – more vulnerable applicants and less (or non-) vulnerable applicants compete for less than 3,000 PWJs in

⁸ Although not always explicitly stated, the local authority often sets a ceiling for the number of welfare beneficiaries, according to the locality's budget and preference, and usually the less developed city keeps its quotas within its jurisdiction at a very limited level given the weak financial ability (Solinger, in press). In addition to other reasons mentioned before, the declining size of *dibao* recipients and PWJ claimants in Ya'an was likely associated with the control of welfare quota too.

the Ya'an case (YMPG, 2019). Furthermore, while PWJs enabled workers to escape extreme poverty, engaging in such jobs was found to be insufficient to enable these workers to overcome their capabilities deprivation. The implicit message underlying the PWJ experience is that the state will only protect the most vulnerable (that is, those living in extreme poverty). Beyond that, individuals need to become responsible for their own security.

Living with the above institutions that they cannot rely on, not only is their range of choices restricted, but their sense of safety is also eroding, impeding the effective exercise of agency. Even though most participants in this research did not explicitly complain about their difficult lives, they did express negative emotions, such as feelings of pressure, anxiety, and a lack of intrinsic motivation to work. Some were no longer willing to demand 'equal pay for equal work'. Self-excluded from social participation and sceptical of social welfare's capacity to guarantee their basic life needs, they no longer dared to dream and had lowered their agency towards pursuing a better life. This is a copying strategy that precarious workers take on, in response to their inability to overcome their vulnerability in the risk society. The long-term learnings of precarious workers, from failures during their life span, have warned them to avoid risk and to seek what is safe, rather than what is potentially more beneficial. Adapted to their environment, this lack of aspiration becomes a form of self-protection, to help them maintain a positive attitude and emotions. Their experience has taught them that, for those like them, there is no difference between choosing or not choosing a particular path in life, as their aspirations seldom become a reality. In their words, they would rather 'be forced by life' than plan for life, because at least it does not trigger self-blame for wrong decisions. These strategies, however, block them from effectively practising agency to make a change. Therefore, they continue to live with the risk of permanent capability deprivation, if they are not already deprived.

The Ya'an case indicates that rapid de-traditionalisation imposes huge pressure on vulnerable people in the less developed area in China, whether or not they are aware of it. Therefore, it is safe to say that living in the risk society, precarious workers' disadvantage has been magnified, as a consequence of both structural and personal factors. While they are protected from absolute income

poverty, the dynamic poverty as capability deprivation becomes more unmanageable.

1.7 Contributions

Precariousness in the labour market and in-work poverty have received little attention in China, primarily because this is a recent phenomenon, triggered by China's rapid socio-economic transformation over the last four decades. The limited research presents narrowed focused information, and does not outline a consistent explanation as to the causes and processes influencing this phenomenon. This research has argued that, in order to more accurately capture the complex dynamics entrenching precarity and in-work poverty, a more holistic examination of precarious workers lived experiences is needed. To fulfil that aim, this research applied the capability approach, to examine and further our understanding of Chinese workers' lived experiences of in-work poverty and its multidimensional outcomes (Gao, 2017). Using primary data from in-depth interviews with those workers, the research provides a more authentic and comprehensive picture of the in-work poverty phenomenon in western China. It also informs scholars in other fields as to how people make choices, how those with different abilities adapt to the process of de-traditionalisation, how marketisation changes people's lifestyles, value systems, policy designs, and so forth.

Firstly, conceptualising poverty through the capability approach, the research considered poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, helping to clarify and broaden our understanding of the links between precarious work, vulnerability, wellbeing and the attainment of a meaningful life. Methodologically, the capability list developed by the research, and the evaluation of people's wellbeing based on the list, will be a useful tool for researchers seeking to critically analyse poverty and wellbeing in China and beyond.

Secondly, collected information about participant's 'lived experiences', focusing on subjective wellbeing and agency that had been neglected in analysing why people live with hardship. This helps us to see the relationship between personal choice and wellbeing outcomes, and the role of social

progress in this regard. The research is a practice of investigating and tracking precarious employment's scarring effect with agency under the capability approach (Egdell & Beck, 2020), and the findings highlight the 'meaninglessness' in precarious life. Regarding social structure, by adopting Beck's 'risk society' theory, this research was able to explain and illustrate how society produces and transfers risks to people with different abilities in the new era. Some commentators would say that this is exactly what neoliberalism does, but Chinese precarity is primarily state-led and influenced by its collectivism tradition. Risk society perspective brings a focus on institutions as sources of risk. And the examination of the interdependencies between and within institutions, as Sen (1999) suggested, explicitly presents the chain effect of one structure to another in people's wellbeing deprivation. Theoretically and ethically, the 'failures' and the 'irrational decisions' of this vulnerable group become understandable.

Moreover, drawing on the risk society theory, data gathered in the research implies a new pattern and dynamic of social stratification (based on risk) in China's society, given participants' emphasis on stability rather than profit in the context of high uncertainty. And in line with the capability approach, the research also highlights the importance of equal opportunity (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The research thus suggests that governmental agenda should focus on building feasible capabilities, developing promising jobs, and enhancing welfare regimes, especially re-regulating the protective game rules, to protect the precariat from rapid commodification.

1.8 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 presents academic gaps and conceptualises in-work poverty for this research. As one of the main gaps in the literature is an appropriate concept of (in-work) poverty, the research draws on Amartya Sen's capability approach as another part of the conceptual framework of this research, to analyse and problematise in-work poverty. In-work poverty is thus defined as those having a job but still suffering from capability deprivation.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies. The chapter first discusses the understanding of and ways to settle the limitation of Sen's capability approach, and justifies subjectivity in conceptualising and analysing poverty. Then, the research design is presented. The chapter also includes the rationalising process of the basic capability list and the semi-structure interview question outline, which are included in Appendix 3 and Appendix 2 respectively.

Chapter 4 discusses the first research question: how the labour market influences in-work poverty. This chapter argues that work is the most basic variable underpinning the attainment of a minimum acceptable life; hence the extent of job stability and security determine the level of capability deprivation in a household. The characteristics of precarious employment are analysed, along with how they influence other dimensions of precarious workers' lives, to explore their real choice in the labour market. And workers with different level of precariousness are compared under the case of the COVID-19 crisis, to examine their risk control ability.

Chapter 5 answers the question about the links between family configuration and precarious work and in-work poverty, and discusses the dual role of the family in the lives of precarious workers. It argues that for those already in a precarious situation, family plays a significant role in their wellbeing, and generally the effect is more negative than positive. This chapter will interpret the intergenerational support, family-work conflict, and the intergenerational transmission of precarious employment.

Chapter 6 responds to the third research question and analyses how the risk society challenges the social network support in the clan-based, solid society. The argument is that the low engagement in social networks is linked to low incentive and an inability to access broader social ties, and blocks access to powerful social capitals, which hampers precarious workers from improving their wellbeing. In this chapter, trust, preference and obligation are explained, as well as the power and resources that precarious workers hold.

Chapter 7 concentrates on the question about social assistance (*dibao* and PWJ). This chapter argues that the trend towards individualised risk distribution in social assistance (*dibao* and

PWJ) has a significant effect on recipients, shown as uneven distribution of opportunities for people with real vulnerabilities to access social protection programmes, making them more likely to suffer chronically from various capability deprivations, even when they are able to overcome extreme economic poverty. The individualised risk in social assistance and its effect on the capability set and capability deprivation will be discussed respectively.

Chapter 8 explains precarious workers' attitudes of peacefully enduring, or even persuading themselves to accept, a precarious life. The argument is that learnt from the failure over time (adaptive preference), the passive life attitudes and actions (risk aversion) are their coping strategies to endure the inability to make change under the adverse social environment. On the one hand, this protects their emotions; on the other hand, it blocks them from obtaining a more comprehensive wellbeing.

Chapter 9 provides a conclusion. It highlights the relationship between in-work poverty and precarious employment within the framework of risk society theory and the capability approach. Based on participants, the capability deprivation of precarious workers is the result of a risk society that not only precludes them from institutional dependency, but also destroys their aspiration to pursue a better life. The limitations of the research and future research will also be discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 2 : Review of the Literature

This chapter will critically review the literature on precarious employment and in-work poverty, and present the conceptual framework in this research. The research draws on the literature on precarious employment (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011a) and Ulrich Beck's (1992, 2000a) risk society, to contextualise and interrogate precarity in the Chinese labour market and work context. To analyse and problematise poverty, and in-work poverty in particular, the conceptual framework also draws on Amartya Sen's capability approach, without denying the role of subjectivity⁹. The capability framework examines the feasible opportunities and personal choice to wellbeing. The core characteristics of the capability approach are an emphasis on functionings and capabilities; consideration of individual persons and their diversity; focus on the conversion factors to transfer means to ends and the processes from capabilities to functionings; and engagement with judgements around 'goodness' and so on (Robeyns, 2008, 2016). This framework and analytical variables can be used to research poverty and wellbeing in both poor and rich countries (Sen, 1984), and will serve to interrogate the lived experience of in-work poverty among Chinese precarious workers.

2.1 Precariousness and in-work poverty

The General Conference of the International Labour Organization (2002) proposed four strategies to guarantee decent work: basic work-related rights; opportunities for better employment and income; social protection; and representation. A decent job, Nicola Smit and Elmarie Fourie (2010) argue, requires better employment, not just receiving payment or a wage. Yet in reality, no job is always 'safe', but all jobs can become precarious (Kalleberg, 2011). In various countries, the

⁹ Sen argued that the capability approach is objectivist (Comim, 2008). However, this research justifies the use of 'lived experiences' in developing and applying Sen's capability framework. A more detailed discussion on this is presented in Chapter 3.

concept of the 'precariat' has referred to different groups of workers – for example, casual workers with low incomes in Italy; temporary workers and the unemployed in Germany; and the working poor in Japan (Standing, 2011a). Low incomes, unemployment and in-work poverty are correlated with precarity, but they are not the same (Standing, 2011a). The purpose of this section is to elucidate what precariousness means, and thus why some precarious workers become the working poor.

Precariousness refers to 'the attributes of the job' (International Labour Organization, 2016, p. 18). Although many academics (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Standing, 2011a; Vosko, 2010) describe various causes of precariousness typologically, based on 'risk society' theory and 'flexible labour market' theory, the cores are identified: insecurity and instability linked to uncertainty/risk (Kalleberg, 2009). The research expands John Allen and Nick Henry (1997)'s concept of 'job security', basically following Guy Standing (2011a)'s explanation of multi-dimensional 'insecurity'. It includes: income and enterprise benefits, career mobility, safety and in-work protection for recruitment, dismissal and work-related physical and psychological ills, and social/community protection and support (Standing, 2011a, p. 12).

As to another feature of precarious employment, instability refers to the continuity of employment (Vosko, 2010); that is, how long workers can hold their job with the same employer (Allen & Henry, 1997). In addition to flexibility and contractualisation¹⁰, casual employment and informality are almost the same (Standing, 2008). They mean short-term employment (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Standing, 2008), such as temporary, casual and part-time employment. With this characteristic, although being hidden, unemployment and underemployment are also part of a precarious worker's life (Standing, 2011a).

Allen and Henry (1997) admitted that, to a large degree, job security is limited by the stability of employment. Instability, in turn, increases insecurity. Once instability and insecurity become embedded in jobs, they lose much possibility of providing decent incomes and upward

¹⁰ That is the tendency of individualised contracts, compared with collective contracts (Standing, 2008).

movement in career and social strata (Standing, 2011a). Thus, it is understandable why such jobs are chronically vulnerable, in terms of working and living (International Labour Organization, 2002; Lund, 2012; Smit & Fourie, 2010; Standing, 2011a, 2012).

In this regard, some types of employment, such as non-standard employment, informal employment and underemployment, may share some similarities related to precariousness, although they do not necessarily suffer from precariousness (International Labour Organization, 2016). 'Non-standard' usually refers to the form of contracts, with key variables of employment periods and relationships (International Labour Organization, 2016, 2018; Kalleberg, 2009). 'Informal' is used more regarding economic and production sectors, usually related to illegal, unregistered, and/or hidden activities (M. A. Chen, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2002, 2018). 'Underemployment' involves the utilisation of workers such as overqualified and mismatched workers (Thompson et al., 2013). These three terms can be seen as synonyms to some extent, and some researchers, for example, Smit and Fourie (2010), do not draw a distinction between them, when involving more than one of them. They share a great variety of common characteristics: either young or old, female, low-skilled/low-educated/low-qualified, migrants, the disabled, welfare claimants and criminals; employed in easily replaced job positions and seasonal or project-based units; low-paid with inadequate fringe benefits; few prospects for career advancement, and so on (Green & Livanos, 2017; International Labour Organization, 2018; Kim & Mergoupis, 1997; Lund, 2012; Standing, 2011a, 2012).

While those concepts are overlapping, this research argues that the concept of 'precarious' employment is more suitable than 'non-standard', 'informal' and 'underemployment'. This is mainly because 'precarious' better describes the complex working experience in terms of 'changes with losses' in employment relationships, shown by such factors as reducing cost, enlarging flexibility, transferring risk to workers and breaking permanent employment (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). It thus can reflect why precarious employment is 'dangerous' (Standing, 2011a). In this research, they are highly likely to suffer from in-work poverty (Beck, 2000a; Pradella, 2015; Standing, 2011b), a

concept that means workers living in poor families.

Given that explanation of precariousness, the precarious worker may fall into poverty through the loss of socio-economic safety nets and the decrease of personal wellbeing (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Lee & Kofman, 2012; Standing, 2011a, 2012). Examples of economic loss can be job loss, decreasing wages, and a lack of employee-provided social welfare. Social deprivation can come from lower occupational identity, less social engagement, and from being denizens with more limited and weak economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights than citizens. In addition, diminishing physical health (such as accidents and diseases linked to working conditions) and mental health (such as job stress, anxiety, anger, fear of losing one's job and less family interaction, due to the need to invest more time into earning money) should also be noted. Therefore, precarious workers are often linked to the working poor, who usually have a low wage and insufficient social protection (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013). Part of precarious employment is the issue of in-work poverty. The risk of precariousness, and thus poverty lasts as long as flexible labour exists (Standing, 2011b). As Beck asserted: 'flexibility gives workers more freedom, a greater autonomy that makes them poor' (Beck, 2000a, p. 107).

This situation is also mirrored in China. Due to the change in employment structure, the groups of urban poor have changed. Before the mid-1990s, the urban poor consisted only of the 'three-withouts' (*sanwu* 三无): those who had no income, no supporting family members, and no ability to work (F. Wu, 2004; F. Wu & Huang, 2007). The wage and social security of these workers were nonetheless 'guaranteed' by the work unit and the state (F. Wu & Huang, 2007). With full employment available, it was almost impossible for people to be poor. But from the late 1990s on, due to the socio-economic transition, mass layoffs in the state sector and rural-to-urban migration have resulted in the formation of new urban poor groups (Z. Cheng, 2014; Guo & Cheng, 2010). In other words, many precarious workers have become the working poor. Indeed, they share similar characteristics: low employability levels; low levels of education and skills; poor health; a larger-size family to support; and being young or middle-aged (40s or 50s) (Kou & Hu, 2014; F. Wu & Huang,

2007).

If precarious workers could be treated equally to other employees (International Labour Organization, 2016, 2018) and if they did precarious work voluntarily (Standing, 2012), that would be fine. However, more and more people are engaged in precarious jobs (Smit & Fourie, 2010) perhaps not by choice, but as a survival strategy (International Labour Organization, 2002). The next section will turn to the empirical studies, to see how they support or oppose this analysis.

2.2 Empirical research on precariousness, family, social assistance and in-work poverty

Precariousness means uncertainty/risk-related instability, in the continuity of employment and insecurity in pay (especially below the poverty threshold), legal/social/labour protection, and career prospects (dead-end) (International Labour Organization, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Standing, 2011a, 2012; Vosko, 2010). These features make it hard for some workers with precarious jobs to reach the average living standard, particularly when combined with the burden of family and insufficient public transfers (Y. Zhang, 2016). Although logically convincing, it is still worthwhile asking to what extent empirical evidence mirrors the relationship between precariousness, family, social protection and in-work poverty. This section will critically review the relevant literature. Firstly, it reviews academic literature's understanding of precarious employment and in-work poverty; secondly, the three main attributions of in-work poverty (labour attachment and wages, individual and household effects, and social assistance); and lastly, it analyses how the working poor are identified. By so doing, any gaps in the literature are identified.

2.2.1 Precarious employment: a pathway to overcoming poverty or a source of deprivation

'Informal' is a term more common in China (Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013), compared to other forms of precarious employment. In the eyes of Chinese academics and most Western researchers, 'informal employment' generally refers to precarious employment which shows the features of

'instability' and 'insecurity' with much less supervision from the government, usually related to small-size production units (Guang, 2005; Huang et al., 2018; F. Wu & Huang, 2007; Zhou, 2013). Sometimes in a Chinese context, 'informal workers' are also related to 'work-unit outsiders' (*ti zhi wai ren yuan* 体制外人员) (F. Wu, 2004). Chinese tradition tends to regard the formal employees in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the collective units, public institutions and the governments as 'work-unit insiders', while workers in the small-size private sectors, foreign companies, and the self-employed, such as small private businesses (*getihu* 个体户) and street vendors, are the 'outsiders', the informal workers (Tang, 2002a). In some cases, 'informal' can be related to 'formalisation', which means becoming a formal worker (*zhuanzheng* 转正) (Feng, 2019b). Informal workers are also those without labour contracts and social security (Tang, 2003), as well as the temporary, short-term, fixed-term contracted workers (Guo & Cheng, 2010), in or outside of formal sectors.

Different from the concerns raised by Western scholars around the link between precarious employment and in-work poverty (Standing, 2011a), Chinese scholars (Guo & Cheng, 2010; Huang et al., 2018; Tang, 2003, 2004a) tended to encourage 'informal employment' as a way of making a living. They considered that for the compelling purpose of promoting a sustainable livelihood for poor urban citizens (Tang, 2004a), even those much less regulated, very small units can be tolerable (Guo & Cheng, 2010), as long as they provide jobs and a sustainable livelihood workers' survival (Tang, 2004a). Considering the difficulties for some jobseekers to find a job in the formal sector (F. Wu & Huang, 2007; S. Zhang & Tang, 2010), the trend towards an ageing society, and larger living pressures and demands for services, informal employment was regarded as the main solution to urban poverty issues (Tang, 2003). Chuliang Luo (2011)'s quantitative study confirmed that informal employment certainly helps to reduce extreme poverty from 1995 to 2002. Even street vending, a kind of informal self-employment, could be seen as a positive phenomenon, as a way for Chinese people to deal with the structural transition that unavoidably brings precarity in employment; it can improve livelihood, dignity (compared with unemployment), autonomy and reflexivity (in balancing family, farming and work) through informal employment (Huang et al., 2018).

In China, informal work is becoming the main source of employment for both urban citizens (including urban migrants, re-employed laid-offs, pensioner workers, and so on) and rural migrants (Guo & Cheng, 2010). And the booming of non-state sectors certainly helps the laid-offs be re-employed (although the proportion is small), thus less likely to be poor (S. Yao, 2004). A study by Xiaojun Feng (2019b), involving interviews with 30 agency workers and 13 staff members, has shown that becoming a formal worker has lost its power to relieve financial burden, reduce precariousness in work and realise the identity of citizenship among migrant workers. This is mainly because formal workers also face increasing precariousness, and thus income differences between dispatch labourers (informal) and formal workers have already narrowed (Feng, 2019b).

However, with such jobs, the contract/employment relation can be terminated anytime, and lower pay and insufficient social security are the case (F. Wu & Huang, 2007). Feng (2019b)'s research also reported much deprivation, in terms of all three elements (contract, pay and social security) among agency workers. And in another article, Feng (2019a) indicated that the occupational welfare of agency workers is still much lower, particularly in private and foreign enterprises. The abuse of subcontract and no labour contracts is common (Guang, 2005; F. Xu, 2013), and some employers do not obey the minimum wage requirement, since it involves more cost when using the labour force (J. Yao, 2009, 2016). When exploited, workers tend to keep quiet in case of unemployment (J. Yao, 2009). This may explain why research has shown the working poor are usually informal workers (J. Yao, 2009).

Concerning the debate on whether precarious employment reduces poverty or brings deprivation, more research is needed to provide more evidence. Given the possibility of 'voluntary precarious work' (Standing, 2012), the research argues for looking over workers' lived experiences. That is to ask, from a phenomenological lens (Van Manen, 2016), the nature of in-work poverty and the real life of precarious workers with in-work poverty, especially given the muffled experience of shame and stigma as part of poverty (Schweiger & Graf, 2014; Sen, 1983). For example, some poor people may be unwilling to admit they have financial difficulties and tend to deny their identity as

'working class', as this identity is often linked to poverty, welfare dependency and moral failure (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). This might also be the case in China, although some people's extreme poverty may be relieved by doing precarious jobs.

The research also argues that learning about the lived experience of workers can help find the roots of in-work poverty and precarious employment. A quantitative study showed that unskilled youth workers tend to attach much importance to holding their current jobs, rather than going to higher education at the price of quitting current jobs, thereby weakening future job prospects and entrenching them in poverty (Korn et al., 2015). This study provides a reason to think about how attitudes and choices (an aspect of lived experience) lead to an undesirable life. Briefly, by collecting information about real experiences from the poor, then description, explanation, critique and empowerment can be carried out (Graf & Schweiger, 2013, 2014; Schweiger & Graf, 2014). But so far, the working poor's own attitudes and lived experiences towards their work and ideal lifestyle have received little attention (M. Fu et al., 2015) in China.

2.2.2 Three main attributions to in-work poverty

The literature on what variables make households with workers poor in other contexts can help us understand why some Chinese precarious workers become the working poor whereas others do not. Explanations seem to concentrate on labour attachment and wages, individuals/family effects, and social assistance. And the mainstream research method is quantitative, to achieve statistical results. This section is structured to follow the three aforementioned issues, to investigate their debates and conclusion. The point here is that other than the variables of low pay and high work intensity, other contributors to in-work poverty (individual characteristics/household effects and Chinese social assistance) should be further examined.

2.2.2.1 Low pay

The literature tended to acknowledge that high labour intensity while on low pay contributes to in-work poverty. Low pay is a result of low labour investment and/or of low wage rate. For instance, the working hours of the majority of the working poor in Canada were equivalent of that of 'full-time' workers, but their wages were less than other workers (Fleury & Fortin, 2006). Similar findings have been made in York City, the UK (Swaffield et al., 2018) and northeast China (H. Yin & Wang, 2015). A salient finding from a Chinese study (J. Yao, 2016) is that the more time people work, the more likely they are to fall into in-work poverty.

While low pay may be a cause of in-work poverty (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Efimova, 2012; Maitre et al., 2012), they are not the same (Hick & Lanau, 2018; Marx et al., 2012; Pradella, 2015; Swaffield et al., 2018). Low pay is related to individual workers, while in-work poverty refers to households (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Fraser, 2011; Pradella, 2015). Low pay or low wage occurs when one's earnings are below (a certain percent of) average earnings (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Marx et al., 2012; Velthuis et al., 2018). That is, compared with other employees, the wage is 'relatively' low (Efimova, 2012). Compared with the threshold of half the average wage (Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011), two-thirds of the average wage in a society (Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Marx et al., 2012) was usually accepted by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Efimova, 2012; Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Maitre et al., 2012), as was the European Union (EU)'s 'wage decency threshold' – 60 per cent of net median earnings (Efimova, 2012). For those few who examined deprivations rather than income vulnerability, the screening criteria would be looser. Since the sense of being deprived would come from social comparison, one with income below average level would experience deprivation (Rahman, 2015). An alternative to money-related sampling would be identifying the low-paid occupations (Velthuis et al., 2018). For example, service industry (sales, restaurant waiters, customer service and so on) and private sectors showed a higher rate of low wages (Cooke & Lawton, 2008).

The working poor may be a subset of low-wage workers (Griggs et al., 2013); it can also be a

subset of poor people (Hick & Lanau, 2018). Only when a worker is living in a poor family, can he or she be classified as part of the working poor. Consequently, it can be seen that many defined 'the working poor', 'in-work poverty' or 'low-income workers' as the employed with a family whose income is below the poverty line¹¹ (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Griggs et al., 2013; Hick & Lanau, 2018; International Labour Office, 2009; Winkle & Struffolino, 2018). Namely, to be 'working poor', one must be both employed and living in a poor household simultaneously. This is why some thought the notion of 'in-work poverty' is naturally ambiguous (Bennett, 2014). Given the concepts of low pay and in-work poverty, it can be understood why some would claim that they overlap (Bennett, 2014), while others presented a different conclusion (Marx et al., 2012). The key may lie in the other sources/earners of income in a family, and in the consumption needs of different family types (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Fraser, 2011; Maitre et al., 2012). The working poor is more likely to be the sole earner to support the family, while low-paid workers would have other earner(s) in the family (Marx et al., 2012).

2.2.2.2 Individual/household effects

With the debate on the ranking of the factors, researchers have reported that wage, labour intensity and attachment, and family-related variables are linked to in-work poverty (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Crettaz, 2015; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Hick & Lanau, 2018; Swaffield et al., 2018). As discussed in the above section, labour intensity may lead to low wages, but it should also be considered together with family, which impacts on the volume of labour investment at work in a household.

In considering the family and demographic characteristics of the working poor, data seems not so reliable. Some studies found that the young, single, only single-earner in a family, female, low educated/skilled, and living in non-developed or small cities are more likely to be part of the working

¹¹ Few studies defined the working poor following other criteria, such as age, employment period and household welfare application (Kim & Mergoupis, 1997). This definition is still principally in line with the elements of 'having poor family' and 'the employed'.

poor (Deng & Li, 2012; Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Fraser, 2011; Hick & Lanau, 2018; Maitre et al., 2012; Velthuis et al., 2018; Winkle & Struffolino, 2018). However, these characteristics may also show a contrary result (Kim & Mergoupis, 1997), especially for occupation. For example, self-employment in the US (Wagle, 2009); and even family size, age and marriage (Rahman, 2015). The different traits of the working poor groups may be linked to regional and, in particular, methodological differences among the studies. For example, the income method may reflect the irrelevance of position of class, unemployment, or other demographics in regard to poverty, while the living standards method may display more poverty among the jobless and blue-collar workers (Halleröd, 1995). These heterogeneities would contribute to less cogency when considering family effects.

In addition to financial pressure, work-family conflicts would also explain why work may not help reduce or even trigger poverty (Hick & Lanau, 2018; Winkle & Struffolino, 2018). For instance, tension between family care responsibilities and paid work can arise from being parents, especially for women (Baker, 2009; Bárcena-Martín & Moro-Egido, 2013). Role strain, as caregivers or as workers, seems common in low-income households, who overcome it by inclining to family routines, whatever employment characteristics (Sheely, 2010). This is particularly the case when help for managing these conflicts is insufficient. A study explored the effects of support from family, workplace and community, to address work-family conflicts among low-income workers. It manifested that not all of them are helpful – colleagues and partners hardly ever provide support, as they are also disadvantaged (Griggs et al., 2013).

The complexity of household variables lies in their fluidity and cultural specificity. Thus, the household effects above would be inaccurate in reflecting Chinese cases. ‘Households are not stable entities through time’ (Hick & Lanau, 2018, p. 666). Family status and structure are changeable (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Hick & Lanau, 2018). A paid worker can jump out of in-work poverty by, for example, divorcing the non-earning spouse (Rahman, 2015). But this would not apply to Chinese in-work poverty, since Fulong Wu (2004) has pointed out that the easily-broken family relationships in the USA that cause poverty seem not to be the case in China. And as to family-work conflicts,

research under the Western context usually assumed the nuclear family model, whereas extended families are especially common in Eastern cultures.

This might change the pattern of how the family causes and/or overcomes in-work poverty, as illustrated by two quantitative studies in China. The first is from Jianping Yao (2016), who found that having younger children do not affect whether or not a family becomes trapped in in-work poverty, because of the relatively low fertility rate (as a result of the one-child policy) and the relatively high labour participation of mothers (thanks to older family members who are caregivers). The second is from Haijie Yin & Yijia Wang (2015), who found that the former generation of the current working poor may also be from the working class and have low incomes, low education and dead-end jobs. The intergenerational transference of precarious employment and the corresponding result of the poverty trap were also investigated in a Western study by Luis Rene Caceres & Susan Ann Caceres (2015). They found that to bring in more income, children in families with underemployment¹² tend to drop out of school and start work earlier in life, which in turn makes them more likely to be employed in low-end jobs, thus showing a vicious cycle of poverty. In fact, not only the immediate family is affected, but in a broader way, since the family identity of Chinese people is somewhat vague and also denotes clans or lineages (Fei, 2004), so the kinship and its stretch to more remote ties should be taken into consideration. Tang et al. (1999) used the random sampling method to interview 47 households in Shanghai, China, and found that the most help poor households received was from their relatives.

Although these studies take a step further in terms of household effects, questions as to how family members provide support and assign responsibility, the differences in intergenerational poverty in these households (Fleury & Fortin, 2006), and even how the public transfer defines 'household' in giving assistance still await answers.

¹² The authors meant here those whose working time is less than 35 hours per week involuntarily.

2.2.2.3 Labour and social protection

To invest more time to work for expanding incomes seems less practical, as many workers are already overworked (Buchanan et al., 2013). Thus, we should go back to consider where incomes can come from. Merely a low wage and a lack of in-work benefits may not lead to poverty (Swaffield et al., 2018). The failure to claim public transfers, a livelihood source, may be a factor (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Efimova, 2012; Swaffield et al., 2018).

Researchers have come to similar conclusions as to the ineffectiveness of some statutory labour protections, since they do not impact directly on the poor workers themselves (Deng & Li, 2012; Marx et al., 2012). For example, improving the minimum wage (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Deng & Li, 2012; Marx et al., 2012) and reducing the contributions of social security or other individual tax credits appears ineffective (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Marx et al., 2012).

Similarly, studies have found that the working poor seem to not share social welfare advantages (Kim & Mergoupis, 1997). Temporary monetary assistance would be very limited in lifting the workers, whose wages come from the harsh working environment, out of hardship (Ng, 2013). This was also admitted by Eric Crettaz (2015), who found that social assistance hardly overcomes income poverty, based on the cross-country comparison of seven members of the EU.

Some have attempted to illustrate it by evaluating the efficacy of the use of targeting for social policy implementation. For instance, as in the case study from York City (Swaffield et al., 2018), and in the study from Belgium (Marx et al., 2012): on the one hand, poverty reduction policy targeting low-paid individual workers was criticised, since many of them are not living in a 'poor' family; on the other hand, targeting low-income households was also criticised for the risk of bringing mobility traps. Since they are within working age, which means they are able to work, the low-paid workers may be excluded from coverage of social security/protection targeting for the disadvantaged citizens (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Efimova, 2012; Lund, 2012). There are no special welfare schemes these workers can enjoy, as 'workers' instead of citizens who have universal entitlements (Lund, 2012).

Recognising that Chinese policies may also help to produce the precariat and poor workers (Lan & Ci, 2018; Tang, 2003, 2004b, 2005), the research argues that the effect of *dibao* on poverty alleviation is still questionable (Hammond, 2019) and the above explanation would not be sufficient for China. This is mainly because, with a very limited number of timely studies, whether *dibao* (targeting the poor family) and employment assistance (targeting those who have difficulty in finding a job) are joined together (as explained in Chapter 1) or separated (Y. Xu & Carraro, 2016) is unclear, as is their interaction. The mechanism of 'make-up deficiency payment' in *dibao* is linked to the cash benefit amount a *dibao* household can get depending on the balance between the local *dibao* standard minus the average personal income in the household (Tang, 2004b). In other words, the *dibao* only fills the gap between earnings and the poverty line (Ngok et al., 2011). Under this mechanism, the more recipients earn, the less they can get from *dibao* (Lan & Ci, 2018; Tang, 2005). Existing research has found that for families who receive government cash assistance of more than 80 per cent of their total incomes, employment assistance is much less helpful (Lan & Ci, 2016b). This might be because of the 'make-up deficiency payment', which on the one hand provides inadequate assistance – in fact, the sufficiency of welfare benefits is still in debate (Lan & Ci, 2016a, 2018; Ngok et al., 2011; Solinger, 2015; Tang, 2005; X. Wu, 2011; Xiao & Li, 2017). On the other hand, it discourages receivers' job motivation (Lan & Ci, 2016a, 2018; Ngok et al., 2011), that is also related to welfare stigma (Chan & Ngok, 2016; Z. Cheng, 2014). It might also be because of individual/family factors, as family care and personal health conditions also affect their ability to work (Lan & Ci, 2016b). More information is needed to clarify those interrelationships.

Lastly, studies about Chinese *dibao* and Employment Assistance mostly focused on the more developed areas in China – for example, Shanghai (Z. Cheng, 2014; K. Han & Zhao, 2017) and Guangzhou (Chan & Ngok, 2016; X. Wu, 2011). But the picture from the much less developed areas in western China is still lacking. The regional differences lie not only in economic development, employment structures and living standards, but are also (especially given the resource constraints) (Hammond, 2019) linked to the variation in benefit levels and even relief measures of social

assistance programmes. This leaves a gap in knowledge as to whether social assistance in the underdeveloped areas of China has indeed been effective in reducing the incidence of in-work poverty.

2.2.3 In-work poverty thresholds

One potential reason for these inconsistent results from empirical research may have its root in how researchers define the 'working poor' group. That is, what they think poverty is, and what criteria can be used to define a worker. This section critically reviews the criteria of in-work poverty, and argues that the concept of 'worker' and 'poverty' should be rethought.

2.2.3.1 Being a worker

As discussed earlier, labour attachment and household income are the two main variables used to identify the working poor in empirical studies and policies. Nevertheless, the identification of 'working' and 'poor' has been highly disputed. Some, for example Kelvin Chi-Kin Cheung and Kee-Lee Chou (2016), thought that as long as people were doing paid job(s) during the investigation period, they can be viewed as working. By comparison, European tradition tended to require working at least seven months a year (Hick & Lanau, 2018), while other studies set no less than half a year during the past year (Winkle & Struffolino, 2018), or more than one hour in the last week (Hick & Lanau, 2018).

However, the time dimension of in-work poverty should be treated more seriously. Unemployment is part of the normal life of precarious workers (Standing, 2011a). The dynamics of employment and unemployment involves the real suffering of precarious workers that should not be silenced. For example, Dominique Fleury and Myriam Fortin's study (2006) reported the situation of the working poor was often not much better than the unemployed poor. This also brings a consideration of whether the working age should be a threshold or not, as it excludes pensioner

workers. In-work poverty usually displays dynamics¹³ and chronic¹⁴ features, showing the cyclic status and the spells of entering into and exiting poverty across a lifespan (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Hick & Lanau, 2018). It thus should focus on not only their current status, but also their historical status of being at work. As Crettaz (2015) has suggested, more longitudinal research is needed.

2.2.3.2 Living with poverty

Similar to the criteria of 'being a worker', poverty lines of in-work poverty studies showed diversity. This subsection divides these criteria into three categories for better understanding: income-based poverty, resource-based deprivation, and social exclusion. The monetary poverty line has the longest history and was the most influential in the study of poverty (Townsend, 1979), either the officially defined absolute poverty line (Fleury & Fortin, 2006; Griggs et al., 2013) or the 'relativity' concept, that is a certain percent of average income in a society, ranging from 60 per cent (Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Hick & Lanau, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2016; Marx et al., 2012) to the less popular 50 per cent (Cheung & Chou, 2016). The muddled standards of the income poverty line also involve the equivalence scales of household income¹⁵ (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011) and pre-tax income (Cheung & Chou, 2016) or net income¹⁶ (Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Winkle & Struffolino, 2018). Comparatively, the material deprivation threshold – to focus on the living necessities – was less common. For example, Peter Saunders & Yuvisthi Naidoo (2008) used this approach and found that the resource-based deprivation that the unemployed experienced was primarily shown as food, clothing, health coverage and social contact. As to the social exclusion approach, it focuses on unfair treatment, discrimination and isolation from the labour market and the broader society.

However, although necessary, using these criteria for the threshold of in-work poverty is

¹³ It is a time dimension of poverty (Barrientos, 2013).

¹⁴ It is another time dimension of poverty, also called persistent poverty (Barrientos, 2013).

¹⁵ That means, for example, adjusting household incomes in which the consumption for a child is regarded as a certain percent of an adult, rather than an equal sharing among family members.

¹⁶ That means the after-tax income or disposable income.

problematic due to their limited foci which conceal the real experience of being poor. First, the absolute income poverty line underestimates human dignity and brings high arbitrariness to poverty measurement. The absolute income poverty line was originally based on measuring poverty by the criteria of maintaining survival (Rowntree, 1903). Amartya Sen (1981) called it a 'biological approach' that paid heed to two basic elements: physical efficiency and (its translated corresponding) income (Townsend, 1979). This 'absolute' subsistence threshold was supported by the International Labour Office (2009), which suggested using a 'nationally-defined' poverty line to diagnose in-work poverty. But as Peter Townsend (1979, 1987) explained, basic human needs are both material (subsistence) and social¹⁷, and they are undivided (Hick, 2014). In addition, the existence of regional, group, wage and price variations and preferences impede an exact measurement for the requirement of nutrition intake and non-food necessities (Sen, 1981; Townsend, 1979; Velthuis et al., 2018). Thus, the poverty line cannot be the 'nationally-defined' extreme poverty.

Relative poverty is affected by the stratification theory, which encourages an inequality approach to compare the poorest with the rest of the society (Sen, 1981, 1983). For identifying the working poor, relative income poverty tends to be more reasonable, compared to the absolute one. This is mainly because most of the working population is able-bodied and can work to support themselves, despite deprivation. They seem not to be in extreme poverty (no earnings at all), but just poorer than other social members (Hu, 2014; J. Yao, 2016). The in-work poverty issue is thus a relative poverty issue. Here, the criticism is not with the concepts of 'relativity' and 'inequality', but with the use of 'income' in conceptualising 'relative poverty'. Poverty is multi-dimensional (Barrientos, 2013). Income below the poverty line is not equal to a low living standard, and there are other non-income resources (such as social networks) that can avoid and cure poverty (Saunders & Naidoo, 2008, 2009). This is why some researchers (Saunders & Naidoo, 2008) used material deprivation thresholds to focus on the living standard and necessities of the working poor.

Material deprivation or resource-based poverty, Townsend (1979) argued, can show the

¹⁷ For example, social participation, see Townsend (1987).

feature of social experience. This conception of poverty replaces (a) 'income' by a wider concept of 'resources' and (b) 'consumption' or 'nutritional intakes' by 'style of living' (Townsend, 1979). 'Resources' includes, for example, cash income, capital assets, value of employment, value of public social services and private income in kind (Townsend, 1979). It implies 'poor' people have to forego participation, due to the insufficiency in resources (Hick, 2014). 'Style of living' refers to customs and activities of a society to which people belong (Townsend, 1979). It varies over time and across cultures, institutions and social progress (Hick, 2014), which means that 'relativity', that is a socially acceptable poverty line, may be divergent for different societies in different time (Townsend, 1979). Within this framework, poverty or deprivation can be defined as living with unacceptable living standards, due to a lack of resources (Halleröd & Larsson, 2008; Hick, 2014) or as a lack of affordability for necessities (Saunders & Naidoo, 2009). Compared with 'income-based poverty', this deprivation approach is more advanced. It is better in identifying real poverty experience, providing a new perspective in which the exclusion of poor people from social and personal activities can be known (Piachaud, 1987; Saunders & Naidoo, 2008, 2009), and offering a key angle of causal relationship in analysing poverty (Halleröd & Larsson, 2008).

However, the material deprivation approach is still not enough for observing the causal link of in-work poverty for two reasons. Firstly, the conversion factors (Robeyns, 2008; Sen, 1990, 1999) that transfer resources into the possible and final wellbeing achievements¹⁸ are not being considered. Even with the same level of money or material wealth, people reach various levels of wellbeing, as there are personal differences (for example, having a disability), which impinges on a person's wellbeing (Sen, 1983). Secondly, in identifying material deprivation, some researchers simply view the lack of some items as a state of being deprived. For example, in the study by Crettaz (2015), a shortage of three out of nine items due to economic limitation was identified as being deprived. What is being questioned is who decides what should be included or excluded in the living necessities, and to what extent the nine items can represent the real living situation.

¹⁸ More detailed discussion is presented in the next section.

The social exclusion approach shares much in common with the deprivation approach to poverty identification. Although not fully the same as each other, social exclusion and poverty are closely related (Laderchi et al., 2003). Therefore Laderchi et al. (2003) categorised social exclusion as an independent approach to poverty, in addition to monetary approach, capability approach and participatory approach. This is risky in the information space of poverty as shown by, for example, Gangopadhyay et al. (2014), who developed the destitution index with social exclusion – food expenditure, protein consumption, education and health. This index is too limited – now that ‘social exclusion’ may be either a cause or a result of being poor, as Gangopadhyay et al. (2014) recognised. It is reasonable to consider social participation beyond material achievement as a part of poverty, even when poverty measurement in developing countries tends to adopt the ‘absolute destitution’ (Ravallion & Chen, 2011). Indeed, without ignoring the possibility of ‘voluntarily being excluded’ (Sen, 2000), social exclusion is not ‘a free-standing concept of poverty’ (Sen, 2000, p. 7) but is ‘constitutively a part of capability deprivation as well as instrumentally a cause of diverse capability failures’ (Sen, 2000, p. 5).

If scrutinising the issue of in-work poverty seriously, no one single dimension mentioned above can be a complete framework for studying in-poverty (Barrientos, 2013). As precarious workers are exposed to a high socio-economic vulnerability (M. A. Chen, 2012), the working poor also face various difficulties in their lives. Since most of the working poor are those with labour ability, their poverty tends to be mirrored as a lack of not only materials (for survival) but also, more importantly, resources, capabilities and opportunities (for development) (Lan & Ci, 2018). Thus, in-work poverty should involve not only economic vulnerability, but also social vulnerability. Scholars also suggested studying multi-dimensional poverty from, for example, the capability approach and participatory approaches (Z. Cheng, 2014; J. Yao, 2016). Yet there are few studies on in-work poverty in China considering these approaches.

In conclusion, these controversial identifications of the working poor, in terms of working time and income in particular, hide some workers whose families suffer from deprivations (Lohmann,

2018). The in-work poverty research usually adopted quantitative methodologies to reach statistical meanings (Hu, 2014; Kou & Hu, 2014). However, the assumption of poverty and what a 'worker' means (Lohmann, 2018) should be placed prior to the statistics and variables of the working poor. Therefore, not only is in-work poverty often overlooked and under-researched (Crettaz, 2015; Hu, 2014; Kou & Hu, 2014), but also the existing in-work poverty research is too limited to tell who the working poor are, how 'poor' they are, why they are 'poor', and so forth.

2.3 Poverty conceptualisation and identification within the capability framework

Poverty, whatever its definition, can be identified as considerable or unacceptable wellbeing deficits in a given society (Barrientos, 2013; Grosh et al., 2008). Wellbeing, also often referred to as welfare (Deaton, 2016), covers people's material and subjective states (Sen, 1984, 1985c). Although most research on in-work poverty simply regarded poverty as a lack of income, as discussed before, poverty is a complex phenomenon (Mendonça dos Santos, 2017). The issue is not only related to living standards and material welfare, but is also influenced by a range of social issues, such as lack of social justice (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2016); social stigma – for example, Adam Smith's case of appearing in public without shame (Sen, 1983, 1984); and social exclusion – for example, Townsend's case of participating in communities (Sen, 1984, 2000; Townsend, 1979). Addressing poverty and welfare problems must thus be based on an appropriate analysis of all of these problems. Having a proper conception of poverty and how to operationalise it are crucial for identifying who the poor is and establishing what social policies could be put in place to address that poverty (Laderchi et al., 2003; Sen, 1992).

In this thesis, poverty will be conceptualised within Sen's capability framework. The research considers that this presents the best framework for carrying out interpersonal evaluations, cross-cultural comparisons, and social, economic and political analysis in relation to poverty-related problems (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2008). It is a framework of

thought about normative issues such as poverty, inequality and social justice (Robeyns, 2005a) that puts emphasis on capabilities (feasible opportunities) and functionings (eventual outcomes). The research, along the lines of Sen (2000, p. 4), defines poverty as basic capability deprivation to 'live a minimally decent life'. Its pluralism on wellbeing and human development (Robeyns, 2005a; Sen, 2000) helps elicit a fuller picture of in-work poverty, beyond a lack of income and materials. The explanatory framework, with conversion factors (Robeyns, 2008, 2016) to feasible opportunities and constraints in the process of making choices, provides a more holistic understanding of and analysis for the lived experience towards in-work poverty and precarious employment, in addition to the macro social progress. In other words, if precarious employment can be seen as 'having no choice but to do it' as a result of structural factors based on the risk society theory, the capability framework supplements an investigation into the choices of individuals in doing precarious work and becoming the working poor.

Using capabilities (what people can do and be) as well as functionings (what people in fact do and be) (Sen, 1984) as indicators and variables for evaluation, enables the comparison of precarious workers' deprivations (even if some of them do not live in a poor family), and an evaluation of the effectiveness of social assistance (Goerne, 2010) in empowering the recipients with heterogeneities. The framework is not only for conceptualising, comparing and evaluating wellbeing-related issues (Robeyns, 2003, 2005a, 2006, 2008). It is also complemented by prospective analysis, to elucidate the causes and consequences of these issues and thus potential intervention from social policies (Alkire, 2008a). Thus, the capability approach serves as both a theoretical and methodological guideline (Subramanian et al., 2013) for the research.

The next section draws on Sen's capability approach to poverty, as another part of the conceptual framework for researching in-work poverty. It starts with the debate around 'absolutism and relativism' in conceptualising poverty, showing the salience of the capability approach in integrating the dichotomy of 'absolute and relative poverty'. Then the capability approach is compared with another two approaches to poverty (welfarism and non-welfarism), to explain why

the capability approach is seen as a more appropriate framework to study the descriptive, evaluative/normative, and interpretative aspects of in-work poverty and precarious employment.

2.3.1 The debate around 'absolutism and relativism' in the study of poverty

Sen (1981, 1983, 1984, 1985a) introduced the capability approach partly through the debate with Townsend (1985) around whether poverty is absolute or relative. Sen (1981, 1983) critiqued Townsend's relativism in a straightforward manner, and argued that poverty has an 'irreducible absolutist core'. As long as absolute disaster scenes emerge – such as famine, starvation, hunger and inanition – poverty exists, regardless of relative difference among individuals in any given society (Sen, 1981, 1983). In a larger scope, drawing on 'appearing in public without shame' from Adam Smith, Sen (1983, p. 161) argued that avoiding poverty or shame in the community the person belongs to, is a case 'not so much having equal shame as others, but just not being ashamed, absolutely'. The assertion denies social stratification in the identification of extreme poverty (although it could exist); instead, with respect to 'absolute needs' in the relative society, relative deprivation can only be a supplement to, but not a substitution for, absolute deprivation (Sen, 1981, 1983, 1999).

As a founder of relativism, Townsend (1985) questioned Sen's absolutism by arguing that Sen misunderstood the concept of relativity, while not clearly explaining absolutism. As Sen (1983, 1985a) admitted, absolute needs differ over time and between societies, and thus absolute achievements may also rest within relative positions. In addition, Townsend (1985, p. 662) doubted that this absoluteness is 'variable, flexible and even, in parts, relative', which is the job of 'relativism'. Lastly, because examples from Sen's absolutism are mostly food-related and without specific criteria about human needs, Townsend (1985) refuted that in more developed societies, an emphasis on absolutist needs would underrate other non-physical needs, and even unperceived needs.

Once again, Sen (1985a) defended that the significance of absolutism lies not in times and societies nor comparison with others, but in evaluating the deprivations individuals experience

absolutely. People can be regarded as poor if they are below the absolute minimum level, no matter whether or not they are relatively poor compared to others (Sen, 1985a). Sen's analysis tends to be more reasonable, since in fact, people would be concerned about both their relative social position and absolute living standard (Ravallion & Chen, 2011).

Therefore, Sen (1984, 1985b, 1992, 1999, 2004b) proposed his capability approach, by which the absolute and relative cores of poverty can be incorporated. Within the capability approach, wellbeing is evaluated by 'capabilities' (what people can do or be, the feasible opportunities for choosing) and 'functionings' (what people in fact do or be, the actual outcomes of feasible capabilities) (Sen, 1984, 1985b, 1985a, 1990, 1992). And poverty is conceived as the deprivation of 'basic' or 'minimum' capabilities (Sen, 1985a, 1992, 1999). 'Basic' or 'minimum' is actually the cut-off point for being poor or non-poor (Robeyns, 2005a). This cut-off point can be formed through an evaluation 'space', that refers to important focal variables in evaluation (Sen, 1992). For the 'space of capabilities', a person's wellbeing is constituted and evaluated by the 'basic' capabilities and/or functionings of this person, shown as 'absolute' (Sen, 1992). For the 'space of commodities', avoiding poverty needs a set of 'basic' commodities, possibly associated with the social position of other members (Sen, 1983); that is, whether one has what others have (Sen, 1984). While poverty takes a form of absoluteness in the space of capabilities, it has relativity in terms of the space of commodities and characteristics (Sen, 1983). Ergo, for some critical capabilities, the absolute 'space of capabilities' (for example, be able to appear in public without shame) converts into a relative 'space of commodities' (for example, wearing a linen shirt for Greeks and Romans, and leather shoes for Englishmen) (Sen, 1983). This is why Sen (1984) argued that if the living standard is treated from a capability scope and the evaluation of commodities is associated with the degree they contribute to capabilities, then the conflicts of absolute and relative definitions of poverty can be averted.

One should use capabilities and functionings, rather than incomes and materials, as evaluation space, if hoping to include absolute and relative features of in-poverty simultaneously (Sen, 1983, 1985a). This does not mean entirely removing incomes and materials, and indeed they

are important factors, because the absolute deprivation of basic or minimum decent capabilities can be caused by the relative deprivation of commodities, incomes, resources, and materials (Sen, 2004b). Instead, it means evaluating whether a person's capabilities are deprived.

2.3.2 Comparison of welfarism, non-welfarism and the capability approach

The strength of the capability approach in studying wellbeing and poverty lies not just in its power to reconcile relative and absolute poverty. More prominently, it provides a more appropriate description and evaluation of poverty and details the causal links of poverty. This can be appreciated by comparing the concepts of opulence, utility and 'capability and functioning'.

Opulence stresses what a person possesses and to what extent that person can command commodities and characteristics (Nussbaum, 2011); that is, how 'rich' a person is (Sen, 1985b), evaluated by real income indicators or commodity bundle indices (Sen, 1984). *Utility* considers that opulence is only a means to wellbeing (Pigou, 1951), and focuses on mental activities and states of wellbeing, such as satisfaction, pleasure, happiness and desire-fulfilment (Sen, 1984, 1985b, 1992, 1999). *Capabilities* are a combination or a set of activities (doing) and states (being) that constitute people's wellbeing; *functionings* are the results of capabilities (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1992).

If bridging the connection among the three notions, then commodities provide some characteristics a person wants – for example, bread offers the characteristics of nutrition and perhaps social customs of a festival, and bikes furnish the property of transport (Sen, 1985b). By using commodities, a person can achieve capabilities and functionings (being nourished in the bread example and moving in the bike example), thereby possibly feeling happy or fulfilled. In assessing the quality of life, however, while the views of opulence (non-welfarist) and utility (welfarist) are reasonable to some degree, their information space is narrow (Sen, 1999).

For non-welfarist approaches (for example, Townsend's resources deprivation and income-based deprivation), while the ownership of opulence seems causally relevant to the quality of life

(Sen, 1985c), its influence is indirect; that is, opulence does not reveal 'what the person can, in fact, do' (Sen, 1983, p. 160, 1985b). For example, owning a bike appears meaningless for a disabled person, because that person may be unable to use it for moving (Sen, 1983, 1985b). The conversion of commodities into functionings relies on both personal (age, gender, metabolic rate, endowments, etc.) and external (natural, climatic, geographic, social, political, historical, etc.) conditions (Barrientos, 2010; Sen, 1985a, 1985c, 1990, 1999, 2005). Because of these heterogeneities, even if different individuals occupy the same commodities, judging and comparing their quality of life is difficult. This is particularly the case when taking non-money aspects into consideration, because they are mostly as important to people as wealth is.

Furthermore, in terms of the disadvantages of welfarism that assesses wellbeing only from the subjective evaluation of people (Barrientos, 2010), the utility approach cannot show the complexity of real life (Nussbaum, 2011). Producing utility is neither the only purpose of commodities (Sen, 1984) nor the only aspect of wellbeing (Sen, 1985c). Returning to the example of bread, consuming bread could bring happiness, but also other achievements like nutrition (Sen, 1984). The view of utility, 'as a mental-state concept' (Sen, 1985c, p. 188), ignores the physical conditions of the individual and how they affect people's day-to-day lives (Sen, 1985b). That is to say, a rich man feeling unhappy cannot be identified as living with low standard (Sen, 1984); and vice versa, a starving person feeling happy cannot equate to having a high standard of life (Sen, 1985b). Some utilities, such as satisfaction, can be met even without relevant materials (Nussbaum, 2011); there are things that can meet utility but cannot be purchased in markets, such as fresh air and a stable community (Sen, 1984).

Consequently, 'welfare' and 'economic welfare'¹⁹ have to be differentiated (Sen, 1984). As Sen argued, what needs to be assessed is not utility but 'the commodity basis of utility' (1984, p. 78),

¹⁹ Economic welfare as understood by Arthur Cecil Pigou (1951, p. 287) establishes these 'economic aspects in life', which can be related, directly or indirectly, to 'the measuring-rod of money' (Pigou, 1952/2017, p. 11). In Pigou's eyes, welfare is related to mental satisfaction, and material welfare, such as money and wealth, is just 'a means to welfare' (1951, p. 288), a part of total welfare (1952/2017, p. 12). Thus, people's welfare can increase or decrease even when economic welfare remains unchanged (Pigou, 1951, 1952/2017).

though the latter is also defective without considering different conversion rates among people (1999). In addition, the utility view muffles real deprivations, because people's desires possibly give way to their judgement on reality, which means they would reflect on the feasibility and possibility of their desire (Sen, 1985b, 1985c, 1999), and thus would feel happy even if actually deprived. This phenomenon is the so-called 'adaptive preference problem'²⁰. Therefore, Sen (1984) argued that 'living standard' handles 'material wellbeing' – not only commodities or monetary material but unpurchasable goods, such as public goods – not 'the sense of material wellbeing', which also pertains to measurement-related problems in the interpersonal comparison of wellbeing (1985b, 1985c).

However, what is closest to a 'living standard' and 'real life' is 'capability and functioning', by which poverty can be diagnosed (Sen, 1993). The capability approach pertaining to this research is identified by three contributions: describing, evaluating and explaining poverty.

Firstly, within this framework, poverty is neither that one has inadequate opulence, nor that one feels unhappy, unsatisfied, or unfulfilled; instead, poverty is the failure of basic capabilities (Sen, 1985a, 1992, 1999), a subset of all capabilities (Robeyns, 2005a). 'How well a person is must be a matter of what kind of life he or she is living, and what the person is succeeding in "doing" or "being"' (Sen, 1985b, p. 28). Functionings and capabilities have an intrinsic importance and play a constitutive role in people's wellbeing (Sen, 1992). In this regard, opulence plays the instrumental but not the constitutive role (Barrientos, 2013; Sen, 1990, 1999); and the utility (subjective experiences such as happiness and choice) can be part (with other material wellbeing like nutrition) but not the whole of wellbeing (Graf & Schweiger, 2014; Hojman & Miranda, 2018; Robeyns, 2013, 2016; Schweiger & Graf, 2014; Sen, 1985c, 1993). Respecting a human's diversity, capabilities and functionings covers a wide range of freedoms and achievements, closer to real poverty and its multi-

²⁰ The description of adaptive preferences among relevant studies would be divergent. For example, Eric Crettaz and Christian Suter (2013)'s adaptive preference refers to the downward adaption from comparing with others who have a similar situation or who are worse off, while Maartje Schermer (2013) discussed the upward adaptation. For more discussion about adaptive preferences, see Martha Craven Nussbaum (2000) and Schermer (2013).

dimensions (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2008). For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997, p. 25) once suggested deprivations in basic capabilities such as ‘health, housing, knowledge, participation, personal security and environment’ over years of life. The identification of basic capabilities helps the research differentiate the working poor from the ‘precariat’ who, as the former section discussed, are overlapped.

Secondly, while capabilities/functionings are value-neutral, the capability approach contributes to a normative framework for evaluative exercises in social arrangements, potential policies design, individual welfare, poverty and living standards (Alkire, 2008a; Hick, 2012; Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2006, 2013; Sen, 1992). Traditionally, individuals are often considered in groups with heterogeneities like families, hence the achievements of a family are seen as the achievements of each member in this family, even if some individual members do not actually succeed (Nussbaum, 2011). Public support is thus given to families, rather than individual members (Nussbaum, 2011). The capability approach stands for ethical individualism that argues ‘only individuals are the ultimate units of moral concern’ (Robeyns, 2008, p. 90)²¹. One person’s ill-being cannot be replaced by other household members’ wellbeing; thus evaluation should move beyond households to the individual person as the unit of analysis, giving individuals ‘equal respect and regard’ and encouraging society to consider which capabilities are really worthwhile for functionings (Alkire, 2008a; Nussbaum, 2011).

The ethical individualism of the capability approach can break the restrictive analysis unit of poverty. As discussed before, for in-work poverty to be identified requires both being employed and living in a poor family; that is, the family is the analysis unit of in-work (Fleury & Fortin, 2006). But the problem is that some precarious workers may be still deprived, even if they live in a ‘non-poor’ family. In other words, the price for the family not being poor may be deprivations for this worker,

²¹ Capability approach only makes a case for normative individualism but not methodological and ontological individualism. Ethical individualism admits individual persons’ social connection and its influence, such as social and environmental conversion factors and personal responsibility for choices, in achieving functionings. By contrast, methodological and ontological individualism holds that individuals and their properties are the only interpretation for all social issues. See Ingrid Robeyns (2008).

such as overwork, poorly health and high stress. As Crettaz (2012) mentioned, income poverty and material deprivation measurement are family matters, whereas studying poverty requires studying the individual members of a family in poverty and deprivation. The capability approach framework considers the individual person as the unit of analysis, to guide the evaluation and comparison of the capability deprivations among precarious workers. Therefore, whether they live in a 'poor' or 'non-poor' family, the compromise between 'self' (the deprivations of worker) and 'others' (his/her family's wellbeing achievement), that muffles deprivations of individual persons, can be visible.

It also helps assess and thus improve public actions of poverty alleviation (Sen, 1985b).

Under the capability approach, the evaluation of social assistance is based on the extent to which the social policies consider human diversity and individual persons in transferring assistance (output) and how much real opportunity they offer to the recipients (process). The relationship between social assistance and in-work poverty thus extends to the way they identify the 'poor' and the way they give assistance. By asking 'to protect what' (Barrientos, 2010, p. 580), the capability approach can do more for the prospective analyses (Alkire, 2008b). In line with the perception of multi-dimensional poverty (Alkire, 2006), capabilities entail a wider range of normative standards for a good society and interdisciplinary dialogue on human rights – freedom, equality, justice and development (Barrientos, 2010; Sen, 2005). The aim of poverty alleviation is thus to expand 'valuable' freedoms of the deprived (Alkire, 2005). In other words, not just giving more opulence, but empowering capabilities for both anti-poverty (respond to already existing remarkable wellbeing deficits: in-work poverty) and welfare production (respond to vulnerability: risks) (Barrientos, 2010)

Thirdly, the explanatory framework of the capability approach provides distinctive contributions (Sen, 1993) to the causal chain of wellbeing achievement and deprivation, by focusing on the two links: from means to capabilities, and from capabilities to functionings. To repeat, means (for example, goods and services) themselves are significant, but how well people can achieve their capabilities (ends) relies on conversion factors (Sen, 1985a, 1985c, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2005), institutional and personal (Robeyns, 2008; Sen, 1999). That is, even with sufficient means,

conversion factors can lead to poverty. Thus, it is not that person A is as poor as person B when both are below the same level of minimum income (the traditional definition of poverty), but that the one who has more difficulty in converting food or income into being nourished is poorer than the one without these disadvantages (Sen, 1992).

In terms of 'from capability to functioning', this raises the importance of analysing the freedoms (opportunities and choosing activities) to live a worthy life and the corresponding actual achievements. The evaluation of capability should not be independent of functioning, as well as the evaluation of 'the range of choice' and of 'the freedom to choose among that range' (Sen, 1993). In this regard, the choice and agency of the utility approach contributes. Sen thought 'freedom has many aspects' (1993, sec. 9). The available opportunities to freely select combinations of functions and the actual exercise of these opportunities together constitute how well a person's life is (Sen, 2005). Being poor thus also means a lack of freedom – limited opportunities and restricted choices (Graf & Schweiger, 2014).

Discussing freedom, Sen (2004b, 2005) distinguished between the opportunity and process aspects of freedom. The 'opportunity aspect of freedom' is one's capability set, the range of choices or options (Sen, 2005) a person can choose from (Sen, 1985b), playing the constitutive roles as ends (Sen, 1999), such as avoiding undernourishment and shame. These ends in one's wellbeing come after the conversion of means, which denote resources or Rawls' 'primary goods' (Hick, 2012). The 'process aspect of freedom' means the procedure of choosing it. This involves, for example, whether or not people can freely choose, and what constrains them to 'freely choose' among their opportunity sets (Sen, 2004b, 2005). The 'process aspect of freedom' plays both constitutive and instrumental roles (Sen, 1999). On the one hand, the constitutive role, choosing or autonomy, is itself a capability; that is, the opportunities or substantial freedoms (acting or not) are people's choices, their self-definition (Nussbaum, 2011). Choosing as an activity itself is part of a worthy life (Sen, 2004b). Possibly because functionings, also the ends of wellbeing (Sen, 1999), come after choosing capabilities, some studies (Deneulin, 2008; Wagle, 2009) also viewed capabilities as means, but

functionings as ends. On the other hand, the instrumental role (such as 'political freedom', 'economic facilities', 'social opportunities', 'transparency guarantees', and 'protective security') influences one's capability set (Sen, 1990, 1999).

It thus highlights the problem of choice and constraint on choice, which is neglected by the Townsendian approach of constraint on resources in explaining the cause and consequences of deprivation (Crettaz, 2012; Hick, 2012, 2014; Piachaud, 1987; Saunders & Naidoo, 2008, 2009; Sen, 1993). That is, when saying a person does not accomplish a kind of functioning, it should distinguish whether this failure is because the person wants to live this kind of life or because the person has no choice but to live this kind of life. For example, the ascetic who is fasting is different from the person who is forced to suffer from starvation, notwithstanding that both are living within a low standard (undernourishment) (Sen, 1981, 1984, 1992). Robeyns (2006) called this the responsibility-sensitivity principle. To see a person as an agent person is to see that person as a responsible person (Sen, 1993).

To summarise, the capability approach visualises the nature and roots of poverty (Sen, 1985b) and its effects (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2008). Thus, in analysing and identifying whether a precarious worker is able to live the life he or she has reason to value (Dean, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), the research analyses conversion factors, the capability set, choice and the finally achieved functionings, instead of merely the means (such as commodities, incomes and resources) (Barrientos, 2010; Hick, 2012, 2014). The responsibility-sensitivity principle enables an analysis of how environmental factors permeate from means to capabilities to functionings, in influencing the opportunities and decisions of precarious workers to do precarious work and live a tolerable life.

2.4 This research

From the above review, existing research from the Chinese context does not provide enough evidence and firm conclusions as to the relationship between precarious work and in-work poverty.

Firstly, in the debate about whether or not precarious jobs reduce or increase in-work poverty in the Chinese context, the roles of choice and attitudes towards work and the ideal lifestyle are still unknown. Secondly, other than the variables of low pay and high work intensity, the contributions regarding individual characteristics/household effects and Chinese social assistance are not well understood, nor is the effect of the combination of these institutions in people's wellbeing (Sen, 1999). Thirdly, the identification of the working poor is still limited to those experiencing economic poverty; it neglects short or intermittent periods of employment and unemployment, which significantly underestimates many others who may also qualify as working poor. Owing to these gaps, there is still a need to further depict the phenomenon of in-work poverty, by exploring the relationship between precarious employment and in-work poverty in the Chinese context.

In order to expand our understanding of the experience and dynamics of in-work poverty in China, this research aims to bring into focus the lived experiences (agency, attitudes and choices) of precarious workers living in poverty (capability deprivations). Through investigating how stakeholders cope with the risks in China's employment context, it asks whether or not and why precarious workers suffer from capability deprivation in the risk society of China. Based on the frameworks of precarious employment and capability deprivation, the research analyses the ways in which individual choices, the labour market, the family, the broader social networks and social assistance schemes combine to affect in-work poverty issues. Specifically, it will answer the following five questions:

1. To what extent does the labour market influence in-work poverty?

This question asks what deprivations the labour market transfers to the precarious workers, in addition to low incomes and unemployment. It also asks about other characteristics of precarious employment in China's risk society, and to what extent a job determines a decent life.

2. What roles do the family play in this phenomenon?

This question investigates how Chinese family support networks can lead to or reduce in-

work poverty within a household. Family configurations and corresponding family responsibilities will be considered, together with intragenerational/intergenerational burdens, conflicts and supports. It also examines the intergenerational employment pattern.

3. How do social relations interact with the wellbeing of precarious workers?

Chinese family identity is somewhat fuzzy. It sometimes expands to the clan/lineage, which alongside neighbours, friends and other close interactive ties can or cannot provide support. The question asks about precarious workers' social participation, in terms of the range as well as the power of their social ties in the relationship with capability deprivation.

4. As the last safety net, how is social assistance (*dibao* and PWJ) related to in-work poverty among precarious workers?

This question examines the role and trend of social assistance in the risk society. The interaction of *dibao* and Public Welfare Jobs (PWJ), a measure of Employment Assistance that is most connected to *dibao*, can be the key to investigating the assess to and efficacy of social welfare in reducing the capability deprivation of precarious workers.

5. What are those workers' attitudes and lived experiences towards work and wellbeing, in the context of normalised precarious employment and life?

While the literature has engaged little in this area, the capability approach suggests choice with its dual roles – constitutive and instrumental – would be a contribution in people's wellbeing outcome. This question focuses on personal agency and responsibility with adaptive preference and risk preference in the 'trade-off' of wellbeing pursuits, which is also influenced by the wider social progress.

Chapter 3 : Methodologies

By offering a more holistic understanding of poverty, as both a material condition and an experiential phenomenon, the capability approach is the most suitable framework for the research. While the capability framework guides this study, it is acknowledged that the biggest challenge to the capability framework is around its operationalisation, mainly because capabilities tend to be unobservable and can be counterfactual, underpinned by subjective biases that may distort the 'facts' as they occur (Comim, 2008). Thus, it is argued, this approach can only partially explain the underlying causes, dynamics and process of poverty (Laderchi et al., 2003). Possibly due to these limitations, existing research on poverty and in-work poverty (e.g. research reviewed in Chapter 2) prefers to adopt more 'objective' and less complex approaches to poverty. However, as explained in Chapter 2, this research argues that the monetary/material approach represents a distorted epistemology of the reality of poverty (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013).

This chapter discusses the methodologies and methods of this research around the aforementioned questions. Although the capability approach is often regarded as an objectivist approach (Comim, 2008), the research justifies using subjective data with the capability approach. This research adopts an epistemological position that acknowledges the importance of the lived experience of poverty, and thus puts forward a methodological strategy to operationalise the capability approach as the most suitable framework to understand an individual's experiences of in-work poverty and precarious employment. Primarily because poverty and wellbeing are normative, rather than purely objective or neutral phenomena (Graf & Schweiger, 2013; Saunders et al., 1994), subjectivity cannot be totally removed from the study of poverty (M. Fu et al., 2015; Piachaud, 1987; Sen, 1981, 1984, 1985b). Instead, subjectivity can provide insights regarding the causes, dynamics and potential solutions to poverty issues, through a participatory approach (Chambers, 2007; Narayan et al., 1999; Robb, 2002). Accordingly, this research adopts purposive sampling and uses semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect information about the lived experience of precarity and in-work poverty. The analysis of this data also assisted in the evaluation of the links between

precarious employment and in-work poverty.

This chapter consists of three sections: the first section addresses the limitations of the capability approach; this is followed by the rationale for using subjective data; and finally, a section detailing the research design.

3.1 Operationalising and adapting Sen's capability approach

The capability approach is informed by a great variety of disciplines with different epistemologies and methodologies. For example, capabilities and functionings have been used as social indicators to measure welfare or quality of life in quantitative empirical studies; as components of a narrative for thick description of people's lives in qualitative studies; as well as underpinning concepts for normative theories in philosophical studies (Robeyns, 2005b). To state this interdisciplinarity here is important, partly to avoid misinterpretation²² regarding the application of this approach (Alkire, 2005; Robeyns, 2005b, 2013).

Apart from this multiplicity of approaches, critiques have been raised regarding its conceptual and theoretical complexity²³, which has made the capability approach less attractive in empirical studies (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2008; Comim, 2008). This section addresses the aforementioned criticisms of Sen's capability approach by outlining its advantages. It also acknowledges its potential limitations and the ways in which these may be overcome, leaving the issue of unclear solutions for adaptive preferences to Section 3.2.

²² For example, a study by Kwadzo (2015) solely used educational attainment as the variable of capability poverty, maintaining that the capability approach is not as useful as income poverty (official poverty line) and social exclusion poverty (50 and 60 percent of median income). This conclusion is not persuasive, because capabilities are multifaceted, and education is just but one dimension. Other aspects of capabilities such as disabilities, working experiences, and interpersonal relationships in the workplace may also affect people's ability to earn money.

²³ The capability approach is complex because of its multidimensionality and unspecific selection of multidimensional variables, context-reliant nature, measurement and calculation, and so on. However, complexity is not always a weakness, since some concepts and phenomena themselves are intrinsically complex (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2008).

3.1.1 Coping with the weakness in explanatory analysis

Scholars who have criticised the evaluation aspect (Deneulin, 2008) and/or explanation (Laderchi et al., 2003) of the capability approach on poverty seem to question individualism and an individual person's capabilities as the basis for information. Capability-study academics usually focus on evaluating the final results (end states) about whose and what kind of capabilities are boosted or constricted (Alkire, 2008b). Comparatively, the analysis for 'why' (that is, the causes of poverty) would not gain much attention when applying the capability approach. The capability approach itself lacks explanatory power with regard to poverty (compared with the social exclusion approach, which engages in socio-structural factors), due to its focus on individual characteristics and circumstances (Laderchi et al., 2003).

This subsection assesses the tensions between individualism and collectivism and information space for using the capability approach. The argument here is that by incorporating the concept of 'structures of living together' (Deneulin 2008) into the 'process aspect of freedom', the capability approach can serve well for this research, in helping to understand the larger phenomena of in-work poverty and precarious employment, beyond the individual experience.

S  verine Deneulin (2008, p. 111) explained that 'structures of living together' are 'structures which belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these'. Sen's capability approach highlights 'existing individual lives' and argues that 'capabilities are characteristics of individual advantages' (Sen, 2005, p. 156). In contrast, Deneulin (2008) argued that individuals cannot be independent of others in a society, and that the group may enable or constrain the capabilities of individual members (Alkire, 2008a; Dean, 2009). According to Deneulin (2008), the structures of living together and their history influence past, current and future generations' living

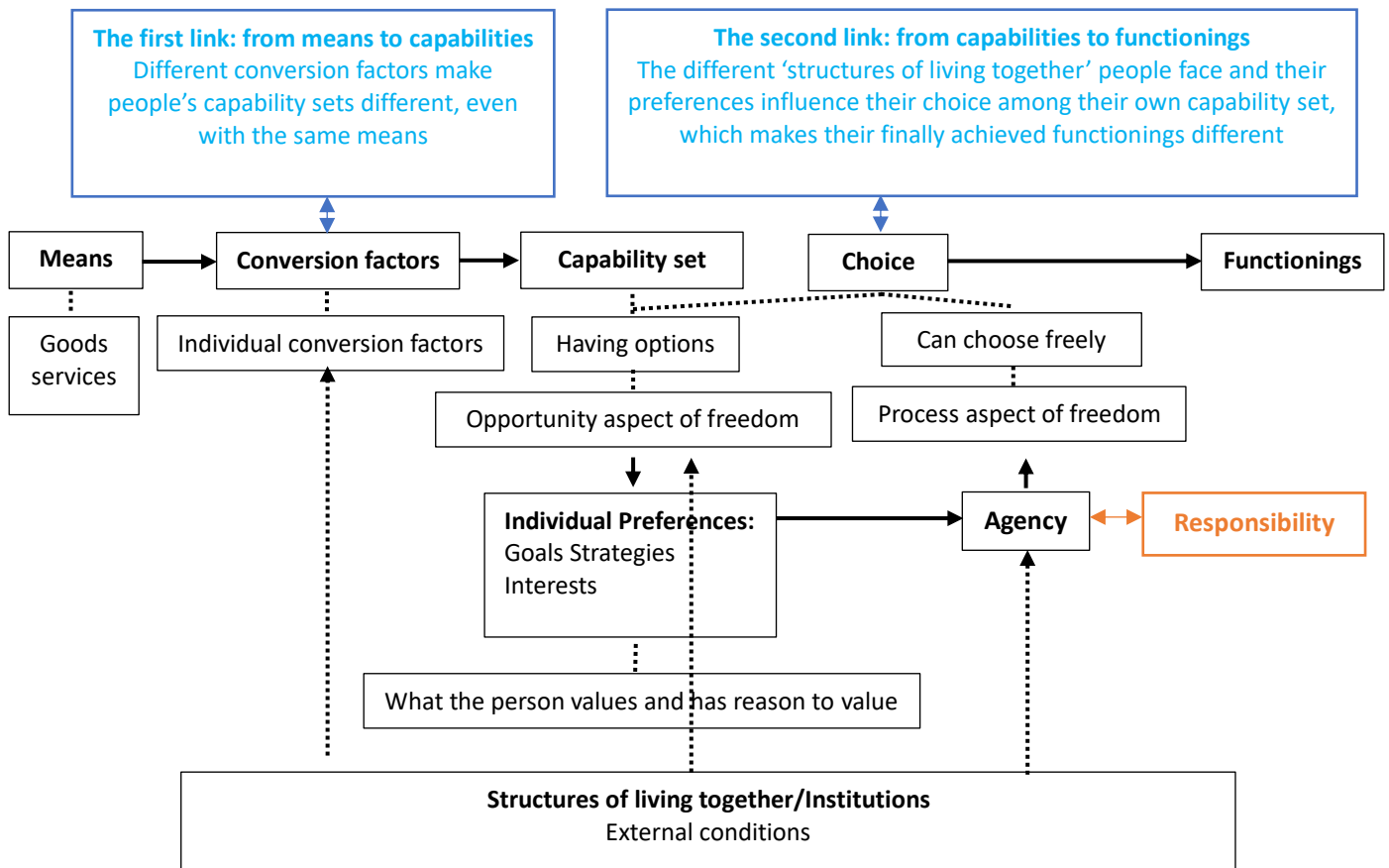
standards. Consequently, Deneulin (2008) suggested considering ‘collective capabilities’²⁴; that is, what individual persons cannot enjoy unless they participate in a group, institution, policies, collective activities and actions, and so on (Alkire, 2008b). Alkire (2008b) argued that what Deneulin criticised here was not the individualism of Sen’s capability approach, rather that Deneulin’s concern was with the missing prospective analysis that pays attention to causes, consequences and possibilities (where the ‘collective capability’ works). In other words, Deneulin’s criticism lies in the information range that the capability approach provides.

Based on Ingrid Robeyns (2005a)’s matrix of capability through to Deneulin (2008)’s criticism of Sen’s approach, the researcher drew a graphic (Figure 3.1) that maps out the logic of the capability approach used in this research. Deneulin (2008) criticised how Sen ignored some factors linking capabilities to functionings, as outlined in the *second link* of the graphic. She argued that having free choices and freely choosing under the influence of social norms must be distinguished (Deneulin, 2008). While convincing, Deneulin’s argument does not challenge the ability of Sen’s capability approach to uncover the act of making choices (actual decisions). Instead, it depends on which way the capability approach is used. When discussing human rights and freedom, Sen himself claimed that, if focusing on ‘individual advantages’ (Alkire, 2015b) as the sole information form, capabilities may be insufficient to reveal the extrapersonal ‘process aspect of freedom’ (Sen, 2005). Sen’s self-criticism is because he assumed an extreme example of considering only capabilities and nothing else.

²⁴ Although accepting the nature of ‘collective capabilities’ (that is, to treat the collective power as part of causal analysis), the research does not use the term ‘collective capabilities’ for two reasons. Firstly, ‘collective capability’ means everyone in a group values these capabilities, but it cannot judge whether or not one is (implicitly) forced to perform what he/she disvalues under the majority agreement (Alkire, 2008a). Secondly, by using ‘collective capabilities’ as the analysis unit in the evaluation space (Deneulin, 2008), not only are the nuances and differences about how social structures influence an individual person’s capabilities ignored, but an issue of individual liberty and social solidarity in terms of social justice and human dignity is thus triggered (Alkire, 2008a; Dean, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). Instead, the research recognises the interpretation from John Bryan Davis (2015), consistent with Sen, that people are both socially dependent persons (they are social group members) and individually independent persons (people in their social groups have differentiated, particular roles and duties) simultaneously.

Figure 3.1

Logic of the capability approach



Note: Based on Robeyns (2005a)'s matrix of capabilities.

This is not to say the capability approach cannot enable us to know the process aspect of freedom. In this research, integrating Deneulin's idea of 'structures of living together' to the latter causal chain of the capability approach in Figure 3.1 can be helpful for this aforementioned problem. Therefore, as in Figure 3.1, not only the *first link* (from means to capabilities) but also socio-historical 'structures' would spawn inequality again in the *second link*, restricting people's actions on making choices from the available capability set.

This is also where lived experience can contribute by disclosing, for the purpose of the research, the mental activities – such as feelings, attitudes, thoughts and choices – of precarious workers and those living in poverty (see Section 3.2). The process aspect of freedom links the capability set to the actual functionings. This is influenced by people's agency – the purposeful

actions with one's autonomy in his/her pursuits/desires to reach a state/object (see Section 3.2.2) – and its wider circumstance of the 'structures of living together'. It thus becomes acceptable that, as Robeyns (2005a) argued, the capability approach, at the theoretical level, does interpret how social factors influence the achievement of functionings, through both the *first link* (conversion factors) and the *second link* (choices). In fact, there is no conflict between supporters of ethical individualism (Sen²⁵ and Robeyns²⁶) and advocates of 'collective capabilities' (Deneulin), when considering the interdependent capabilities and the social setting.

Nevertheless, while agreeing with the key precepts of Sen's capability approach and its importance, authors such as Robeyns (2003, 2005a, 2006, 2008, 2016) argued that Sen's capability approach lacks explanatory power to account for wellbeing-related phenomena. In Robeyns' (2016) opinion, the capabilities approach offers only a 'general view' of capability 'framework', which can be used differently with different purposes and disciplines. In her view, in order for the capability approach to become a theory with explanatory power, it should be filled with 'ontological, explanatory and normative accounts' in order to be operable and show the precise dimensionality of wellbeing indicators (Robeyns, 2003, 2005a, 2008, p. 94). Robeyns's argument arises from two related arguments. The first relates to the issue of the capability approach not constituting a normative theory of justice, as Sen himself has stated (Goerne, 2010). Instead, the capability approach argues that each society has a responsibility to uphold its own core entitlements (Brunner & Watson, 2015), with the capability approach offering a tool for conceptualising and evaluating/comparing (Robeyns, 2005a) social justice through those core entitlements. Thus, the approach does not explicitly state what *should* be included in the capability set to evaluate and

²⁵ Sen (1999) not only suggested considering how the institutions combine to influence people's wellbeing, but also rationalised including social exclusion in capability deprivation, which visualises the 'diverse origins of the failure to have adequate basic capabilities' (2000, p. 29). This verifies that Sen has already taken broader social and environmental factors into account in causal analysis.

²⁶ The example Robeyns (2006) took to explain this idea is: in a family with responsibility for care of children, both the father and mother have the capability to hold jobs, but their final functioning of working cannot be achieved simultaneously. One's achievement of capability must be based on the other giving up his or her capability.

explicate a just society. In other words, Robeyns's criticism of the capability approach as not constituting a fleshed-out theory (Robeyns, 2003, 2008) is specifically targeted at its lack of an explicit and operationalisable list of capabilities.

Robeyns' related critique of the capabilities approach also relates to its blurring of ends and means, by not explicitly clarifying what role(s) capabilities and functionings play in the attainment of wellbeing, as well as outlining the way(s) in which those capabilities and functionings are deployed and for what specific purpose(s) (Robeyns, 2005a). To illustrate her point, Robeyns (2005a) used the example of health, which can be a capability (end), but at the same time it can also be a means for having a job. Similarly, conversion factors and means can sometimes be blurred. For instance, social institutions may be a kind of primary goods, that is a means which plays an instrumental role in wellbeing obtainment (Sen, 1990, 1999); but it may also be a conversion factor (Robeyns, 2008) or 'rules of the game' (Chopra & Duraiappah, 2008)²⁷ among people living, working and interacting within a society. The ambiguous or multiple classification of some capabilities and functionings can thus lead to unclear inter-constraint and inter-empowerment among 'structures of living together'²⁸ (Davis, 2015).

Given the rationale of the critiques from Robeyns, Deneulin (2008) and Laderchi et al. (2003), this research argues that the aim of the capability approach should not only be a matter of forming a list of capabilities for assessing wellbeing. Instead, it argues that the capability approach can also be productively deployed to account for the reasons and the processes by which precarious workers become the working poor. Undoubtedly, as Figure 3.1 shows, the range of capabilities, conversion factors, choices, responsibilities and so forth could be potential explanations for the questions raised by this research. Thus, in this research, 'capability deprivation' itself is not used as the only explanatory or theoretical framework. Rather, the research acknowledges the limits to its

²⁷ The authors stated that they adopted North, D.'s definition of institutions.

²⁸ For example, the labour market gives people opportunities to develop their individual capabilities, but companies in the labour market and family decide they can only develop their socially dependent capabilities (Davis, 2015).

operationalisation (Robeyns, 2008), but posits that the approach can be further developed to create more specific indicators (Section 3.1.2 and Appendix 3). And, it also makes sense that some elements can work more than once in the casual chain.

3.1.2 Methods: unobservable capabilities and unspecified capability list

As discussed in the above subsection, some of the criticism of the explanatory power of Sen's capability approach is based on its focus on capabilities, without specifying a list of specific capabilities. But as Robeyns (2016) herself admitted, using and understanding the capability approach appropriately can potentially help develop a great variety of capability theories. This subsection thus continues to focus on the operationalisation of the capability approach. It argues that a viable pathway to engagement with the capability approach unfolds, by retrodicting capabilities from functionings and creating a locally specific version of a capability list based on the 'general view'.

This research, in fact, adopted Robeyns's (2006, 2016) method of considering capabilities and functionings simultaneously, to address the challenge of counterfactual and unobservable activities and states of capabilities (Comim, 2008) when applying the capability approach. For those in favour of capabilities rather than functionings in poverty analysis, such as Sen and Nussbaum (Robeyns, 2016; Sen, 1984, 1985c, 1992), the problem is that capabilities are possible choices, the potentials, not what is/are chosen eventually – the fact(s). Counterfactuality is the nature of capabilities (Comim, 2008). Sen saw the problem of the unavailability of some capability data, and would instead use the observable information of functionings as a substitute (Sen, 1984, 1992, 1999).

However, neither capabilities nor functionings are dispensable for three main reasons: first, the systematic irrationalities of human nature; second, the instrumental purposes to citizens' certain wellbeing outcomes; and third, the dependency of capability achievement on other's choices (Robeyns, 2006, 2016). Given the observability of functionings compared with capabilities, the

research observed functioning obtainment first, and then retrodicted capability obtainment based on the functioning obtainment, which also visualises the role of choice. For example, if analysing a failed to obtain acceptable wellbeing, on the one hand, it may be because his/her agency and individual preferences had interrupted capabilities converting into functionings. On the other hand, if that was not the case, then it may be because the means and conversion factors hinder the range of capabilities.

If the unavailable information for capability is no longer a barrier, then capability lists are a core methodological problem. The research followed Sen's idea of public reasoning, aiming to develop a systematic methodology to democratically select capabilities (Robeyns, 2005b). Sen (2005) himself refused to list capabilities, because he thought a pure theoretical list without public reasoning may limit the possibility of what should be included in such a list. Furthermore, he argued that capability lists may vary with different purposes, conditions and priorities across different societies (Dean, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2004a, 2005).

The same is true for the evaluative space of capabilities and functionings (Sen, 1993). A person's capabilities and functionings would differ tremendously across contexts and societies. For example, in poor areas, capabilities may refer to longevity, nourishment, basic health, shelter, basic literacy and numeracy; while in rich areas, they probably would entail interacting with others, participating in community life, being in public unashamedly (self-respect), having worthwhile jobs, education (and even the aspiration of literacy, culture and intelligence), leisure and so on (Sen, 1983, 1984, 1985b, 1992, 1993, 2005).

Nussbaum was at the opposite pole to Sen, arguing for a fixed capability list. She argued that the lack of a set list of capabilities may result in not only controversy about absolute and relative poverty, but most importantly, it may result in an incomplete answer about how we might achieve equality and justice (Nussbaum, 2011). She thus proposed a definite list of 'ten central capabilities' for a 'minimum justice threshold level' (Nussbaum, 2011), or 'central requirements of a life with dignity' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 57). Nussbaum's list includes the following capabilities: life; bodily

health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 58–59, 2011, pp. 33–34). Nussbaum regarded this list as appropriate to define and measure both social justice and quality of life (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2016).

While recognising the operability of Nussbaum's capabilities list, Robeyns (2005a, 2005b, 2016) nonetheless criticised Nussbaum's push for a universalist fixed list of capabilities. Robeyns regarded this fixed list as problematic in the context of different epistemological goals, methodologies and disciplines when using the capability approach; but also due to the fact that the list is drawn with limited knowledge of people's lives in different parts of the world, thus also challenging the legitimacy of forming such a list (Robeyns, 2005b). Robeyns (2005b) further argued that academics and policymakers who plan to use the capability approach need to figure out at the onset what capabilities should be measured or aimed at in a particular context. She warned that Nussbaum's list – although claiming to be the 'ideal' normative theory for the selection of social indicators – may not be the most appropriate for the analysis of the quality of life, the 'real' people's life (Robeyns, 2005b). With different legitimacies for the formulation of the list (for example, based on public census or a scholar's brainstorm), even if a list was produced following Sen's idea and proved to be the same as Nussbaum's list, the underlying assumptions and theories on the two lists are distinct (Robeyns, 2003).

3.2 Dialectic discussion about subjectivity and objectivity in the capability approach

This research used the capability approach to study the subjective lived experience of in-work poverty. Sen, however, regarded his capability approach to be an objectivist's approach (Comim, 2008; Schweiger & Graf, 2014), based on its absolutism (see Chapter 2). Sen and Nussbaum claimed that the capability approach can cope with the problem of adaptive preference, by centring on capabilities and functionings (which they thought are the objective indicators), rather than

people's utility or subjective evaluation (Nussbaum, 2000; Teschl & Comim, 2005). Nevertheless, the process by which the capability approach can overcome the adaptive preference problem is still unclear. And thus, while the capability approach rejects the welfarist approach to poverty (targeting mental activities), it still cannot totally avoid the problem of subjective bias when forming a list of capabilities and/or evaluating wellbeing (Comim, 2008; Crettaz, 2012; Crettaz & Suter, 2013). This problem becomes especially salient when capabilities involve subjective data, for example 'choices' (Comim, 2008). Even Sen's 'public reasoning' may trigger subjectivity-related problems, including the issue of whose voices should be listened to, and how to deal with divergent voices and opinions between different groups or communities (Laderchi et al., 2003).

This section discusses these philosophical questions underpinning the application of the capability approach alongside subjective indicators (such as subjective evaluation, subjective experience and self-report), to unmask 'hidden assumptions' in poverty studies (Graf & Schweiger, 2014). It argues that subjective data is as valuable as 'objective' approaches to poverty, in order to holistically visualise and understand the phenomena of in-work poverty and precarious employment, so the research does not need to evade them. It also argues that using the capability approach need not conflict with using subjective data.

The section is divided into three subsections, addressing questions as to why subjectivity is needed, how the capability approach coexists with subjective data, and how validity can be upheld when analysing subjective data.

3.2.1 The inevitability of subjective data and its role in the study of poverty

The research did not control adaptive preferences, because adaptive preferences are formed naturally. From hedonic psychology, we know that adaptive preferences do not always distort people's subjective feelings (Teschl & Comim, 2005), but that instead they can show or give evidence of the real lifestyle of relevant people. Thus, adaptive preferences are perhaps not so negative in people's lives (Nussbaum, 2000). In other words, subjective experiences, even when distorted by

adaptive preferences, contribute to an epistemological necessity and ethical respect to the relevant people in the phenomenon. In practice, subjectivity cannot be fully avoided. Rather, it is a methodological strategy to study the phenomenon.

Firstly, epistemologically and ontologically, the thesis argues that the view that 'subjectivity should be removed' is biased. Real life is filled with objectively observable, measurable lives as well as subjective, immediate experiences. Subjective experiences, which are generated from thoughts and actions, are part of 'real' reality in the everyday life of people (Berger, 1966). As common sense, they contain the interpretations for everyday life, despite being 'pre/quasi-scientific' (Berger, 1966). As a means of recognition, 'subjective emotions', 'self-reporting' and 'subjective testimony', expressed by 'language' (Berger, 1966; Van Manen, 2016), provide firsthand information about the poor's real experiences (Schweiger & Graf, 2014). After all, those who have experienced and lived with a certain phenomenon know best about what this phenomenon is really like and what it means (Mapp, 2008).

For the research, knowing the lived experience of the subjects of a phenomenon is a recognition approach for identifying actual contextual experiences where injustice exists, but may be overlooked by scholars who have no such experiences. In other words, it enables one to conceive the consequences of their capability deprivations (for example, how much of a struggle their life is), the reasons why they value or disvalue some capabilities, and the process of how the lived experience interplays with the 'structures of living together' to influence their wellbeing outcomes.

Ethically, respecting the lived experience of the subjects of a phenomenon breeds the empowerment of the disadvantaged. For instance, feminists argue that since women have been subordinated and ignored by the public (compared to men), individual women's lives should be focused for the purpose of raising the consciousness of women (DeVault, 1996). Accordingly, women deserve to play a part in research practice; together with other researchers, they can theorise the relationships between experience and knowledge, thereby bringing about social actions and changes for women (DeVault, 1996). For this research, not only are the working poor the victims of social

injustice, being poor itself also means not being acknowledged by others (Schweiger & Graf, 2014). It should not be taken for granted that their voices will be listened to and represented in conceptualising and theorising poverty (Schweiger & Graf, 2014), through expressing their subjective and lived experience of poverty and precarious work. As Robeyns (2005b, p. 196) states, 'it is the people who will be affected by the policies who should decide on what will count as valuable capabilities in this policy question'.

Based on these principles, a relatively recent and innovative methodology to study poverty has been introduced (Chambers, 2007; Narayan et al., 1999), which is called Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA)²⁹. PPA assumes that the poor have ability to know themselves, have creativity in this process, and can play a role in making decisions (Laderchi, 2001; Robb, 2002). Thus, it employs a participatory, open-ended method, that involves the voice of poor people and possibly other stakeholders in understanding and reducing poverty (Narayan et al., 1999; Robb, 2002).

The PPA methodology contributes to more theoretical knowledge (explanatory analysis) and practical actions (follow-up actions) on poverty. As a critical social theory, the recognition approach – knowing people's experiences and understandings, listening to them, giving them weight in constructing the critique of society, and empowering them – acts in answering why people can or cannot achieve some capabilities (Graf & Schweiger, 2013, 2014). Compared with quantitative poverty measurement, PPA does not predefine questions but adopts open-ended and visual strategies, such as unstructured interviews, group discussion and focus groups (Narayan et al., 1999). These strategies expose some issues that outside experts had not previously noticed (Narayan et al.,

²⁹ Some (Laderchi et al., 2003) would consider PPA is parallel to approaches such as income-poverty, social exclusion and capability deprivation. However, this classification might be questionable. Monetary approach, social exclusion and the capability approach can all be seen as theories to some degree, as they depict and/or analyse poverty more or less. For example, these approaches depict poor people as lacking money, being excluded by the majority of social members, or being deprived in capabilities. By contrast, from a PPA perspective, poverty may still be invisible. If poverty is merely 'one views himself as poor' or one thinks he/she lacks something that he/she deserves (Schweiger & Graf, 2014, p. 148,153), we may still ask what poverty actually looks like, and who the poor really are. Therefore, PPA may be more suitable to be treated as a methodology (Chambers, 2007) in studying poverty, in line with the methodology of subjective poverty studies, that is to 'let the people speak' in deciding the poverty line (Saunders et al., 1994, p. 18).

1999).

PPA is thus a contextual method that sees multifaceted poverty from the perception of local circumstances and local people (Laderchi, 2001). In addition to nuancing local poverty (Cohen & Saisana, 2014) and exploring the causes of poverty and its dynamics (Laderchi, 2001; C. Lu, 2010; Robb, 2002), PPA is outstanding in empowering poor people and improving policies (Laderchi, 2001; C. Lu, 2010; Narayan et al., 1999; Robb, 2002). For instance, protecting tenancy rights would motivate some poor women to work outside home in Mexico City, given their worry about their houses being occupied by others when leaving; the pressure from education fees tops other sources of stress among Zambian families, and the local government thus considers reducing school fees (Robb, 2002). This may be something that quantitative methods (survey, for example) cannot provide.

Furthermore, seeking solutions to completely control 'subjectivity' or to attain absolute 'objectivity' in studying poverty is impractical (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020). The issues of poverty and wellbeing are normative, not purely objective and neutral (Graf & Schweiger, 2013; Saunders et al., 1994). 'Normative' means value judgement is involved (Saunders et al., 1994) in knowing 'what constitutes a good life or a bad one' (Kingdon & Knight, 2006, p. 1026), or 'what is acceptable' (Graf & Schweiger, 2013, p. 283). In fact, among all mentioned concepts of poverty – perhaps except for the biological approach and the pure money-based approach – moral judgement cannot be completely eradicated from the study of poverty. Although both the approaches of relative deprivation (Townsend, 1979) and capability deprivation (Sen, 1985a, 1992, 1999, 2006) criticise evaluating wellbeing based on purely subjective experiences (traditional welfarism), they somehow cannot control for subjectivity. For example, since relative deprivation is assessed by socially acceptable standards (Townsend, 1979), it unavoidably refers to the subjective attitudes at minimum resources of the majority of social members, to understand what the 'socially acceptable' standard is. And capability deprivation, as interpreted above and below, engages with issues of subjectivity, such as autonomy and choosing, adaptive preferences, as well as the subject of who decides capability lists. Therefore, methodologically, subjectivity such as feelings and values always exists (M.

Fu et al., 2015; Piachaud, 1987; Sen, 1981, 1984, 1985b). So subjective testimony is not an excuse for arguing against subjective wellbeing research, since objective wellbeing studies still face this problem (Venkatapuram, 2013).

3.2.2 Subjectivity, lived experience and the capability approach

After rationalising the subjective data, this subsection explains the logic by which subjectivity can be made compatible with Sen's objectivist capability approach. It argues that agency and subjective wellbeing need to be included as core elements of the basic capability set, and that PPA can be applied to Sen's public reasoning approach to develop a list of capabilities.

In fact, the coexistence of the capability approach and subjectivity lies in the nature of capability; that is, people's ability to live the life they have reason to value (Alkire, 2006; Dean, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). This statement implies two crucial elements in capabilities – agency and subjective wellbeing – which people rationally value as part of their pursuit, whether or not they are aware of it. For this reason, some (Shams, 2012, 2016) consider that the capability approach places more stress on 'psychological' deprivation than on material deprivation.

Following Sen, the research adopted the definition of agency that refers to taking purposeful actions to influence a state 'in line with self established objectives' (Kotan, 2010, p. 370). Some may consider Sen's notion of agency to be slightly confusing, given the multiple meanings he gave to it. Sen (1985c, 1993, 1999) explained that agency, often involved in wellbeing, means one's ambitious pursuits which may be beyond the wellbeing concept (the core goals, desires and values). He (Sen, 2004b) also used agency (in explaining the 'process aspect of freedom') to refer to autonomy as an ability to make choices and control decisions; in other words, the process of choosing (Robeyns, 2005b). However, these two notions of agency can be said to be coherent, since 'freedom' is bound to the autonomy to decide on (the process of choosing) the worthy life (self-valued pursuits) (Graf & Schweiger, 2014).

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, both limited sets of choices (opportunities available to be chosen)

and limited agency could be reasons why people live in poverty (Sen, 1985b). Choices, values, objectives (Sen, 1985c, 1993) and thus determination and control (Kotan, 2010) directly contribute to the final achievement of wellbeing (Kotan, 2010; Robeyns, 2016; Sen, 1993) and influence the opportunity aspect of freedom (Sen, 2004b, 2005). In making choices, there are preferences, desires and goals, showing people's 'real' interests (Schweiger & Graf, 2014), which determine some of the capabilities that people value. This process can be seen as people's control and self-determination in creating and achieving desired states or functionings (Kotan, 2010). Agency itself is thus a capability (Hojman & Miranda, 2018; Robeyns, 2016); that is, to choose from various opportunities to reach worthy beings and doings (Graham & Nikolova, 2015). This is why the capability approach views individuals as autonomous beings (M. Binder, 2014), who can take actions and make changes and whose values and goals can be used to evaluate his/her own achievements (Sen, 1999).

The necessity of engaging in lived experiences to warrant social critique (Schweiger & Graf, 2014) lies in the fact that agency does not entirely mirror 'real' interests, since there are 'structures of living together' making them, consciously or unconsciously, abandon and reselect some capabilities. The lived experience, referred as the thematised consciousness phenomenon in phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997), plays out as the philosophic underpinning of the capability framework in ontology and epistemology. Experiences refer to the meanings (consciousness) of the subject with its objects (realistic references), shown as everyday attitudes (Giorgi, 1997). The lived experience directs the consciousness of 'self' and 'object'. But consciousness does not just present the 'objects' neutrally; instead, it contributes to the meanings of those 'objects' (Giorgi, 1997). That is, the 'inner' and the 'outer' of 'self' are constantly interacting, which makes the consciousness of 'self' direct to the 'object' of 'self', by reflexive consciousness of 'self' (Van Manen, 2016).

This is where common-sense knowledge (or social knowledge) – socially produced, objectivated and distributed with social progress and environment (Berger, 1966) – works. Common-sense knowledge formulates and mediates one's own identity of his/her 'self' with 'the objective sense of actions', and the actions determine his/her self-understanding of the actor (self or others)

he/she performs, that is the 'role(s)' he/she plays in participating in society, the objectified self-consciousness (Berger, 1966). In the identification of 'self' and 'role(s)', people compare themselves (inner) with others and objects (outer) and modify their identification of 'self' and 'role', their sense of life and the way they live their life (Berger, 1966). Ordinary people may thus decide their 'location' in society and the corresponding attitudes they have and manners they act upon, in the light of their common-sense knowledge (Berger, 1966). For example, society tells ordinary people what poverty is; knowing their poverty or acting as a poor person, the poor may not have the unrealistic expectation to live in a fashionable suburb (Berger, 1966). Personal consciousness internalises the socially constructed, objectivated world (Berger, 1966).

Therefore, not only was the capability framework used to study the lived experience of in-work poverty in the research, but the lived experience was also used to develop the capability framework. The identity of 'self' and 'role' can also further explain the process aspect of freedom: the objects (structures of living together) influence their identity of 'self' and 'role', their identity of 'self' and 'role' influences their agency, and their agency influences the achieved wellbeing. This is just as Sen (2014) explained, when discussing the form of the sense of personal identity: people identify themselves not merely in a totally inner 'self' sense, where their personal interests work; instead, they identify themselves with the groups they belong to, or those similar to or different from them, by which their inner 'self' sense is compromised with the reality, with confinements from the collective. This is also how the adaptive preference is produced.

As for the view of 'common-sense knowledge' the lived experience engages in, it once again reinforces Deneulin (2008)'s criticism that historical influence on the 'structures of living together' and its future influence should also be considered when using the capability approach. The philosophy of lived experience can be an explanation for the opportunity aspect of freedom (why people value some capabilities or not) as well. For example, 'living in a fashionable suburb' may not be included in their capability set of 'worthy life'.

Likewise, some crucial 'subjective experiences' themselves constitute part of a capability set

for a worthy life, as Sen (1993) himself admitted. To contain some subjective feelings and experiences in a capability set is not equal to reviving utilitarianism and welfarism (which argues wellbeing should only be studied based on mental attitudes) that Sen resolutely resisted (Robeyns, 2013; Venkatapuram, 2013). Instead, it means some subjective experiences, such as happiness and desires, are valuable capabilities (Graf & Schweiger, 2014; Schweiger & Graf, 2014), as are some material aspects of wellbeing (Robeyns, 2013), like nutrition. After all, the core of a phenomenon is the nature of that experience or the very essential aspects of that experience (Van Manen, 2016): what the difference between the experience of this phenomenon and that phenomenon really is. In other words, subjective experiences constitute part of the capability list for in-work poverty; they may well comprise some of the most elemental aspects of being working poor.

The subjective wellbeing approach does not compete with other approaches to studying poverty; it is rather a complementary approach, that can incorporate or be incorporated into other approaches (Kingdon & Knight, 2006). An example is the often complex classification of social exclusion. Sen (1983) claimed 'unashamedly appearing in public' as an 'objective' indicator, the 'absolute' space of capabilities. But shame is a feeling which eventually leads to social exclusion (Hojman & Miranda, 2018), a relational dimension of social functioning (McGregor & Sumner, 2010). Social exclusion itself is not only a consequence of poverty, but is part of an intolerable life, an additional injustice (Schweiger & Graf, 2014; Sen, 2000).

Subjective experiences, as functionings (M. Binder, 2014; Kotan, 2010) or capabilities, should thus play a role in poverty assessment (Alkire, 2015b; Schweiger & Graf, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative to integrate subjective experiences and objective criteria into poverty study (Schweiger & Graf, 2014). In other words, more comprehensive dimensions and indicators should be conceived to analyse poverty and wellbeing within the capability approach. Indeed, many scholars have attempted to do so (M. Binder, 2014; Graf & Schweiger, 2013, 2014; Graham & Nikolova, 2015; Kingdon & Knight, 2006; Kotan, 2010; McGregor & Sumner, 2010; Schweiger & Graf, 2014; Shams, 2012, 2016).

Lastly, Sen's suggestion of adopting a capability approach for democracy in forming a capability list is, in fact, respectful of poor people (Schweiger & Graf, 2014). The process of public deliberation consists of judgements made by the poor (Schweiger & Graf, 2014), which inevitably involve a process of subjective evaluation. The oral/subjective information that ordinary people provide may be biased and distorted. For example, as Sen (1999) stated, when asking the poor to choose between political freedom and economic security, they would undoubtedly prefer the latter. Using 'public consensus' may raise the issues that (a) the poor, who perhaps present different values from other participants, may be less likely to participate in discussion; and (b) dissent would be masked (Alkire, 2006). This misrepresentation of the poor violates the nature of capabilities, because it does not reflect a truly democratic view of the life people have reason to value (Alkire, 2006).

Conversely, bottom-top deliberative participation can more directly filter the real values of people themselves (Comim, 2008), but it still cannot avoid the distortion caused by imbalances of power and thus increases the problem of muffling disagreement (Alkire, 2006). Likewise, PPA could not be applied at a macro level (Laderchi, 2001), as PPA is an intensive process; yet a smaller sample would not be representative of the larger population (Laderchi et al., 2003). Also, due to low education, limited information and ignorance, the local people would not have enough knowledge to perceive real poverty (Laderchi, 2001; Laderchi et al., 2003). Consequently, the problem still remains as to how to generate standardised, generalised, reliable and comparable results (C. Lu, 2010; Caizhen. Lu, 2012).

3.2.3 Research validity

'Validity' is the feature that characterises science from other kinds of knowledge (Giorgi, 1997). This subsection outlines the process and rationale by which the research derived trustworthy and valid findings of subjective data derived from a small sample of participants.

3.2.3.1 Reflexive consciousness and phenomenological reduction

Based on the above discussion, an issue for this research is how to make 'superficial', that is subjective information or everyday knowledge, become valid 'theories'. To address this issue, the research drew on phenomenology to study the structure of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology focuses on the essence of the lifeworld – immediate, pre-reflective consciousness where lived experience is embedded (Van Manen, 2016) – whereas the mathematical and physical sciences focus on the objects (matters of fact) in the natural world.

To understand the structure of lived experiences phenomenology makes use of reflexivity in two distinct ways. The first is to block out the researcher's transcendent-object cognition and presuppositions, to 'objectively' understand the pure phenomenon (Husserl, 1990; Tuffour, 2017) – the research subject's lived experience. This requires the researcher to act as 'a fly on the wall' (Herr & Anderson, 2019), to avoid polluting the data. However, that state is very hard to attain. Although controlling presuppositions as maximally as possible, the observer needs focus in their observation, which requires them to be equipped with certain knowledge. This is why either a general principle or background knowledge is needed, even in critical thinking (Ennis, 1989, 1990; McPeck, 1990). Otherwise, it risks the danger of 'ineffective' observation.

As to data pollution, the research activity itself would influence the action it plans to research, such that what researchers observed is actually the situation that has already been contaminated (Feng, 2001). This is why Buford Helmholtz Junker (1960) argued that avoiding data pollution is more 'imaginary' than 'possible', unless research is carried out in the laboratory situation. Some feminist methodologies thus argue that partial truth is more reliable and accept multi-version truth (DeVault, 1996).

Accordingly, in this research, subjective or biased information was accepted as a valid point of view. The job of qualitative research is in fact not to judge whether information provided by the subjects is 'factual' or 'made up'. And thus, even with the added researcher's 'prejudice' in understanding a phenomenon, subjective data provides alternative interpretations that should not

be criticised as non-scientific (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020). Therefore, while the research followed a Husserlian approach – by which the researcher tried to minimise the influence of personal beliefs on their interpretation of the experiences of the phenomenon-relevant people (Mapp, 2008), the analysis was ineluctably involved in the researcher's subjectivity. This bias, however, can be reduced by revealing the researcher's hidden prejudices and challenging them with other possibilities (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020).

The second meaning of reflexivity is reflecting experiences and the structures behind them. Michael Burawoy (1998)'s four procedures of reflexive science provides a mode to understand how information becomes knowledge through reflexivity. Similarly, using Pierre Bourdieu's framework, Fries (2009) proposed to first use quantitative methods to understand objective social structural factors, to then use qualitative methods to explore subjective nuances (Fries, 2009). In such a way, objectivity and subjectivity, as well as qualitative and quantitative methods, can be combined in understanding some issues. Accordingly, the subjective behaviour of research subjects, even if biased, is valuable as a focus of the research, as this behaviour would be a result, and/or a driving force, of objective social structure (Fries, 2009). In other words, it is the seemingly subjective narratives that map the influences of objective society (Fries, 2009). This approach breaks the epistemological dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism, enabling an exploration of the interplay between objective social structure and subjective agency/behaviour, and to connect individualistic understandings with common sense (Fries, 2009). In this regard, measuring whether or not a research study is 'objective' is not by 'procedures that assure an accurate mapping of the world', as in positivism or quantitative research value, but by 'the growth of knowledge' (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5).

Although the sequencing of quantitative to qualitative approaches in lived experience research as a way to produce reliable knowledge and explanation may be different from Burawoy's reflexive sociology, their logic is the same. The lived experience in its most basic form is the awareness of the system of 'self' and 'other' (Giorgi, 1997). Following Husserl (1990)'s phenomenology, the essential feature of consciousness is always intentionality; that is,

consciousness is always directed towards the object that sometimes goes beyond it (Berger, 1966; Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 2016)³⁰. To apprehend the subject-object relationship is what phenomenology works for, through 'phenomenological reduction'.

The phenomenological reduction investigates the motivations behind one's consciousness to describe what something is (Giorgi, 1997). Due to its aim of 'reduction', phenomenological descriptions work not solely to describe a phenomenon (Husserlian phenomenology); phenomenology also goes to the interpretation and construction of that phenomenon (hermeneutic phenomenology) (Giorgi, 1997). Consciousness is what will be 'understood', the common-sense knowledge and the 'self'-identity is where the 'deeper understanding' of consciousness can be excavated, and the wider, outside world with objects (structures) is what the 'deeper understanding of common-sense knowledge' can be further deepened to understand. By collecting the experiences of those who experience a phenomenon, the philosophic way of 'reduction' (possibly empirical or fictive) becomes as natural as the reality is (Giorgi, 1997). Expecting to really reveal the experiences from the objects, phenomenological research accepts all attitudes including bias, distortion, prejudices (Giorgi, 1997) and adaptive preferences (Van Manen, 2016).

Lived experience research seeks to establish the relation between subjective and objective, micro and macro world. In the process of interpreting phenomena and meanings of lifeworld (Van Manen, 2016) beyond the 'descriptions' of lived experience, the focus turns to how this lived experience shapes and is shaped by the outside, objective world. What we hope to know through experiences is the 'structures' of those experiences, the nature of those experiences (Van Manen, 2016). By looking at various layers of experiences and their corresponding structures, we look at the 'common intentional character of all consciousness' (Berger, 1966, p. 35). Those structures are also called themes or thematical meanings, formed by conceptually clarifying these meanings (Van Manen, 2016). The phenomenological theme is to the lived experience as knots are to webs (Van

³⁰ It does not ignore the dispute about the non-existence of the object the consciousness casts or the consciousness independent of the object (like intuition) (Husserl, 1990). However, this is not the focus of the research.

Manen, 2016). To reflect on the lived experience is actually to reflect on the structures and themes embodied in that experience (Van Manen, 2016). Therefore, phenomenological descriptions theoretically elucidate the meanings from systematically and/or analytically categorised with themes, collected by lived experience (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 2016). Everyday knowledge thus becomes theoretical knowledge.

3.2.3.2 Typical and universal

The thematised consciousness phenomenon is the total lived experience belonging to a single person (Giorgi, 1997). To form a capability list that people have reason to value, and to investigate the lived experiences, requires an in-depth interview (Van Manen, 2016). This is a time-consuming process that produces a large amount of data for every individual interviewed, so is only manageable with a relatively small sample of participants (Van Manen, 2016). However, drawing on a small group of participants when researching capabilities presents various risks, such as when every participant forms/votes a 'biased' capability list, or when every person draws a 'distorted' picture of in-work poverty. Although acknowledging that methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative and of contextual and non-contextual data (Chambers, 2007) can address the issue of scepticism and trustworthiness from a small-sized sample, qualitative research by itself can lead to trustworthy findings.

Applying objective 'scientific research' criteria to qualitative research, particularly in relatively small-sized samples, is unfair. In social science, when aiming to discover universal laws, the criteria to evaluate quantitative/positivistic research are 'validity, reliability and objectivity' (O'Byrne, 2007, p. 1383). But no method can fully meet positivistic principles, even with the best survey (Burawoy, 1998). Strictly speaking, well-developed, trustworthy and valid qualitative research does not necessarily have to meet the criteria of 'good' quantitative research. Instead, the criteria of quantitative research should be translated into a qualitative context (Hannes, 2011).

Without denying that some types of qualitative research, such as phenomenology (lived

experience with the researcher's experience) may not follow the below criteria, Karin Hannes (2011), drawing on Lincoln and Guba's work, put forward the following criteria for evaluating qualitative research: 'credibility' (the representation of the data keeps real from participants and findings are true); 'transferability' (the findings can be used in another context); 'dependability' (the research process is logical, visible and recorded well); and 'confirmability' (the findings can be re-examined and confirmed by the data).

To reiterate the problem of standardisation, generalisation, reliability and comparability again, as O'Byrne (2007, p. 1387) argued when discussing positivism, critical and postmodern approaches to the ethnography studies, every result produced by different methods is 'valid, correct, and true for the respondents, the researcher(s) and the cultures within which the project was constructed and executed'. It is not convincing that one result is true or better, while others are misleading or worse (O'Byrne, 2007).

Small-scale sample research can be said to comply with the credibility, dependability and confirmability criteria, but it must still tackle the issue of transferability. This directs us to the issue of how situational knowledge can be generalised into 'scientific' knowledge. An extreme example of small-size sample research is the case study that only studies a single case. Its importance lies in collecting rich information about a setting and/or helping establish hypotheses (Gibbs et al., 2007). And in the following research, the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998) – involving more cases – may be used to test and revise the former conclusion, by constantly comparing different or similar cases and/or to suit broader contexts, until generating the generalisable findings (Gibbs et al., 2007).

Using the logic of extended cases, reflexive sociology also produces 'valid knowledge'. That is, the researcher firstly sets a single case to collect contextual knowledge, then aggregates them into social processes of a certain space and time, and locates the wider external structures (the impacts from other social processes), before reconstructing prior theory (the former three procedures) from one generality to another and seeking refutations and anomalies to develop existing theory (Burawoy, 1998). Similarly, in terms of the lived experience research, the consciousness from

different objects constitutes the different aspects of the reality (Berger, 1966). On the one hand, those differences are complementary to draw a fuller picture of a phenomenon. On the other hand, the 'shared typical' among different research subjects generates 'intersubjectivity', by which individual lived experience becomes the 'structure' lived experience (Berger, 1966; Mgintosh & Wright, 2019). When that shared experience is objectively reiterated, it becomes the social generation (Berger, 1966). The knowledge of a certain phenomenon, its nature, is thus 'universal'.

The research thus followed this model of data aggregation, whereby data collected from groups (even with a small size) was used as a measure to minimise information distortion from an individual person. If the majority reports the same suffering, or a phenomenon is related to certain groups in the society, then it is reasonable to believe some objective factors function poorly (Schweiger & Graf, 2014). And thus, with information reaching saturation from the collective level³¹, a contextual knowledge from a single person goes to a more general one from a group of people. Without group discussion and 'trade-off' in advance, even if a 'biased' capability list is produced by brainstorm or voting (Robeyns, 2006) and/or every participant in a group with certain features draws a similar 'distorted' picture, there is reason to believe that it is a fact that this group of people live in this way and so there must be objective factors making them live in this way.

3.3 Research design

Given the justification of the combination of the capability approach and subjectivity, this section details how this research was conducted. After receiving ethics clearance from the University of Sydney's Human Ethics Committee (Appendix 1), the main fieldwork and data collection were carried out in Ya'an, a prefectural-level city of Sichuan province, between January and May of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic prolonged the data collection period and prevented the researcher from

³¹ That means, similar data from different informants appear repeatedly, signalling that the data collection can end.

carrying out fieldwork in multiple cities for comparison. Supplemental data (two follow-up interviews while drafting the thesis) was collected between July and September 2020.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data about the lived experience of precarious work and in-work poverty from 46 participants. A separate set of data on published policies and regulations, as well as specific information and statistics regarding local *dibao* and Public Welfare Job (PWJ) policies and their implementation was gathered through local governmental websites, random visits to printed bulletins in three communities, and was also requested from community officials in two of those communities. The data was analysed through inductive coding and thematic analysis. A detailed outline of the procedures will be presented in the following subsections.

3.3.1 Research setting

To reiterate, given the exploratory nature of the research, it did not seek to derive representative or generalisable findings that are more typical of quantitative research. The field research was carried out in Ya'an city in Sichuan province, which is located in western China, the least developed region in the country. While not an economically poor province, Sichuan's economy can be said to mirror China's national economy with its regional inequalities. According to 2019 official statistics (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020), the Gross Regional Product (GRP) of its provincial capital, Chengdu, accounted for around 37 per cent of the provincial GRP, far more than that of other cities in this province. Chengdu is to Sichuan province what Beijing, Shanghai, and the developed eastern coastal areas are to China. Fifteen of 21 cities in Sichuan had a middle-range GRP – ranging from 2 per cent to 6 per cent of provincial GRP (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020), which can also be said to represent the economic ranking of the central region of China. Mirroring the economic conditions of China's most underdeveloped areas, the remaining five cities of Sichuan province were the most underdeveloped, each with a GRP of no more than 2 per cent of the provincial GRP.

One of these five less developed cities, Ya'an, was selected for carrying out the empirical

work of this study. Like most cities in western China, Ya'an was in Tier 5 of the city classification in 2019 (YiMagazine, 2019)³², and among the poorest in terms of economic indicator (GRP) in the province. The size of its GRP (72.397 billion CNY) ranked at 19³³ among all 21 cities in Sichuan province, although achieved a higher rank (9th) of average per capita GRP (46,984 CNY) with a small population (1.541 million) in its jurisdiction (15,046 km²) (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020). Its urbanisation rate (48.37 per cent) was lower than the average provincial figure (53.79 per cent), ranked at 12th (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020). In terms of employment and wages in Ya'an, whereas the registered unemployment rate stood at 3.8 per cent (higher than the provincial figure of 3.3 per cent), 1.0406 million people were employed, primarily in primary industry (48.8 per cent), then tertiary industry (33 per cent), and lastly secondary industry (22.2 per cent) (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020). In 2019, the annual average wage of Ya'an (before taxes and social insurances) was 62,197 CNY, but its urban average disposable income was merely 35,043 CNY (SBS & NBSSOS, 2020).

3.3.2 Sampling strategies and recruitment

Undertaking lived experience research – that is, to research those who have experienced certain phenomenon/phenomena – requires purposive sampling (Mapp, 2008). However, without in-work poverty (capability deprivation) line that can be used to identify the working poor, the sampling criteria was extended to include those who have experienced precarious employment, including any of the following criteria: (a) having a low wage (less than 60 per cent of local average wage, following the OECD standard mentioned in Chapter 2), (b) having insufficient social security (not enrolled in any or only some of the social insurance programmes that they have eligibility to enrol in), (c) experiencing frequent or long periods of unemployment, and (d) experiencing high job insecurity (for

³² There is no official city classification in terms of city tiers in China. Some media and commercial organisations published their city tiers, although it seems informal and limited in terms of ranking indicators. For the cited publication, the Tier classification was based on business, transportation, the activity of residents, the diversity of living style, and future city development.

³³ The 20th and 21st places were the two Autonomous Prefectures of the Minority.

example, not having a formal employment contract, being employed on a casual or temporary basis and so on). Those aged below 18 and students on campus were excluded.

Passive snowball sampling was adopted, because precarious workers were scattered all over the city, hence it was hard to formally contact them through specific organisations. Instead, the researcher (a Ya'an local) used her personal contacts, who due to their work and personal connections could introduce potential participants. The contact persons were provided with the participant information statement (PIS) in advance, which described and explained the key information of the research. The contacts then gave the PIS to potential participants, in order for them to decide whether or not to take part in the study. To minimise stress or anxiety during the interviews, participants decided when and where they would like to be interviewed. The researcher repeated the PIS before interviews began, to make sure participants were aware of critical information. Interested participants were also allowed to invite other eligible respondents to participate in the study.

In line with phenomenological research tradition – a small sample of in-depth interviews examining the lived experience (Mapp, 2008) – the researcher recruited 46 participants. They included two couples – S-5 and O-1 (the code rule is explained in Section 3.3.4). A couple are viewed as one participant, and for distinguishing purposes, they are labelled as, for example, S-5 (male) and S-5 (female). Therefore, the total sample size was 48 people, including 23 females and 25 males. At the time of interviews, while five participants were below age 30 and five were between 31 and 40, the majority (37 out of 48 interviewees) were middle-aged (aged 41-60), with one aged 61. All participants had experience of precarious employment. Although some held rural *hukou*, they worked or lived in the city while being interviewed.

Following the relevant literature on who constitutes the Chinese precariat (Chapter 2), with overlaps, they were classified into five job groups: the laid-offs or low-waged formal workers in the State-Owned Enterprise (SOE); contract workers with triangulated employment relationship; other casual workers and the self-employed; (rural) migrant workers; and welfare recipients.

3.3.3 Data collection

Based on the 'discovery orientation' of phenomenology, data for the lived experiences was collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews. Each interview, conducted in Chinese, lasted about 45-90 minutes. Four main themes were covered: job and employment (such as their employment history, their favourite jobs and their workplace relationship); family (such as their family size, the interaction between the extended and nuclear family, and their preference for family, work and other activities); social assistance (such as their attitudes towards applying for social assistance and the welfare recipients, their preference for *dibao* and PWJ, and how they feel about social assistance in their poverty alleviation, if applicable); and agency (such as their dreams and ideal lifestyles, how they control the negative environment, and whether or not they have plans in advance) (see Appendix 2).

In addition, participants' opinions about wellbeing were collected, by asking what they consider to be 'a minimum acceptable and meaningful life'. Exercising Sen's public reasoning requires transparency and public scrutiny (Alkire, 2006). Participants were asked to develop a list of living necessities, in an attempt to apply public reasoning to the capability list. They were asked to think about what is necessary for their most basic living first. Given that local people may not have enough knowledge to perceive real poverty (Laderchi, 2001; Laderchi et al., 2003) and to prevent the commonly held belief that poverty is lack of money, the researcher then showed a pre-prepared tentative capability list (4 dimensions, including 11 capabilities consisting of 41 indicators) drawn primarily from the literature (Appendix 3). The researcher asked participants to select wellbeing indicators that they considered critical for living a minimum meaningful life and to rank them, giving reasons for doing so.

The tentative capability list was translated into Chinese (paraphrased in a way that a lay person in China could understand, instead of a literal translation) by the researcher rather than a professional translator, because it would be the researcher who interpreted the indicators to the

participants in the fieldwork. Before conducting fieldwork, the tentative capability list was tested using acquaintances of the researcher (Chinese and educated to at least middle school). The researcher knew the real-life situation of these acquaintances, so could judge to what extent the tentative list made sense and reflected their real life.

Since the participants eventually did not expand on the list, the tentative capability list was used as the capability deprivation line, to differentiate between the working poor and precarious workers, as well as to evaluate whether or not precarious workers live in poverty (capability deprivation). And due to participants' significant irrationality (for example, some viewed the indicator of 'longevity with normal length' as unimportant), the researcher did not adopt the weight participants assigned, but allocated equal weight among indicators, following the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (Alkire & Santos, 2010).

After indicator selection and rank, participants were asked to self-evaluate their wellbeing indicator obtainment based on the tentative capability list, separate from the researcher's evaluation. However, they showed inconsistencies between their cognition and evaluation. For example, some thought they did not have the 'basic income' (and sometimes they thought they had wealth above the basic level), but in fact their average household income exceeded the low-income family standard. Therefore, their self-evaluation of their wellbeing was not used as the real outcome of their wellbeing, but as data for analysing their lived experience of precarity and their agency, where their desires and beliefs can be extracted from their preference (Nussbaum, 2000). For the evaluation of their wellbeing, this research follows MPI (Alkire & Santos, 2010) to set 30 per cent as the cut-off point of overall capability deprivation. That is, a participant is identified as deprived if he/she suffers from deprivations in at least 30 per cent of capabilities/functionings. This aggregation rule (Appendix 3) was also tested using the acquaintance data and confirmed as acceptably accurate.

All the interviews were recorded, either by auto-recording (smartphone) when the participant allowed or by fieldnotes (with another research assistant, to prevent misunderstanding and missing important information; but due to COVID-19 and other restrictions that caused the

research assistant to be absent, two fieldnotes were recorded by the researcher only).

A separate set of data about the local *dibao* and PWJ policies and their implementation was collected from the community and from published official government documents on the Internet. Based on the literature (Chapters 1 and 2), *dibao* and PWJ are managed at the community level. The researcher randomly visited three community service centres, where printed bulletins publicly display *dibao* information, and consulted (not formally interviewed) two community officials about the implementation of the two programmes (the researcher did not hide her purpose of researching the policies). Official documents and statistical information on the programmes were also searched on the Internet.

3.3.4 Data coding and analysis

The data analysis – inductive and deductive thematic analysis (W. Xu & Zammit, 2020) – was done throughout the investigation. The themes and codes were developed by the researcher from the data (inductive coding) and themes (deductive coding), informed by the research’s conceptual framework. The participants were coded by their job groups to protect their privacy, so that their personal information was non-identifiable: S for those with SOE experiences; P for those with PWJ experiences; M for those with migrant work experiences; T for those with triangulated employment relationship; and O for other casual workers and the self-employed. Then, combined with field notes, the data was integrated for recording comprehensive information.

After each interview, an initial identification of themes and codes was done, for the purpose of adjusting the focus and the method of asking questions in following interviews. After the fieldwork ended, the themes were identified formally from the transcripts: the interview auto-recordings were transcribed in full into Chinese; only certain relevant sections from the transcripts were translated into English and reproduced in this thesis. NVivo software was used in data analysis, but the themes and codes were identified by the researcher.

After the analysis, the results from this research were compared with results from other

studies, both to evaluate the study and provide an explanation as to consistent and inconsistent results.

Chapter 4 : Precarious Employment and Precarious Life³⁴

Labour market precariousness permeates the everyday life of precarious workers. This is the reason behind Guy Standing (2011a)'s argument that precarious employment is dangerous, as it creates insecurity, time pressure, and affected thinking and emotion, which are key components of wellbeing. In his work, Standing (2011a, p. 12) discussed seven kinds of security under industrial citizenship in the labour market: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security (where the working hours issue is classified), skill reproduction security, income security and representation security. Except for representation security, the remaining six forms of security can be seen as eventually linked to job remuneration. In this regard, the literature in different contexts has unanimously argued that low wages are linked to low labour attachment (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Hick & Lanau, 2018; Swaffield et al., 2018) rooted in the conflicts between family-work responsibilities (Baker, 2009; Bárcena-Martín & Moro-Egido, 2013; Hick & Lanau, 2018). The field research similarly revealed that most participants' job rewards were low, however, most tended to do overwork (Buchanan et al., 2013; J. Yao, 2009, 2016) which restricted their spare time. In this chapter, the focus will be on the relationship between other dimensions of wellbeing and the characteristics of precarious employment presented by participants, which jeopardises the life of precarious workers.

In the Chinese context, work intensity – overtime work with few holidays and a physically demanding job – has been normalised. This is as much the case for traditional rural migrant workers (Guan, 2008), as it is in the Internet industry's 'nine-nine-six' work model³⁵. In this study, 36 out of 46 participants had at least once experienced long-work hours. Except for welfare recipients and those working in the formal sector, most participants worked between 9 to 10 hours a day, sometimes even longer, usually with only two to three unpaid days off a month (as shown by seven participants) or no days off at all (as shown by four participants). As a result of the normalisation of

³⁴ Here and in the following chapters where the results are elaborated, some of the literature that corroborates this research's results is also referred.

³⁵ Working from 9am to 9pm (including the mealtime, thus about 10 hours per day) and six days a week.

overwork, when participants were asked to assign a weighting to a list of employment and wellbeing indicators, the average weight they assigned to the indicator of 'normal working time' (8 hours/day less than 44 hours/week, required by Labour Law) was only 5.98 out of 10, ranked 36th place among 41 indicators. Whether doing migrant work or local jobs, the work carried out by participants was generally physically demanding. For example, some of the more common and demanding jobs included waiters/waitresses, kitchen helpers and chefs, plumber and electrician, coalmining and construction workers, and other service jobs such as masseurs, nannies, beauty salon personnel, and cleaning staff. Four participants directly mentioned feeling exhausted after work.

Migrant and commute workers were also involved in spatial mobility. Among the households of participants, 47.83 per cent had at least one member with experience of migrating for work. The majority had engaged in short-distance interprovincial migration and/or short-term migration with intervals of several years. Some also experienced commute work (within the county/district, living in an urban area while working remotely in a mountainous area, or vice versa) in both the private sector and in state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

Compared to their work effort, remuneration for precarious workers was low. Migrant work could in some instances bring slightly higher wage rates than Ya'an's average annual wage (62,197 CNY in 2019). For example, based on participants' feedback, a project-based job usually paid 200-300 CNY a day, and senior skilled workers could earn more than 7,000 CNY per month. By contrast in local wage levels, the majority of respondents reported earning less than that. Coalmine workers, truck drivers and senior chefs had a monthly wage of around 4,000-5,000 CNY, but most participants reported wage levels of only 2,000-3,000 CNY per month (ten participants) or equal to the statutory minimum wage standard of 1,650 CNY per month (five participants), as was the case with the twelve participants doing Public Welfare Jobs (PWJ). Respondents highly valued wage (8.55 points, ranked at 9th place) when ranking the indicators (except for 8 participants who were jobless during the interviews), however, a high number of them (18 out of 46 participants) had suffered from wage payment delays and/or wage deductions. The high value placed on earnings coupled with low labour

rewards can help explain the low weight assigned to the 'normal working hours' indicator. Participants' priority was on earnings (to support living), and thus any other consideration (such as work intensity) was secondary. Normal working hours were 'voluntarily' renounced by workers, as they expected to work longer hours in order to make ends meet.

Having no contract or only an informally set out (spoken contract) was most common in the private sector. Some project-based jobs offering short-term employment did not offer workers a contract, but instead replaced the contract with a 'consent form' (M-3). Individual (private) employers (*getihu* 个体户) also recruited employees without contracts. Since they offered no contracts to these workers, most employers also did not contribute to social insurances premiums for their workers. The relevant informants only made the minimum self-funded social insurance contribution, or no contribution at all.

The remaining indicators within the capability of 'employment' were also devalued by participants. Although 'working environment' and 'good relationship in the workplace' received higher ranks because they were related to physical safety and emotion/working outcomes respectively, 'equal right with others in work', 'equal employment rights', 'interesting work' and 'upward job mobility' were underappreciated. However, the reality was that they had no options for these indicators. 'Equal job, equal pay' and 'equal employment rights' were unregulated, even in the formal sectors. The jobs they could find were low-end, hard or repetitive jobs. Employers, particularly in small-scale businesses, did not set a job ladder system. Given the main purpose for taking a job – earning money – and the nonexistence of the indicators in practice, they thought most indicators (including other capabilities out of employment) were 'dispensable'.

The characteristics of precarious employment strongly influence all dimensions of wellbeing. The chapter argues work is the most basic variable underpinning the attainment of a minimally acceptable life; hence the extent of job stability and security determines the level of capability deprivation in a household. Compared to formal workers, precarious workers are more likely to fall into in-work poverty. For example, 76 per cent of participants suffered from functioning deprivation

(the actual outcome of wellbeing). Aside from the real options under the responsibility-sensitive principle that separates choice from constraints, 65 per cent were still trapped in capability deprivation (feasible opportunity to obtain wellbeing). Even in a crisis like COVID-19, compared with the more formal counterpart, they encountered higher job loss without any institutional response for risk-sharing. These empirical findings also suggest a growing market doctrine whereby a decreasing negotiation power with little collective strength normalises labour market deprivation – the precariat tend to comply with or even voluntarily aggravate labour market deprivations, such as overwork and low pay, because most would want to hold the job and earn more money.

The following section discusses how the characteristics of precarious employment influence other aspects of life, and how labour market rules restrict precarious workers' employment choices in the labour market, precluding them from achieving various capabilities necessary for a minimum acceptable life. The second section investigates precarious workers' ability to navigate risk during the COVID-19 crisis, by comparing market events and policy reaction between workers with different levels of formality in employment. The last section concludes this chapter with a brief discussion on precarious workers' negotiation power with respect to labour market deprivations.

4.1 Experiences of deprivation among precarious workers

Work spreads its influence outside the workplace (Kalleberg, 2009). Even if we accept the lack of statistical significance of the small sample, the high incidence rate of functioning deprivation and capability deprivation indicates a strong relationship between precarious work and in-work poverty. This section highlights two points: firstly, precarious work is significantly associated with functioning deprivations, due to the characteristics of precariousness; secondly, functioning deprivations are consistent with capability deprivation, because the nature of the free job market and the demand for sustainable livelihood restrict workers real options, although on the surface they can enjoy 'freedom'.

4.1.1 Functioning deprivations and precarious work: work intensity, wages and spatial mobility

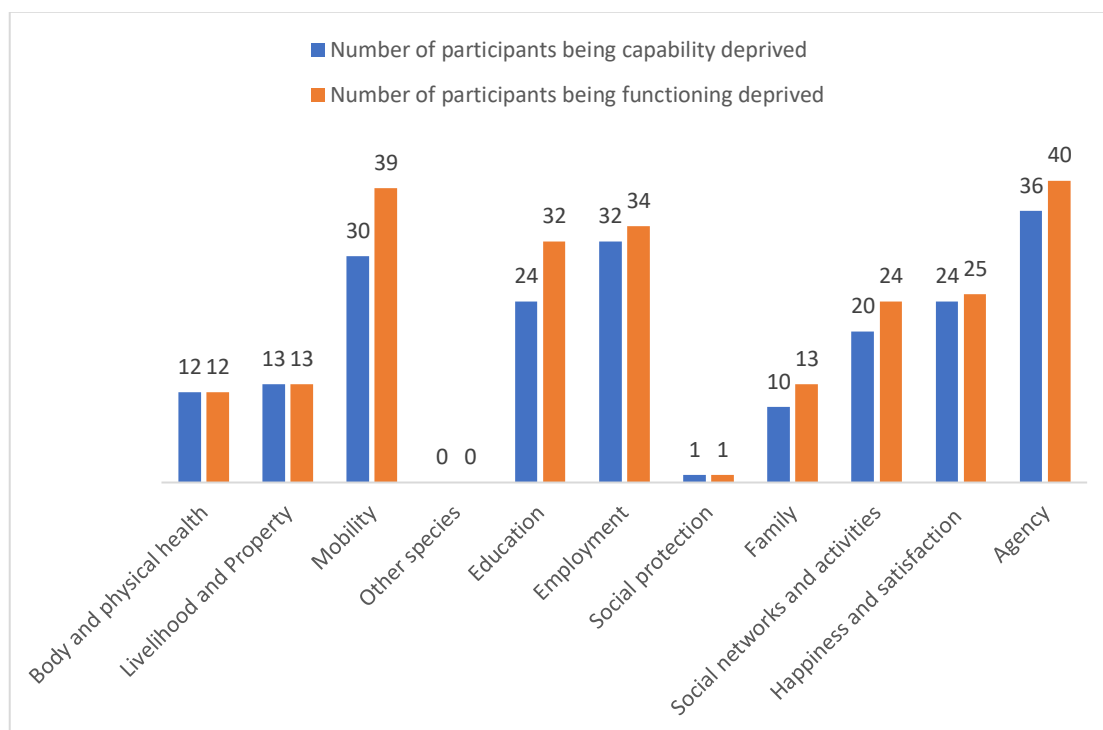
The study found that, in most cases, participants were deprived in wellbeing indicators. Except for the indicator of 'other species', one of the Ten Central Capabilities used by Nussbaum (2000), all functioning indicators were deprived, ranked as agency, employment, mobility, happiness and satisfaction, education, social participation, livelihood and property, health, family and social protection (see Figure 4.1). These indicators are reciprocal causations that can be regarded as both conversion factors and consequences. Here, the focus is on employment as a conversion factor to other consequences.

The thesis presents the consequences of employment, along with other conversion factors: on subjective wellbeing and agency wellbeing in Chapter 8, on social protection in Chapter 7, and on social participation in Chapter 6. Among the remaining indicators in the dimensions of material and rational wellbeing, although excessive labour may increase physical and psychological health problems (Standing, 2011a) – as in S-8's self-diagnosis – the direct relationship between employment and health is hard to evaluate accurately, because of insufficient medical evidence. So too the direct relationship between employment and education, because the main reason for low education was not work-for-money, but lack of education awareness (see Chapter 5), although economic purpose also played a role. Therefore, the discussion will be around how precarious employment influences mobility, livelihood and property, as well as family.

Events in the labour market all contribute to the vicious circle of an 'unacceptable' life. The low rewards impose huge pressure on the unstable livelihood for a household. As family wealth is limited, precarious workers tend to invest more time to earn money. For example, P-12 had part-time jobs in the early mornings and at weekends, as was the case for T-5 who undertook three jobs simultaneously. Their mobility was thus limited, because of insufficient money and time. In this situation, family interaction and the happiness of family life is weakened, making a family fragile or delaying a relationship.

Figure 4.1

Number of participants experiencing deprivation³⁶



4.1.1.1 Livelihood and low wage rates

Among all dimensions, material wellbeing (primarily measured by income) is an absolute necessity for one's comprehensive wellbeing (see Chapter 2). According to participants, material wellbeing can be obtained from a well-paid job or from other means, such as a better-off origin family or spouse or a reasonable pension. Thanks to having enough family wealth, ten participants were excluded from capability deprivation, though they suffered from functioning deprivation. Nevertheless, although the majority had self-sufficient earnings from their precarious job, the in-work economic poverty rate was 28.26 per cent. The thirteen participants' households (once) could not even obtain the indicator of 'basic livelihood and property' (below the official low-income family standard in Ya'an, see Chapter 7). Given that the economic poverty suffered by four participants was

³⁶ For the detailed description of these capabilities/functionings, please refer to Appendix 3

related to COVID-19 (see Section 4.2), this sub-section uses the remaining nine cases with the ratio of 'dependents to earners', to demonstrate the association between low wage, family labour intensity and household consumers, and income poverty. Except for S-8 and P-9 who had unusual circumstances of family labour participation, the other cases suggested that low wage rate determines a household's economic impoverishment.

S-8 only needed to support himself, since he was divorced and childless. He was an unemployed *neitui*³⁷ worker (due to severe diabetes) from a bankrupted SOE, with an allowance of 1,000 CNY per month. He undertook unpaid childcare for his brother's family in their migrant city. S-8 did not need to cover food and housing costs, and his clothes were provided by his siblings, so he had almost no expenditures except for his medicine. By contrast, the dependents-to-earners ratio of P-9 was the highest to 2. P-9 had an extended family of six members (including a baby) living together in a 90 square metre apartment. Her father-in-law had a pension of 2,000 CNY per month, which only covered his health expenditures (cerebral infarction); her husband could earn, with fluctuations, more than 4,000 CNY per month before taxes³⁸; and her PWJ paid her 1,200 CNY per month after taxes. Their son was unemployed and was learning a skill, and their daughter-in-law was also unemployed due to having to provide childcare.

P-2, P-4, P-7 and T-3 had a dependents-to-earners ratio of 1. P-2, P-4 and P-7 all had a PWJ with a monthly wage of about 1,300 CNY after taxes. P-2 rented housing with her second husband (unemployed) without household appliances. P-7 (divorced) and her second child (schooling) lived in an old apartment with no bathroom, provided by her ex-mother-in-law. Before P-4's husband did migrant work, he had a monthly wage of 3,000 CNY before taxes. P-4's younger child was a junior school student, whereas the older child obtained free higher education and did casual part-time work that saved part of her education and living costs. Before T-3 retired, she could only earn less

³⁷ *Neitui* (内退) is similar to early retirement (government pays the pension), usually due to poor health condition that precludes the person from working. *Neitui* workers can enjoy the basic living allowance provided by the employer.

³⁸ Before-tax wage means wage before statutory social insurance contribution; after-tax wage means the wage after statutory social insurance contribution is deducted.

than monthly 2,000 CNY, to support her unpensioned father and herself.

The dependents-to-earners ratio of P-10 and T-1 was 0.5. The T-1 couple, who lived in low-rent housing, both had low after-tax monthly wages – she earned 1,500 CNY as a cleaner and her husband 1,200 CNY from a PWJ. This was also the case for the P-3 couple, both of whom had low earnings of just over 1,000 CNY per month each (it was not stated whether this sum was before or after taxes).

The gaps in wage rates among occupations were substantial. The cases show the factor of low wage rate to economic in-work poverty (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011) outnumbered the low earnings from reduced working intensity (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Hick & Lanau, 2018; Swaffield et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the co-occurring factor of household composition and consumption (Baker, 2009; Cheung & Chou, 2016; Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011) was unchallenged. As mentioned before, the common wage level of precarious jobs was 2,000-3,000 CNY per month before taxes. In contrast, based on the participants reported expenses on basic food, clothes, utility, telephone and transportation bills for a family of three cost about 2,000 CNY per month, excluding any property expenses (e.g. mortgage payments). Low-wage families, especially those with a larger dependents-to-earners ratio, did not have a way out of material deprivation. As wage increases could not catch up with increases in living costs (T-9), the statutory minimum wage standard was too low, and thus insufficient in alleviating in-work poverty (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Cooke & Lawton, 2008).

4.1.1.2 Limited mobility, low wage and excessive working hours

The range of mobility among participants was somewhat hard to definite, as participants tended to move for both economic and non-economic purposes. The former involved moving in order to find a job, for example, by doing migrant work or commuting to work. The latter included visiting relatives/friends, touring and other leisure activities. Mobility with an economic purpose was necessary to make a living, although it did involve financial strain (M-3). Mobility for a non-economic

purpose rarely occurred for participants. Even without the effects of COVID-19, insufficient money and time were the two main reasons for this lack of non-economic mobility, especially due to individual participant's consideration of the family economic circumstances.

Although participants weighted mobility (marked 7.70 points, ranked 19th place), they disvalued leisure (marked 5.33 points, ranked 38th place). Among those who did travel on a more regular basis, S-5's travels were linked to her travel agency job; and only T-6 and T-8, both younger, mentioned having regular travel as a pastime. It should be mentioned that T-8 had a better-off family background. And while T-6's income was not as high as T-8, T-6 would borrow to be able to travel, because for her travel allowed her to expand her horizons.

By comparison, time and income from work, along with that for the family, limited mobility for the majority, especially long-term and long-distance travel. For example, when P-8 was asked if his lack of travel was because he did not like to travel, he responded: 'not [dislike]. For one, it is because I worked here, limited [by the working hours]. Secondly, my child. I must keep her company'³⁹. Limited mobility due to low pay was also confirmed by T-7, who thought his wage of 2,100 CNY could only allow for them to 'move freely' within Sichuan province. This was also the case for P-11, who travelled furthest to Chongqing city but thought, even with enough time, it was too early for him to tour due to their low income. This was also why P-4, P-6 and S-9 never travelled for leisure, even within Ya'an. Due to low-paid work, T-1 could not even afford to visit her parents in her hometown. When being asked about employer-provided welfare (his boss provided paid travel) and leisure activities, M-6 responded: 'travel is dispensable, because you spend money when you go out [travel] ... If he [his boss] could convert [providing unpaid] travel into giving the money to me, I think I would [still] choose not to travel'.

These cases illustrate the leisure/time squeeze experienced by precarious workers due to their excessive work hours⁴⁰ (Standing, 2011a). Compounded by insufficient income (and family care,

³⁹ The family factor was also why O-5 did not travel within 5 years.

⁴⁰ Most participants judged that they obtained the indicator of 'leisure', primarily because their demands on leisure were minor.

see Chapter 5 for details), this restricted their mobility. Although only a few participants were holding concurrent jobs, as mentioned before, the rest with only one job still experienced excessive labour and low returns. As time and money are essential for mobility, it is easy to understand why the 39 participants were deprived of this capability.

4.1.1.3 Precarious household, intensified work, spatial distance and socio-economic position

Precarious workers are usually part of 'precarious' households (Lain et al., 2020), and as one study from Canada showed, uncertainty in employment tends to translate into negative household wellbeing, including delayed marriage and low fertility (Lewchuk et al., 2016; Lewchuk & Laflèche, 2017). This adverse impact was also observed in the field research. This sub-section discusses the prevalence of unstable/delayed relationships and family reproduction linked to work intensity, spatial mobility, and high economic uncertainty among low social strata workers.

4.1.1.3.1 Fragile marriage and interactions within households

The field research found that fragile households are common. The divorce rate among participants was much higher (32.6 per cent) than the national average, which increased from 0.28 per cent in 2015 to 0.34 per cent in 2019 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2019). Looking at intra-household interaction with precarious employment, it was found that work intensification, high mobility and income variability brought out uncertainty within the family.

Working hours directly affect how people schedule their daily lives (Fuwa, 2014). Relatedly, this research found that broken marriages were associated with couples where both parents did precarious work. Noticeably, those participants who had a spouse in formal or more permanent employment (as shown by ten participants) were not divorced. The remaining 63 per cent of participants in a first marriage were the families of dual precarious workers or single breadwinners. If both spouses have abnormal working hours and physically demanding jobs, the time and energy available for family interaction are reduced. For instance, T-9, whose working shift was opposite to

that of his wife (also triangulated employment) and daughter (a primary school student), reported this situation. More work-family conflict disrupts the happiness in marriage (Lain et al., 2020). Even for single breadwinner families, long work hours and the related exhaustion resulted in less frequent intra-household interactions, as well as less satisfying family lives.

Marital instability further deteriorates with geographical distance related to work duties. About 30 per cent of participants of households where one spouse was or had been involved in migrant work were divorced. For example, S-8 acknowledged that his divorce was likely linked to his absence from family interactions, due to his demanding commute work. On the one hand, spatial mobility affects face-to-face communication within family, and leaves the other spouse with full responsibility to look after the family while also working. On the other hand, as migrant workers go out of their hometown, their thoughts and horizons are broadened. With increased knowledge, tensions and trust issues arose with spouses who remain in a less developed and more conservative hometown. The case of M-5 is the best example of such instances. M-5, a female migrant worker, in several developed cities, described how her job as a footbath masseur was a source of shame and discrimination back in her hometown. She didn't link her divorce to footbath migrant work, but ascribed this to her disappointment over her husband's gambling and lack of responsibility for his family (based on her account). However, based on another participant's account (O-1) from a similar background, such marriage collapsed due to the negative connotations that work in the footbath industry has among their fellow villagers. It can be assumed that traditional discrimination toward certain types of work, as well as the context of spatial distance, can create misconceptions and mistrust among family members about the actual work a family member is doing while outside the village. This, in turn, can result in family tensions, conflict or even divorce.

Along with disadvantage from excessive work and geographical mobility, the labour division and economic contribution between husband and wife has changed as more women took on migrant workers. This phenomenon undermines the traditional family division of labour, where males were the sole breadwinner and females acted as caregivers. With financial independence, such work-

family conflict reduces women's desire to marry or remaining in a marriage (Fuwa, 2014; Gutiérrez-Domènech, 2008), especially when dissatisfied with their husbands' lack of dedication to family care responsibilities while they are working (as in M-5's case). Similarly, the traditional attraction of marriage decreases (Fuwa, 2014) as the females become more independent in spirit, due to their work and travel experiences. Furthermore, when their incomes are higher than their husband's, an unbalanced mentality occurs (M. Chen, 2018). Consequently, not only the women but also the men who made a lower economic contribution felt unhappy in the marriage (H. Li, 2013), which often lead to divorce.

Given the above three factors, precarious workers tend to have less harmonious and stable marriages (Lain et al., 2020). A permanently low living standard, uncertainty and insecurity bring about anxiety, which is then transferred to family life (Lewchuk & Laflèche, 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2016; Esping-Andersen, 2002). Among those workers who had been laid-off or 'bought-off' (*maiduan* 买断) by an SOE, the divorce rate reached 47 per cent. As M-3, a laid-off migrant worker, reported, a large number (about 30 per cent) of his former co-workers (in an SOE) divorced due to having been laid-off.

4.1.1.3.2 Delayed marriage, low fertility and matching socio-economic backgrounds

Certainty and security are important, not only in marriage but also in the consideration to have a family. People, especially young men, in precarious employment are less likely to have a family than those with formal employment (Lewchuk et al., 2016; Lewchuk & Laflèche, 2017). Three participants, all male and above 28 year of age (M-6, T-7, M-2, aged 29, 36 and 39 respectively), had not yet entered a first marriage at the time of the interview, though not by choice. Among those who were married, most participants had only one child and often had no plan to have a second child, despite the one-child policy no longer being in place⁴¹. In discussions with participants about

⁴¹ For more details on the one-child policy, see Chapter 5.

marriage and fertility plans with interviewers, the field research identified links between matching the socio-economic background (*men dang hu dui* 门当户对) and being engaged in precarious work is why they delayed marriage and/or had low reproduction levels.

Jobs decide who people can interact with⁴², the social circles which might bring about a relationship (Lewchuk et al., 2016). As M-6 mentioned, ‘like stir-fried shredded potatoes with green peppers⁴³, a chief gets matched to a waitress’. However, the likelihood of workers with more temporary employment developing a relationship circle is limited. For example, participants who were former SOE employees were more likely to have a spouse from the same *danwei* (employment unit), compared to those in other job groups. If an egalitarian marriage was impractical, then they had to rely on a matchmaker familiar with the backgrounds of potential partners, who would introduce them via a blind date (*xiangqin* 相亲) (based on P-6’s account and the case of P-12’s child). Apart from seeking homogamy – matching the socio-economic status of the two persons – a matchmaker also considers the personal characteristics of prospective partners (for example, filial piety valued by T-7 and family atmosphere by P-6).

Given the tradition of mating among those of similar backgrounds (H. Li, 2013) and the tendency of women to marry up in socio-economic position (M. Chen, 2018; H. Li, 2013), a precarious job is discriminated against in the marriage market. T-6’s experience illustrates this situation:

Hearing you’re a civil servant⁴⁴, [the person you are dating will say] ‘yes, great’, no matter what your appearance is ... Merely being a teacher feels noble so [I] couldn’t match his higher position ... You don’t know how hard my life was before I got a formal job offer ... The most annoying thing was the people around me ... I asked my husband whether they had asked him ‘have you carefully thought [about having a wife who doesn’t even have a job]’

⁴² For more details, see Chapter 6.

⁴³ A Chinese food, by which M-6 meant the food ingredients are matched.

⁴⁴ In most participants’ eyes, even in the whole of society, the job of civil servant means good job because it is stable, as in the case of being a (formal) teacher.

[at that time T-6 was unemployed] ... Sometimes I was really angry ... After I got the offer, now my husband could say to them 'my wife has a job'. This is strength and confidence ... not showing-off.

The marriage prospects for women without a formal job was harsh (as T-6's statement above attests), not to mention for the men, who were required to assume to bulk of the economic responsibilities of the family. The economic reality (S-5) under gendered roles and ego/expectations (P-4, M-2, M-4, T-6 and T-7) in the culture of similar mating reflected the three male participants' single status, although love is also important (T-9). The uncertainty of precarious workers brought anxiety⁴⁵ and low life satisfaction, which was worsened by the low wages (T-7, T-8, T-9 and T-10) that did not allow workers to afford purchasing a home, the first requirement towards forming a family (T-6 and M-6). This was particularly the case for those in their 20s or early 30s, who were still in the early stages of their career, if without extended family help. Therefore, given his wage (less than 2,200 CNY monthly) and the cost of marriage and childrearing, T-7 thought that being single was more suitable for him unless he could find a better paid job, although he came from a relatively better-off family. Conversely, female participants O-3, O-4 and O-5 mentioned that they would not consider marrying a PWJ worker, as they thought they would be unable to support a family.

Further, the corresponding result of a delayed marriage is delayed childbearing, especially for those out of employment (Gutiérrez-Domènech, 2008). Raising a child is one of the biggest burdens for households (T-7 and T-9). Only 5 out 46 participants had more than one children, and all (once) had rural backgrounds. Among those in their early 20s and 30s who were asked about plans for having a second child, none intended to have another child. Although O-6 preferred to have one child (voluntarily), for the remainder having only one child was a decision made out of consideration for the high expense (money, time and energy) of fostering child(ren). When talking about the plan for her daughter in-law to have a second child, S-3 mentioned: 'due to [our] finances, [we] don't give this much consideration ...[at least] temporarily'. If life is unstable and insecure, any plan for reproduction is

⁴⁵ T-7 reported a sense of anxiety due to low wage, older age and no marriage.

postponed (T-6).

To summarise, instability and insecurity from low wages, overwork, spatial mobility and low socio-economic position damages intra-familial solidarity and leads to postponed marriage and low childbearing (Gutiérrez-Domènech, 2008; Lewchuk et al., 2016; Lewchuk & Laflèche, 2017; Standing, 2011a). This challenges Fulong Wu (2004)'s assumption that in Chinese culture, family relationships would be harder to break down. If this situation continues, as Beck (1992) anticipated, the future scenario is that the labour market would be filled with independent workers without families and children.

4.1.2 Constraints and real options in the job market

What was revealed in Section 4.1.1 is the functioning deprivation caused by precarious work. If the workers could escape labour market deprivation, then they would avoid the functioning deprivations in life. The question thus becomes, to what extent can workers avoid labour market deprivations? Or put differently, how wide is their capability set? The key to answering this question, according to the responsibility-sensitive principle (Robeyns, 2006), is to ask whether the deprivations were a lack of ability or whether the workers voluntarily lived with the deprivations. In this section, the choices available in the labour market will be analysed. Based on the discussion around the three labour market rules with sustainable livelihood guarantee, the options in the labour market are narrow in range, implying that most participants' experiences on functioning deprivations were consistent with their capability deprivations (see Figure 4.1).

Only seven participants were evaluated as suffering from functioning deprivation but no capability deprivation⁴⁷, and three participants were evaluated as having neither functioning deprivation nor capability deprivation. This is primarily because they or their families had either enough wealth (five participants), or a reasonable pension (five participants), which makes their life

⁴⁷ Another six participants whose family was likely trapped into capability deprivation due to COVID-19, see Section 4.2.

sustainably guaranteed. Nevertheless, while the five pensioners could be regarded as 'grinners' who take precarious work for pleasure or extra money (Standing, 2011a), the remaining five participants still belonged to the 'groaners' who take precarious work without choice (Standing, 2011a), because they were within working age and their choices were either unemployment or precarious employment. Undoubtedly, they desired to work. In other words, in their understanding they should work, even if they had another livelihood source(s). The value of work, based on participant responses, includes basic social interaction and a sense of being occupied, in addition to earning money.

However, as long as they remain in the precarious labour market, they can hardly escape labour market deprivations. The distinction between a formal job and a precarious job is clear. Take T-7 and T-8 as an example. For both, their employment relation was triangulated. They had worked in a government institution, for four and eight years respectively. As labour agency workers, they had no equal in-work rights with other formal workers (civil servants), such as rewards and career upward mobility, due to not doing the 'same' job as the civil servants. They were responsible for the outside-office job in regulating vendors, which often involved them in dispute and conflict; thus they felt they were not respected or treated with dignity. The *danwei* regarded their job as 'peripheral', compared with what civil servants did – indoor paperwork to exert their law enforcement power. Their wage level was about monthly 2,100 CNY after taxes, 1,000-2,000 CNY less than civil servants (based on T-10), without welfare from the trade union, because they had no membership as did the civil servants in the *danwei*. Some labour dispatch workers' worked irregular shifts (for example, T-9), while others shared similar working hours to the civil servants.

It would be hard to assert that the differentiated treatment is against 'equal job, equal pay', because the job positions and tasks were indeed 'different'. However, it is evident that the rationale of 'equal job' is not applicable in the risk society. Unlike the standardisation in traditional industrialism, the current specialised labour division means that job tasks cannot be completely identical, even among civil servants. As criticised by Feng Xu (2013), the unclear definition of

‘auxiliary posts’ in the condition of using labour dispatch leaves a loophole to exploit dispatch workers.

To reach ‘equal job’ for ‘equal pay’, they could only aspire to become formal workers. However, ‘equal employment rights’ are also problematic. For example, T-7 and T-8 mentioned that even if they were asked to become civil servants, they would not be able to pass the civil servant exam – a precondition for becoming a civil servant – because of their age and education, two of the basic eligibility criteria for the civil servant entrance exam. The age requirement for the civil servant entrance exam – between 18-35 (those with a master’s or a doctoral degrees can be below 40 years of age) – excluded T-7 (aged 36) from becoming a civil servant and thus a formal worker. And although T-8 had a diploma equal to junior college, the lowest education level requirement, the education quality was insufficient for them to pass the exam. As T-8 said, when asked why she did not enter the exam:

[I] can’t pass at all ... Since the junior high school, I have not studied well ... Even some of my colleagues with a bachelor’s degree couldn’t pass the exam ... Their employability is better than mine, [though they still cannot pass].

Because of her age and education made her eligible for civil servant work, T-8 could try to improve her employability through personal diligence, including by improving her academic qualifications and through exam training. Nevertheless, work and family care took all her available time. Besides the opportunity cost and feasible resources that can be used for improvement, the question is whether setting such eligibility criteria and entrance exam is against ‘equal employment rights’. The market does not deny the principle of ‘equal employment rights’, but not recruiting a person with, for example, older age, poor health or pregnancy is ‘reasonable’, because any job shows preference to those with higher competitiveness and productivity. Of course, the employer would not make public the real reasons (e.g. age, health or gender) for discriminating against a job applicant. Market competition favours the ‘survival of the fittest’.

Therefore, although T-7 and T-8 were safe from overall capability deprivation due to better-

off family backgrounds, it appeared impossible for them to become civil servants, which meant their in-work deprivation could not be overcome. Perhaps they could refuse in-work deprivations by switching jobs, but age, education and skills determined that the jobs they could have would be precarious jobs. Hence, even if they were to attain in-work dignity or a higher wage, they would still encounter other kinds of labour market deprivation. While the labour market did not openly assert these discriminating rules, with so many 'tricks' available to employers, workers' capability sets were too small to help them gain a more decent job.

This also influences the precarious workers whose only income source was their jobs or a low pension (four participants) insufficient to support the household. The principle of 'distribution to each according to his/her work' develops a 'voluntarily' intensified labour (Feng, 2019b; Franceschini et al., 2016) as a coping strategy for moderating risks (Standing, 2011a). As mentioned previously, most participants' families were dual precarious workers or single earners. The incomes were unstable and/or low. And most had not contributed to a pension yet or only had the minimum contribution, which means their potential pension tended to be low. A problem they face is where their livelihood comes from, today and tomorrow. As a consequence, they must stay in the labour market for as long as possible. Especially when the wage determination system is based on piece-rate wage (O-1) or daily wage (project-based work), precarious workers are encouraged to work more and longer for better incomes. Lengthening work 'voluntarily' was particularly popular among participants during migrant work. For example, to earn full-attendance bonus reward, M-5 did not ask for day-offs; whereas O-1 (migrant nanny) and S-10 (local maid) worked for several months without a day off, accumulating the few monthly days-offs to take longer leave. M-5 and S-10 had a pension and M-5 and O-1 could earn money more than or equal to Ya'an average wage, but they still worked hard because their pension or savings could not cover household current consumption or provide for the future when they can no longer work.

Even though they may be increasing their future livelihood guarantees, 'voluntarily' intensified labour is also stressful, because the diligence seems endless and the return may be

uncertain (Standing, 2011a). To keep employed, workers must accept the deprived rules set by the labour market. While the self-employed could reduce work hours or ask for higher prices, this could nevertheless affect profits. For those with an employer, any disagreement over, for example, working hours or wages can lead to unemployment (M-2) (Feng, 2019b), as the size of China's large labour force practically means that nobody is irreplaceable. As M-3 said: '[The boss set the price of your labour power.] If willing, you take the job; if unwilling, then you leave'.

In summary, by discussing 'equal job, equal pay', 'equal employment rights' and 'distribution to each according to his/her work' with current and future livelihood, this sub-section reveals the limited choices available to workers in the precarious job market. For precarious workers, the labour market is neither a capability set nor does it function as a positive conversion factor. 'The spirit of dedication' encouraged by the employer, such as working longer regardless of rewards, only persuades workers to endure labour market deprivation and overlook other aspects of life. If labour market deprivation cannot be changed, then it will make no difference to other kinds of deprivation caused by precarious employment.

4.2 Precariousness and risk control in COVID-19 Crisis

Section 4.1 highlighted the labour market deprivations that precarious workers experience, even in the public sectors where laws and regulations for labour protection are stronger than in private sectors. In fact, in an era of commodification, regardless of whether it is in the informal or formal sectors, all workers, precarious or salariat, face risk and insecurity (Standing, 2011a). Such was the case for the SOE participants – after working two or three decades for the company, they were laid off suddenly because the company went bankrupt. As Beck (1992) suggested, modern risks feature a boomerang effect, whereby the producers of the risk are also exposed to that risk; no-one is free from risk. Similarly, Xiaojun Feng (2019b) argued that formalisation (*zhuanzheng* 转正) no longer provided security, because being formal workers or labour-dispatch workers might make not

much difference.

However, even if formalisation is losing its security and certainty, what is more concerning is the severity and resilience of risk (Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001) on precarious workers and formal workers. The COVID-19 crisis has proven that Feng (2019b)'s assertion of the need for formalisation and security would be insufficient to address risks. Much like the 2008 Financial Crisis which started in the US, the COVID-19 pandemic first reported in China became a global crisis within a few months, spreading from a public health problem to the socio-economic field. Official statistics (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021) showed the average urban unemployment rate in 2020 was 5.6 per cent, 0.45 per cent higher than 2019, and reaching 6.2 per cent in February. Globalisation expands connectedness and thus also risk distribution. In the labour market, risk distribution tends to be characterised by bottom accumulation (Beck, 1992), meaning that the ultimate victims are the most vulnerable. These include those at the bottom of both risk position (Beck (1992)'s analogy of underemployment) and class strata (Standing (2011a)'s expression of the precariat).

This section investigates precarious workers' risk-taking ability in the labour market in the context of COVID-19, by comparing security during risk events between participants with different occupational stability. It argues that the levels of severity and resilience to risk are primarily determined by whether a worker is formally employed or not.

4.2.1 Unemployment and income loss between formal workers, contracted workers, uncontracted workers and self-employed

The effects of the COVID-19 were not serious in Ya'an. Nevertheless, although most participants reported that the pandemic had limited effects on their lives (most, as S-4, reported on social activities and mobility, but rarely on living cost except for S-6), those engaged in migrant work and those working in catering and tourism were affected because of the higher number of infection cases in other cities. Although the field research suggested that wage level is related to occupations and industries (Cheung & Chou, 2016; Cooke & Lawton, 2008; Kim & Mergoupis, 1997; Velthuis et al.,

2018), the distribution of risk and its consequence depends, not only on occupation, but rather on a more complex set of factors, including: job stability; whether a worker is employed on a permanent or casual basis; and, whether he/she has a contract or not. According to the degree of standardisation (contractual forms), participants and their family members are reclassified ongoing formal workers (non-fixed-term contractors), fixed-term contracted workers (labour dispatch workers and workers with direct contract with the employer), uncontracted employees, and the self-employed. The job/earning loss of these four groups will be compared, to examine the relationship between job stability and security.

Firstly, formal employees were shielded from job loss, in that as long as their *danwei* was financially viable, they were less likely to be unemployed. Although the influence on performance bonuses was unknown, none of the participants in permanent formal employment (S-7, M-1's husband, T-6's husband and T-8's husband) reported job and/or wage losses.

Among the participants with a labour contract, the majority worked in the formal sector, with only two (S-5 (male) and S-9) were in the private sector. They were either labour dispatch workers (ten participants) or fixed-term contract workers (eleven participants) in an SOE or governmental/public institution. While some experienced an increased workload related to epidemic prevention and control, such as cleaners (P-1) and community workers (P-8), their job stability (P-10's PWJ employment period was actually extended) and wages were not affected (T-7). For instance, P-6 was once suspected of being infected with COVID-19 and hospitalised. Even though there was a dispute as to who should take responsibility for his medical expenses, he was nonetheless entitled to full pay during his hospitalisation.

In contrast with formal workers and those with a contract, the field research showed that uncontracted workers and the self-employed suffered much higher losses as a result of the pandemic. Uncontracted workers among the participants were the migrant workers and local workers in the private sector. While being interviewed (February to May 2020), most migrant worker participants were still looking for a job (six cases). Only P-4's husband had resumed work on 26

February 2020, having been called back by his employer. A study by Che and colleagues (2020) estimated that, in late March 2020 around 17-29 per cent of rural migrant workers had lost work for an average of 57 days. Most of these migrant workers were construction workers, the 'guerrilla workers', who do not have a regular employer/client or fixed workplace (Guang, 2005). At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, many migrant workers had gone back to their hometown for the Spring Festival. As mobility was restricted as a result of the pandemic, many were blocked from continuing their migrant jobs (Ding, 2020). Market demands for labour did not decline, but the lockdown and isolation caused short-term economic loss in some industries (W. Yang et al., 2020) also cutting jobs. The labour-intensive industries that absorb most migrant workers were required to close or delay resumption of operations (Ding, 2020). And some migrant workers chose to stop migrant work, worried about the potential danger and cost of quarantine (P-10's son and P-1's husband). Given that migrant workers occupy around one-third of the workforce in China (Che et al., 2020; Ding, 2020), many are likely to have been suddenly trapped into income poverty, since COVID-19 shortened their annual employment period.

The sudden economic poverty experienced by local uncontracted workers (M-2 and M-6) and the self-employed (M-8) was associated with both closure/suspension and the shrinking market consumption (Ning & Wang, 2020). Local industries were all affected in some way. Although big restaurants were required to suspend operations (such that M-6 could not find a job), S-2 disclosed that the government did not force small restaurants to close, though most customers no longer ate out. P-12's small business was affected by liquidity constraints, as was the case for O-4 whose lottery store was required to close. M-8's teahouse (home as worksite) lost its customers. O-5 and O-6 worked in a beauty salon and resumed work at the end of March, but O-5's truck driver husband was unemployed for about six months, because the quarry he worked for had been required to close. Similarly, in the coalmine industry, while M-4 did not experience work suspension, M-2's factory did not resume operations until the end of July 2020. As S-10, a maid, said: '[there is] no resumption [of activities] anywhere, it is hard to find a job'.

Higher unemployment and consumption reduction reinforce each other (Ning & Wang, 2020). If the analysis that global COVID-19 pandemic will slowdown China's economic recovery is correct (Che et al., 2020), workers in the grey economy will continue suffering from job and income loss. Therefore, unlike what happened in the EU during and after the 2008 Financial Crisis (Crettaz, 2015), in-work poverty in its material meaning likely increase and spread to other dimensions of life.

4.2.2 Labour market policy responses to the Crisis

The strict controls to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 were understood by the participants. To minimise adverse consequences for workers, the government issued specific policies to reduce unemployment and guarantee basic life. However, the actual security that workers obtain is unequal, as it is dependent upon the formality of their job. In other words, only those with a contract and/or *danwei* were able to access those benefits.

First, from the central⁴⁸, provincial⁴⁹ to the Ya'an government⁵⁰, attention was paid to enterprises, not individual workers. For sustaining employment stability, the main package launched to middle and small-scale enterprises included providing epidemic prevention materials, cutting and postponing an enterprise's taxes, social insurance contributions, rent and utility bills, expanding

⁴⁸ For example, Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on the Implementation of Measures to Strengthen Employment Stability in Response to the Impact of the COVID-19 Epidemic (issued 2020, No. 6) [国务院办公厅关于应对新冠肺炎疫情影响强化稳就业举措的实施意见] (国办发[2020]6号), see http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-03/20/content_5493574.htm

⁴⁹ For example, Policies and Measures of the General Office of the Sichuan Provincial People's Government on Responding to the COVID-19 Epidemic and Alleviating the Difficulties in the Production and Operation of Small- and Micro Enterprises (issued 2020, No.10) [四川省人民政府办公厅关于应对新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情缓解中小企业生产经营困难的政策措施] (川办发[2020]10号), see https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/EP55_hRXHtyJjGYziQ6Ug; Notice on Conscientiously Implementing the "Policies and Measures of the General Office of the Sichuan Provincial People's Government on Responding to the COVID-19 Epidemic and Alleviating the Difficulties in the Production and Operation of Small- and Micro enterprises" (issued 2020, No. 22) [关于认真贯彻落实《四川省人民政府办公厅关于应对新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情缓解中小企业生产经营困难的政策措施》有关问题的通知] (川人社办发[2020]22号), see <https://sichuan.chinatax.gov.cn/module/download/downloadfile.jsp?classid=0&filename=4d5ccd71cf4648d7be2b062dd5a41130.pdf>

⁵⁰ For example, Notice from the People's Government of Ya'an City on Twelve Measures to Support Enterprises to Cope with the Epidemic and Tide over the Difficulties [雅安市人民政府印发关于支持企业应对疫情共渡难关十二条措施的通知], see <http://www.yaan.gov.cn/gongkai/show/20200210105938-30650-00-000.html>

access to loans, and subsidizing the enterprise without layoffs or with newly recruited contracted migrant workers. It could be assumed that the rationale behind the government's actions was that if enterprises could survive, then the workers would be able to hold on to their jobs. However, as the above section explains, large numbers of precarious workers in the grey sector were excluded, because they were not employed in enterprises but by individual employers. Although *getihu* was also covered in those measures (People's Daily, 2020), only those enrolling in social insurances as 'danwei' can enjoy social insurance relief. In other words, without a *danwei* or *getihu* employer enrolled as 'danwei', workers are excluded from the beneficiary group.

As for unemployment insurance, a measure focused on individual workers, it may only help those who contribute to it to positively resist risk (Q. Lu et al., 2020). The central government had lengthened the benefit period of unemployment insurance, allowing previously ineligible contributors to enjoy unemployment insurance benefits, and providing one-time subsidies to contracted migrant workers whose *danwei* contributed to unemployment insurance⁵¹ and who had worked under contract for more than one year (State Council, 2020). However, neither most participants in the private sector, as uncontracted workers or only having an oral contract, nor the self-employed who did not have a *danwei*⁵², were enrolled in unemployment insurance. Thus, in practice the real unemployment coverage was low (Che et al., 2020).

Another measure for wage guarantee that might benefit individual workers, states that the enterprise should provide a living allowance (more than 70 per cent of local minimum wage standard) to the workers who did not work at all for a whole month due to COVID-19 (Sichuan Renshe, 2020). However, in practice, likely, only the formal sector was regulated around the application of this measure. For example, S-5 worked in a private travel agency that had to stop operating during the Crisis. Her boss did not dismiss her, but during that period she received no wage nor living allowance. This did not violate any laws, because the agency was not an 'enterprise' (or

⁵¹ Based on Article 6 of the Regulations on Unemployment Insurance, contracted rural migrant workers in the urban enterprise and public institution *danwei* do not need to contribute.

⁵² Only *danwei* can enrol in unemployment insurance.

was not a registered *danwei*), and/or S-5 was technically not an ‘employee’ because she had no contract.

Therefore, the policy measures for precarious workers without *danwei* or contract are meaningless. At a time when de-industrialisation facilitates the grey economy that exploits precarious workers (Standing, 2011a), labour market policy tends to only protect formal employment, even during the Crisis. The difficulty for the precariat to control risk thus doubles. As the International Labour Organization (2018) has shown, poverty and informality are positively related.

4.3 Conclusion

In discussing the functioning and capability deprivation from the labour market and market and policy reactions to precarious workers during the COVID-19 Crisis, this chapter argues that one’s job, as the most basic variable influencing minimum acceptable life (Beck, 1992), creates a domino effect on other dimensions of life. The more precarious the job, the more precarious life the worker faces. In the risk society, life increasingly hangs on the labour market (Beck, 1992), especially for members of the precariat, who are more sensitive to changes in monetary wages (Standing, 2011a). Nevertheless, due to a lack of collective voice in negotiation power, the precariat must deal with the increasing risk and deprivation transferred by the labour market.

Standing (2011a) used the concept of industrial citizenship in building his seven forms of security, based on the assumption of a process of active participation in collective action – for example, the trade union – to reach certain goals (Mundlak, 2007). In the era of precarious employment, the scope and power of labour unions in protecting workers’ rights and wellbeing through collective bargain and action has decreased globally (Beck, 1992; Kalleberg, 2009; Knuth et al., 2017; Mundlak, 2007; Mythen, 2005; Pradella, 2015; Standing, 2011a).

While Western observers tend to stereotypically view Chinese trade unions as compliant to the one-party State such that their bargaining power is almost wholly restricted, a growing body of research argues that the All-China Federation of Trade Unions has had an active role in labour legislation, labour dispute mediation and unionisation (F. Chen, 2009). However, without formal government status, workplace trade unions' bargaining power remained on paper only (F. Chen, 2009).

Most participants in this research did not mention having joined a trade union, even when their work units had set one up (for example, those involved in labour dispatch). If the official statistics are reliable, it can be calculated that nationwide the number of those participating in a trade union (283.178 million) only occupied around 36.6 per cent among all workers (774.71 million) in 2019 (DPES, NBS & DPF, MHRSS, 2020). The rate of unionisation among precarious workers – for example, rural migrants (A. Booth et al., 2021) – tends to be much lower. It does not ignore that rural migrant workers would have village/town-fellow based and/or grassroots' supportive groups. These groups, however, are different from the trade union, which is assumed to negotiate work-related matters with employers – such as, collective wages and contracts, labour disputes and in-work protection –, provide material benefits and livelihood assistance, organise (for example, training and leisure) activities, and so on (A. Booth et al., 2021). In tandem, compared with SOE laid-off workers, whose enterprises once had a trade union, few other workplaces had formal trade unions, nor did they engage in other forms of unionism. Scholars suggested that the gaps exist in terms of incomes, fringe benefits and other kinds of security between those with and without trade unions (A. Booth et al., 2021).

Pluralisation and flexibilisation reinforce each other and facilitate the de/re-standardisation of the labour market, such as fixed collective labour contract, working hours and workplace (a clear division of work and life) (Beck, 1992). In China, the weak collective bargaining and unions is also correlated to the 1994 Labour Law and 2008 Labour Contract Law, which allow individual contracts and pluralised forms of employment relations (Standing, 2011a). Individual working operations

without co-workers (S-8), short-term contracts, and scattered working sites and hours distance and disorganise workers' groups (Standing, 2011a). As a result, they can hardly form a new 'union', nor are they included in a traditional union that is built on the collective identity from teamwork at fixed units (Holgate, 2011). Not to mention that joining the trade union needs worker's application (time) and the membership fee (cost) of 0.5% of their wage. The collective right to combat injustice proposed by the International Labour Organization (2018) only exists as a formality to a large extent.

The shrinking of collective bargaining means that the employer (capital) likely holds power in fixing labour conditions and rewards. In other words, the employers are the rule-makers of the so-called 'market price'. Through 'market prices', the deprivations in employment are legalised and 'voluntarily' accepted by the masses and even by workers themselves. Not only the abuse of subcontract and no labour contracts (Guang, 2005; F. Xu, 2013), but the individual contract itself also legalises discrimination, because of no comparable cases (Section 4.1.2). And in addition to the worry about job loss, the deprivations would be ignored and used to influence 'going-rate pricing' (*sui hang jiu shi* 随行就市, mentioned by M-6), because other colleagues work accordingly. Unless a big event happens, for example, Foxconn workers' suicide that increased the negotiation power regarding intensified workload and low rewards (Standing, 2011a), the precariat detached from collectives continues to live with deprivations that are too 'minor' to attract public attention. Therefore, while enjoying bigger freedom in job choice (M-7), the free market just provides 'a greater autonomy that makes them poor' (Beck, 2000a, p. 107). Security is losing out.

Asymmetrical opportunities in the labour market expand into other dimensions of living, since market dependency can lead to institutional dependency (Beck, 1992), by which people's potential connection in fact increases, while they are independent of each other. The following chapters will discuss other forms of institutional dependency, and their consequences for subjective wellbeing and agency.

Chapter 5 : Family Configurations, Support Responsibilities and Wellbeing

Family plays an important role in influencing individual conversion factors from means to ends, and is itself an important capability for basic life. As both conversion factors and capabilities, family and employment have a mutually influencing relationship that either enables or restrains an individual person to achieve wellbeing (Deneulin, 2008; Robeyns, 2008). Family configuration and responsibility in contemporary China is changing, as the family has been downsized since the independence awareness arose (Yan, 2009) and the one-child policy was implemented (H. Liu et al., 2020). The one-child policy was a national policy implemented between the late 1970s and the mid-2010s, stipulating that most couples could only have one child⁵³. The one-child family structure led to the nuclear family model becoming the norm, especially in urban areas. With this change in the configuration of the family, kinship-based intra-household support responsibility has correspondingly adjusted between the nuclear and extended family. For example, the traditional model of the eldest son playing the main supporting role for elderly parents has been eroded (H. Zhu, 2016). The nuclear family model has become the main unit to address risks. In the context of this collapse of the 'big' or 'extended' family, the mutually influential relationship between family and employment and other capabilities has become more complex.

This chapter focuses on the links and relationships between family configuration and precarious work and in-work poverty. It argues that the (extended) family has been part of the welfare regime in China, as the provider of informal support to overcome hardships (F. Chen et al., 2011; Falkingham et al., 2020; H. Liu et al., 2020; H. Zhu, 2016; Zimmer & Kwong, 2003), playing a significant role in the wellbeing of precarious workers. However, for those already in a precarious situation, the effect is generally more negative than positive. Responsibilities toward other family members restrain wellbeing among precarious workers and also affect the next generation, which tends to follow their parents' precarious employment and precarious life.

⁵³ Some rural areas or minorities were allowed to have more than one child.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 5.1 discusses the importance of family in people's minds and the financial capability behind the societal phenomenon of extended family support, especially to the younger generation. Section 5.2 analyses the compromises made by families in relation to employment, social participation, and material living standard. Section 5.3 explains the intergenerational transmission of precarious employment, and is followed by a final overall conclusion (Section 5.4) on the links between family configuration and precarity among precarious workers.

5.1 Intergenerational support enhances younger generation's wellbeing

The nuclear family model (spouse and children) was the norm among participants in this study (60.87 per cent). Among the 17 participants with extended family living together⁵⁴, five were divorced and thus lived with their elderly parents or siblings.⁵⁵ Two cared for a grandchild, three had only one elderly parent, and the rest had (or once had) a rural background. Despite the change in family configuration for these participants, the concept of family remained the extended family model, whether they were living under the same roof or not.

While different from intergenerational support from the younger generation to elderly parents in Chinese tradition (H. Zhu, 2016; Zimmer & Kwong, 2003), the research found universal and regular extended family support from the older to the younger generation. Only six out of 46 participants did not provide nor receive extended family support, mainly due to their or their family's inability to do so. However, these participants (e.g. P-3 and T-1)⁵⁶ mentioned that they would provide extended family support when able to do so.

⁵⁴ M-2 is excluded from the calculation, because he was an orphan and had not entered first marriage when the interview was conducted.

⁵⁵ T-4 and S-8 lived with their siblings; both were in their 50s and had no children.

⁵⁶ P-3 and T-1 were the nuclear family model. Although P-3's son was in his 20s, he was still unmarried, and thus they were counted as a single family (the division of family based on marriage will be discussed in Section 5.1.1). T-1's daughter was under 18, and her nuclear family and extended family lived in different cities.

Support from the extended family plays a key influencing role in people's wellbeing achievement and deprivation. Based on interviewee responses, the most common forms of support provided by the extended family were money, in-kind items such as food and housing, and care support. This support helped reduce economic pressure and family-work conflict, and thus facilitated the subjective wellbeing of the receiver (for example, reducing psychological pressure and anxiety related to having insufficient income). This support was generally from the older to the younger generation (parental downward support), intragenerational (horizontal support among siblings), and from children to parents (children's upward support). This section concentrates on parental downward support only.⁵⁷ The changed family configuration and unchanged perception of kinship, especially with the broadened coverage of the pension system and relatively young age at which people become grandparents, allow for intergenerational support to be more universal and feasible. The following subsections outline the reasons behind participants' willingness and ability to provide extended family support, with analysis on the ways in which that support is provided.

5.1.1 The concept of 'family' in people's minds and lifelong responsibility

This subsection explores extended family beliefs underpinning parents' responsibility to provide various kinds of support to their child(ren), even after they become adults. Based on the literature (Xie et al., 2017), there were three key criteria for identifying who is part of a family: (a) blood relationship, (b) marriage, and (c) sharing accommodation (housing and eating together). However, participants in this research had reordered the three elements. Among these, blood relationship is the absolute core. As T-6, who had just entered into (first) marriage and was pregnant while the interview was conducted, said: 'After getting married, I thought [that] only having my

⁵⁷ Based on the field research, upward support from children to elderly parents likely causes children to suffer from further deprivation. This limiting role is not what this section focuses on, but it will be discussed in Section 5.2.

husband and I cannot be seen as a family to be serious [sic]. [It can] only be called a couple. Having a baby, we can be a family. A family of three.'

Parentage and marriage are parallel, but when a blood relation is absent, the (legal) marriage relationship becomes the cornerstone of family identity. Blended families without biological child(ren) in the sample tended to no longer treat the remarried spouse as part of the family (P-2 and T-5); nor were long-term partners, even when they had been living together for a long time (for example, M-2). Generally, these participants avoided talking about their new spouse or partner when asked the relevant questions.

The above example also evinces the decline of the power of 'sharing accommodation'⁵⁸ in defining who is part of the family. While three participants thought sheltering and eating together made them feel like they and their parents-in-law were one family, five devalued the spatial distance. The consideration of 'pooling economy' (Motonishi, 2012) tends to be excluded from conceptualising who is part of the family. As shown by the field research, generally adult children (even those still unmarried) separated their bank accounts from that of their parents once they began to earn money, and the nuclear family and extended family had separate bank accounts even when they lived together.

The decline of 'sharing accommodation' in family identity further highlights the normalisation of the nuclear family model. Respondents generally thought that after their child(ren) marry, a new separate family from their own has been created psychologically, even when their child(ren) and their family still lived with them. Thereafter, unlike filial piety to the parents (F. Chen et al., 2011; Falkingham et al., 2020; Zimmer & Kwong, 2003), supporting adult children is not an obligation, although this could be a way for parents to show they are good parents (Yan, 2009).

However, since blood relationship is the key criterion determining who a family member is, parents and their child(ren)'s new family were closely linked, including when living apart. This means

⁵⁸ Xie et al. (2017) used 'eating together' (*tong zao chi fan*, 同灶吃饭), which means sharing economy among those eating together and co-habiting (both with and without blood relation), as a precondition to identify part of the family.

that while not an obligation, the responsibility as a collective culture (F. Chen et al., 2011) to provide support beyond the nuclear family to extended family (parents, spouse and children)⁵⁹ remains. This is particularly the case for parents, who tended to continue to support their child(ren) in adulthood, even after they had formed their own families.

It seems that the responsibility to support their children is informed by their own experiences of precarity and hardship, often linked to having inadequate income and demanding family care responsibilities. As stated by one respondent, in relation to providing financial support for children to acquire housing (T-9): 'Without property, you yourself can feel the hardship of your generation. So, if you don't want to let your children have a hard life, [you buy property for them]'

T-9 further stated:

Without it [the housing provided by parents] from the last generation, the wealth accumulation of the last generation, you see, perhaps 25 years old, we use a man aged 25 as the example, his economic pressure is quite heavy. Before 25, he has studied at school. Even if you receive education before 22, you have worked for only three years. 25 years old, when you consider marriage, the marriage is a huge expenditure [that you cannot afford]⁶⁰.

The difficulty comes not only from money, but also housework and family care. Based on participant responses, private care is so expensive that worse-off households rarely choose to employ help; instead, they prefer to ask grandparents to take care of grandchildren, unpaid⁶¹. And compared to private caregivers, grandparents are perceived as more trustworthy. As Jianping Yao (2016) suggested, the older generation in the family play the role of caregiver to grandchildren, enabling women to participate in the labour market and thus help the family avoid in-work poverty (by enabling the family to have more earners). At interview, young mothers disclosed this limitation.

⁵⁹ Among those interviewed, only T-1 did not mention the extended family. This may be because she and her extended family had lived in different cities for many decades. But it cannot infer that she did not view her extended family as part of her family, based on Chinese culture.

⁶⁰ Based on participant responses, the first step to getting married is to have housing.

⁶¹ Only T-6 mentioned she would pay her mother for childcare in the first interview. However, in the follow-up interview after her (first) baby was born, when asked if she paid her mother, the answer was 'no'.

For example, O-2 said:

Then [when I work] my mother-in-law looks after my child ... And after work, I take care [of him] ... Without the old, who can take care your child, it's hard to go out for work. Before the child goes to kindergarten, it's hard to work.

While the previous generation's support is conditional to a large extent, that is, only when the young couple perform their responsibility but still cannot balance work and family (O-5 and P-10), parents give priority to their child(ren)'s work. Therefore, given that marriage and childbearing are expensive and influence future career and income, the older generation (as was the case for couples of S-3 and O-4 who still worked hard after retirement) must financially subsidise and instrumentally assist their child(ren), to help them reach the greatest milestones in life.

5.1.2 Ability to provide support to one's extended family

It is unclear to what extent the intergenerational exchange theory explains this phenomenon (cf. F. Chen et al., 2011; H. Liu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is evident that empathy for and worry about children's precarious life, especially when people around also act as supporters to the younger generation, makes the older generation rationalises being a lifelong parent and providing support. Another parallel explanation, in addition to the older generation's desire to transfer money or deliver care to the next generation, is that their ability to provide extended family support is associated with the one-child policy from their generation plus the wide coverage of public pensions and sufficient incomes.

The average age of participants who had grandchildren was late 40s (female) and 50s (male). Still relatively young, they could continue to work to provide money or take care of grandchildren. Further, most had to look after one grandchild, as only 30 per cent of them had two grandchildren. In fact, only five out of 41 participants had two children. Given their age and family size, the 'one-

child' family structure is another explanatory element of the lesser likelihood of being considered working poor (fewer consumers) (J. Yao, 2016).

Having only one child makes parents concentrate all their resources on the child. The field research found that, compared with younger participants who tended to be purely the receiver of extended family support, middle-aged participants tended to be the provider rather than the receiver of extended family support⁶², or a mix of both provider and receiver⁶³. Five out of nine aged below 40 were purely receiver, three were neither provider nor receiver, and only one provided upward support to his mother.

All 11 participants who both received and provided extended family support were in their midlife. Among all providers, the middle-aged constituted 91.67 per cent, among which half provided downward support to the next generation⁶⁴, 33.33 per cent provided upward support to their elderly parents, and the remaining 16.67 per cent provided both⁶⁵. Eight participants reported that they did not receive (or received little) help for childcare from their old parents. Although the reason P-3 and P-7 gave behind this lack of help was linked to personal preference, and T-5's husband's parents were unavailable as they lived in a remote mountain area, P-9, S-9 and T-1 mentioned they had siblings, hence their parents could not look after all of their grandchildren, As P-9 explained: 'For the most part we take care of the child ourselves... In your [my] era, basically, the old had many children. In our family, I have five siblings. They [parents] can't care for every grandchild.'

⁶² Liu et al. (2020) also discussed the 'sandwich' role of the middle-aged. Their quantitative data showed much less middle-aged received economic support from their old parent (3 per cent) and children (more than one-third), compared to those who provided economic support to old parents (46.7 per cent) and children (11.7 per cent), as well as care to old parents (22 per cent) and the next generation (more than a half) (H. Liu et al., 2020, p. 248).

⁶³ The mixed roles of providing support to and receiving support from the previous generation are also argued by Motonishi (2012), with Japanese context.

⁶⁴ This result is somewhat divergent from Li and Shin (2013), who found one-third pure support flowing to child(ren). They (B. Li & Shin, 2013) pointed out that their sample, retired people, may have had more than one child before the one-child policy. However, most respondents in this research had only one child. This is likely a reason why the results are different.

⁶⁵ This partly challenges Liu et al. (2020)'s result that economic support flowing in China was mainly from the younger to the old, and echoes part of their result that care support to the next generation from the middle-aged is common.

In addition to family size, pension or having enough income⁶⁶ makes the downward monetary transfer between generations more practical. The research of Lain et al. (2020) found that inadequate pension was one cause of financial pressure that the older generation experienced. Fortunately, most of the elderly in participants' families, as well as participants themselves, had a public pension. In fact, at the end of 2019, the coverage rate of public old-age insurance in Ya'an was 89 per cent (Ya'an municipal government, 2019). The pension not only meets their own living demands but also enables them to transfer money or deliver care to their children's family, without worrying where funds for their future life will come. Not to mention that parents who receive a pension do not need their children (middle-aged) to provide support (H. Zhu, 2016), which enables the middle generation to concentrate their financial resources on the next generation. For example, when P-1 talked about how her parents can support her brother's child, she said: 'The old, my father, has a pension so [he can economically] support his [her brother's] son and provide care.'

Unless they have enough wealth, the middle-aged are likely to keep working to earn money for themselves and their parents. For instance, M-7's parents had a pension and thus he did not need to financially support them. By contrast, P-10 was and planned to continue being a pensioner worker, because of the economic pressure to support herself, her unpensioned parents, and her son (a precarious worker). And although O-5's mother-in-law (no pension) exited employment to take care of her grandchild, her father-in-law still worked and could provide enough money.

To summarise, the lifelong role of being a parent and actual feasibility of supporting their extended family – due to relatively young age, one child, and pension or enough economic accumulation when reaching middle age – explains why the older generation can provide support to the next generation. Such support helps the young reduce their likelihood of suffering from capability deprivation, since income poverty can be prevented and they can also invest more time in

⁶⁶ Liu et al. (2020)'s research found that support to parents (who were less likely to have a pension but to depend on children's support) was given top priority by the middle-aged thanks to them having a pension (data from 2011 and 2012). This research, however, showed the middle-aged are more likely to give support to the younger generation, as their older generation were generally already covered by a pension.

the labour market to avoid relevant deprivations (see Chapter 4).

5.2 Reconciling family support responsibilities and capability deprivations

The resilience of parental support is impressive. Some scholars (B. Li & Shin, 2013; H. Zhu, 2016) saw intergenerational support as a long-term exchange relationship, but data collected showed the older generation tended to not ask the next generation to pay back for any support, especially to less well-off children (H. Liu et al., 2020). When being asked why she had not asked her daughter (formally employed, married, with a daughter below 18 years of age) to support her when she suffered from breast cancer and needed considerable money, S-4 stated: ‘her life is hard; how can I ask her [to support us]?’ In the eyes of the old parents, as O-3 put it, ‘the older generation is always the family of children, but the children’s family is the children’s family’. The backing of the extended family gives the young an opportunity to pursue a better career and life condition. However, since the middle-aged are also precarious workers, they themselves face the risk of becoming the working poor one day; and that risk is further increased as they continue to provide resources to their child(ren)’s family. In this regard, family is not an enabler but a limiter to one’s overall wellbeing.

By analysing how the family restricts employment and living conditions (material), this section will demonstrate that despite intergenerational support as a family adaptive strategy to maximise the wellbeing of the whole family (F. Chen et al., 2011), with the altruistic pattern (Zimmer & Kwong, 2003), total deprivations seem not to be reduced, but to just be transferred between generations.

5.2.1 Limitations on employment due to family support responsibilities

The literature has widely discussed the dual roles of working women that causes family-work conflict and negative impacts on women’s lives (Booth & Van Ours, 2008; M. Chen, 2018; Lan & Ci,

2016b; Sheely, 2010). In the present research, 26 participants were affected by family considerations (such as living together with family members and childcare responsibilities) that limited their job choices. Eleven participants' households had pensioner workers, which made life better for their family members. This subsection will discuss the negative consequences resulting from family constraints on the range of job choices and retirement decisions, within the contexts of a gendered labour division and of pensioner workers.

The field research found that the sharing of family responsibilities in urban areas was gradually becoming more balanced, and that both men and women perform economic and domestic duties simultaneously. However, the traditional gender norms in marriage – that women do household labour and men work as breadwinners – are still embraced by Chinese women (M. Chen, 2018), particularly those with a rural background. The families of eight participants (seven of whom had rural backgrounds) kept the tradition that even if the female had a job, the husband undertook the leading role in earning money. Within the families of another eight participants (six of them with rural backgrounds) they all had a full-time housewife⁷⁰.

This gendered labour division leads to much limitation regarding job decisions for women. Due to their primary role of homemaker and kin keeper, women tend to prioritise family care responsibilities; the responsibility to earn money or the dream of seeking upward social mobility through one's work remain men's business. Women seek more flexible working hours and closeness to their home for family care, even when this means receiving low pay. This was the case for six participants all of whom had a full-time job, but had no extended family support for childcare. As a study by Booth & Van Ours (2008) suggested, women tend to have a part-time job due to various social constraints, especially the opportunity cost of working for family care. For some women in this study, reproduction and family care responsibilities resulted in at least two years' unemployment and thus income interruption (as shown by eight households).

⁷⁰ Among them, M-2 was a partner (not wife) and S-3 was his daughter-in-law, not his wife.

This was also a case for some of the men. For example, in the household of M-7 (divorced) and M-6 (single and his father had passed away), no other people could provide care; so the men had to undertake family care and thus had limited job choices. Some migrant workers also chose to forego the more popular, higher-paid migrant work for a lowly paid local job close to home, due to their elderly parents' poor health (M-8) or accompanying child(ren) (P-6). Taking a less satisfying job due to family-related matters was also the case for those seeking a more balanced labour division in the family, although this scenario was less significant in numbers (only four cases in the field research). For instance, T-10's daughter had studied at the central district of Ya'an; for this reason, T-10 moved there and was able to find a more stable job though with an even lower wage than his previous job.

In relationship to work opportunities, many pensioner workers in the field research were regarded as 'having no choice', due to family matters. Research in the Western context has highlighted how work-family conflicts and family financial conditions, such as retirement savings and financial responsibility to dependents, influence decisions about retirement (Pienta, 2003; Raymo & Sweeney, 2006). For example, work-family conflict can increase the preference to retire, but economic responsibility to dependents can lower that preference (Raymo & Sweeney, 2006). Data from the pensioner workers interviewed supported the latter argument, though that responsibility applied in relationship to adult children (i.e. above 18 year of age). In the context of Ya'an, economic responsibility to adult children influences participants' retirement plans. In the Chinese context, the public pension system is a basic life guarantee, given to those retired from employment. The Enterprise Employee Basic Pension that most participants are enrolled in is designed to at least meet a pensioner's basic personal livelihood needs. However, based on the participants' experiences, working after retirement infers that the money from a pension is not enough and thus they need to work.

It is not that the pension cannot satisfy their personal basic livelihood demands, but that livelihood demands exceed the 'personal' level. Without denying that some sought primarily to

‘remain occupied’ (not necessarily related to family as a limiter), prolonging one’s working life after being pensioned is associated with providing extended family support. As explained previously, under their lifelong role as parents, they consider the demands of their children’s family as their responsibility. In order to make money, remaining in work becomes their only choice. For example, five households provided support to the next generation; T-4 needed to provide intragenerational support⁷²; and T-3⁷³ and P-8⁷⁴ provided upward support. These interviewees did not demonstrate that they enjoyed their job (intrinsic motivation, see Chapter 8). Instead, they had financial demands that could not be met from their pension alone, thus being a pensioner worker provided another income source.

5.2.2 Keeping a low material standard of living and sacrificing for children

Consumption decisions are made under familial and financial contexts (Payne et al., 2014). The field research found some people kept a low standard of living, even when income increased, partly because of their unidirectional support to their non-adult children or adult children’s family⁷⁵. Children’s dependence on parents is becoming more dominant (B. Li & Shin, 2013). This subsection explores how downward intergenerational economic transfer leads to deprivations in material conditions for precarious workers.

Poverty is accompanied by a feeling of scarcity (Brujin & Antonides, 2021). Whatever their income level, participants tended to report a sense of financial strain and dared not spend money. For example, M-5 had a higher wage of 7,000 CNY per month but said ‘no money’. She was divorced, lived with her pensioned mother, and had a son who did migrant work. The three members had separate accounts. M-5’s savings had been used to pay for social insurance, recovering from a

⁷² Lived with her old brother (illness to legs) and unpensioned sister.

⁷³ Lived with her unpensioned father.

⁷⁴ Although not co-residing, P-8 took care of his mother who was a *dibao* recipient.

⁷⁵ Some were because of low aspiration about life or also because they saved for the future. However, for the latter, to a large extent, it is not that the pension was inadequate for a basic life; rather, this is a feeling of ‘no money’, which can be seen as a lack of the sense of being secured, related to past hardships (see Chapter 8).

disease, renting, buying household appliances and furniture, and raising her son, after which she felt she had no money left. For those asked the relevant questions, only two out of 29 participants evaluated their income/living standard as higher than average. Another 19 participants thought either their personal or family income just reached or was below the basic level. 'Lived frugally' was used by four participants when they talked about how they made ends meet, as was the case for another two participants who used 'luxuries' to describe living items other than the most 'basic heating and food' (*wenbao*, 温饱).

Since any 'big' expenditure can lead to difficulty in making ends meet (M-4), they must cut spending. Seven participants reported cutting on clothes, of which four had not bought new clothes in recent years. Lowering the demands on food, drinks, tobacco and snacks for children was a common reality. M-3 planned to replace decrepit furniture and household appliances, but he did not have enough extra money that could be used for these items, thus he had to remove them from his list. It was similar in the case of paid leisure activities; 'unnecessary' travels were reduced, such as tours (even short tours within the city) and visiting extended family members in other cities. P-10 went to a more distant vegetable market just because it sold cheaper vegetables, despite it being only one or two cents (or *yuan*) cheaper.

However, most of the time spending cuts do not transfer to their children. That is, they still met children's living demands as much as possible. Spending on children, especially non-adult children or adult children still studying and thus regarded as 'not having to work', was seen as 'necessary'. In considering expenditure, participants tended to give top priority to their children or maintained their children's 'luxurious' expenditure, such as going out for fun (T-9) and expensive tuitions (P-6). Take P-6 as an example. P-6 felt sorry for his daughter, because in the past 17 years (2001 to 2017), he and his wife had done migrant work and left their daughter to live with her grandfather and aunt. After returning to their hometown, the couple lived a pretty frugal life – they participated in almost no social activities, did not buy new clothes, did not seek financial or in-kind support from extended family, they ate in the employment unit where food is free, and only brought

the most necessary food. While P-6's life was tough, he once used most of his savings – 200,000 CNY, equal to his 3-year income at the pinnacle of his migrant work or 13-years of wages in a PWJ (at the time of the interviewing) – to fund his daughter's junior college education. As P-6 explained:

You enter the society and find a job ... You need to get along with the society ... [You seek] promotion ... And basically, we have only one child in our era. You must foster her as much as possible. Even if it is a bad [unworthy] college, I should let her go to that college, right? She went to the crappy school and it cost us 200,000 CNY ... that is expensive ... She is a girl and studied alone in another city. We were worried she was fooled. We gave her enough money ... Because in today's society, especially money, the economics, if you let her feel not enough for living, [she would seek those who would give more money to her]. So, we made sure she had enough money and bought whatever she wanted to buy ... Even if we had economic difficulty, we did not make her lower than others [in materials]. We had to bite the bullet. Because, today's children have highly valued pride.

In similar cases, P-11 and P-12 transferred their assets or used their money to help their children purchase a property, and O-4 and S-10 helped their children's marriage with expensive betrothal gifts. Even spending on themselves is for the children. For example, P-1 and P-4 reported contributing to social insurances, to reduce their children's economic burden in the future. P-6 and S-3 bought property to inherit to their children, as T-9 and S-6 also planned to do the same.

By contrast, the younger participants (aged below 30) rarely saved money. For example, O-5 never spent less on make-up and clothing, even when facing financial strain; T-6 (pregnant when first interviewed) valued social activities and travels as her spiritual life, as important as food and housing, such that she would rather be in debt than cut spending. An explanation for this behaviour could be that the younger generation has not shouldered the parent responsibility yet (T-6) or that they have extended family support as backing (O-5). Nevertheless, after her baby was born, T-6 (during a follow-up interview) had adjusted the focus of her life and inclined her economic distribution to her baby.

Thus, the biggest cause of financial difficulty is not linked to insufficient pension and precarious living circumstances (e.g. living cost after divorce) (cf. Lain et al., 2020), or co-residing with elderly parents with low-income (cf. Motonishi, 2012). Instead, the difference in consumption between generations supports the view that saving for child(ren) is the main reason why the older generation would rather maintain a low standard of material life. As M-8 said:

When I was a child, I had the sense [of inferiority], because my family was too poor ... The kids from well-off families can buy snacks after class, while the kids from the poor families can only stare at you [the rich child eating snacks] ... What would you do if your child stares at others [eating snacks]? No matter how poor you are, even using all of your family wealth or robbing, you must give something to him/her [the child].

Regarding M-8's and P-6's statements above, the sacrifice is more or less filled with a sense of guilt toward the child(ren). This emotion is not uncommon, such as that expressed by T-3 (due to failed parenting), P-7 (due to her disease), M-5 (due to work and ignoring the education of her son) and P-5 (who attributed his son's dropout from junior high school to his divorce and disease). The guilt increases altruism. After all, in their eyes, child(ren)'s failure – precarious life – is related to the parents' own failed life.

5.3 Guilty parents and intergenerational transmission of precarious employment

For various reasons, precarious workers' children are likely to have a precarious job too (Caceres & Caceres, 2015; H. Yin & Wang, 2015). For the children who were not students or in a gap year between degrees, only four out of 22 had a formal job. And for the parents of participants aged below 40⁷⁷, although the full data about their parents (and parents-in-law) to a large extent were unknown, only one out of eight⁷⁸ had parents employed in a formal job. Some (H. Yin & Wang, 2015)

⁷⁷ One participant had been an orphan since childhood, thus was not applicable in this category.

⁷⁸ Except for one case whose data about parents were unavailable, the remaining had at least one parent (or

would attribute their bad employment situation to personal factors and argued that the influence of their family of origin (on the education of the older generation and their income level) on their situation was remote. They (Yin & Wang, 2015) explained the reason: children in a relatively low-income family know they must exert great effort to get a good job, because there are no familial resources they can depend on. This research, however, found that family has a significant influence on children's employment (H. Han et al., 2016; Solinger, 2011). This section will show that precarious workers parenting shortcomings due to their precarious situation can lead the next generation into precarious work.

As a key form of human capital (Ziol-Guest et al., 2004) and social stratification factor (H. Liu et al., 2020), education is used as a primary mediated variable for intergenerational precarious employment. Education is highly correlated to employment. Most precarious workers had a relatively low level of education⁷⁹, and most children doing precarious work also had a relatively low level of education. Among 36 participants who had children of school age and whose data about children were available, only 25 per cent of the children had an education level at or more than bachelor's degree or were undergraduates. The four children with formal employment had an education level of junior college (two) or university (one bachelor's degree and one master's degree). Among the remaining 18 children who were in informal employment, one had a master's degree, six went to junior college, one had a diploma of technical secondary school, one graduated from high school, five graduated from junior school, two went to primary school, and for the final two no information was provided. It can be seen that, generally, the children of precarious workers had relatively low

parent-in-law) doing a precarious job. In fact, with available data, excluding T-7's parents and M-6's father, all parents were doing precarious work, including those former state-owned enterprise laid-offs.

⁷⁹ Only three had university education and all were in the younger group (aged in the 20s and 30s). T-7 (informal employment) had no child, T-6 (received a formal job offer during interviews) and O-2 (unemployed because of childcare but once obtained formal job offer) had a baby. Three participants' education level was unknown, but based on relevant information it is inferred their education level was no more than high school. The majority was educated at junior school level (18 participants), followed by technical secondary school and primary school (both six participants respectively). Less participants received education at high school level (five participants) and associated college level (four participants). One participant was uneducated.

educational attainment and some⁸⁰ did not even reach the basic education (high school education, based on most participants⁸¹). Education tends to be a key to formal employment in China, since most formal jobs require the institutional recognition of cultural and educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986), An education level of at least junior college and, more commonly, university with certificates of the academic qualification are needed to get a formal job. The low education received by the children of precarious workers explains why they ended up with informal jobs.

Investment in education and culture cannot be instantly converted into an integral part of an individual by just purchasing it, nor can it be acquired and accumulated by others (Bourdieu, 1986). Regarding urban-rural gaps⁸² in education as to accessibility to school, education quality⁸³ and extracurricular classes (J. Han et al., 2014), existing research suggested that available family economic resources, the willingness of parents to allocate financial resources and time in parental interventions for children, the education level of parents, parents' personality traits (such as organisation and efficiency), and family structure all play a role in children's development (Dunifon et al., 2004; Han et al., 2014; Michael, 2004; Zioli-Guest et al., 2004). These factors eventually transfer into parents' perception and knowledge on the education, money and time that can be allocated to children, in addition to the psychological influence of family events on children.

Precarious-worker parents' awareness of the importance of education was low. To some extent, they did not value children's education. Most participants showed a low level of aspiration in regards to their children's education⁸⁴, especially when their children were young. Dunifon et al. (2004) found that while in school, the children benefit more from parents with higher organisation and efficiency personality traits. The phenomenon of low acknowledgement of education is reasonable when entwined with the explanation that parenting behaviours can be enhanced by

⁸⁰ The total number of children were 39 among 36 applicable participants (three had two children), in which nine were aged below 18 and still in school; and the education level of three children is unknown.

⁸¹ Compulsory education in China is 9 years (junior school) or 12 years (high school) with regional differences. Ya'an still implemented 9-year compulsory education when the interviews were conducted.

⁸² Most participants had a rural background.

⁸³ Including knowledge and abilities, such as leadership and awareness of rights.

⁸⁴ More details in Chapter 8.

personality characteristics related to success, such as organisation, efficiency and persistence to invest in what can promote children's later development (Dunifon et al., 2004). The parents in the research were less likely to organise their children well or cultivate personality traits such as efficiency and aspiration in their children, since they seem to lack the personality traits and ability to succeed themselves. And parents pass not only their assets but also their attitudes to their children (Michael, 2004). When they themselves disliked studying, it would be hard for them to ask their children to show an interest in academic matters. As O-5, a young mother, said, when asked whether she monitored her child's study: 'Anyway, I'm not good at studying. [I wouldn't] ask he [her child] to study well. The main thing is that I, myself, didn't [have] good academic performance.'

Some interviewees thought they valued children's education and had already been conscientious in this area, but in fact they had not. They (P-11, M-5 and S-5) expressed the logic that because their children disliked studying, or could not obtain a good academic result, the children were 'not good at studying' or that 'studying is not suitable for them'. And thus, they gave up the potential of encouraging their children to seek a higher level of education. For example, rather than seeking private tutors to improve poor academic performance and catch up (Y. Zhang & Xie, 2015), M-5 allowed his son not to continue with school after he graduated from junior school, as did S-5, S-6, T-5 and P-12.

Some parents really valued education, but they did not have cultural capital to transmit to their children (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, they lacked knowledge on education and could not help their children's education. For instance, P-1 could not act as a tutor for her daughter's after-class homework, because with her low level of education, she had not acquired the relevant knowledge. So it is more difficult to give good advice when children are making important life decisions. For example, T-6 (aged 28), when talking about her hardships and education:

Because your [my] family doesn't have a good condition, you [I] must learn to bear it by yourself [myself]. From childhood to now, [including] going to the college, all decisions were made by myself. Choosing the major was also decided by myself only. My family doesn't

have anyone educated ... They couldn't give me any suggestion ... When I chose the major ... [I] never knew the future of this major, what the market of this major was and what job I could find with this major. Nobody talked to you [me], because they also didn't know. You [I] can only rely on yourself [myself] in this way. So, I suffered a great loss in this regard.

The case of T-6 also suggests parental inability, in addition to lack of awareness or knowledge of education: a financial strain that leads to low investment in their offspring. And not only public education but also private tutors require money⁸⁵. A crucial reality that precarious workers face is time pressure and low earnings (see Chapter 4). O-1, M-5 and O-4 reported investing much less time in parenting and monitoring children, because of their focus on earning money. However, even putting so much time and energy into work did not provide them with enough earnings (see Chapter 4) to invest in their children's education, especially when they were young. Research showed children's early development is related to a family's income, time and skill (Michael, 2004). These all seem unavailable for the respondents, whether they were limited by employment or preferred enjoying spare time to spending time on children (J. Han et al., 2014).

These limitations are likely enlarged in a fragile household. With evidence from the literature that the household expenditure of a single parent is different from a dual-parent family (Ziol-Guest et al., 2004), the high rate of divorce as a feature of precarious employment (see Chapter 4) can be linked to the effect of childrearing. One most direct result is that divorce with dependent children means the loss of an earner, so the budget that can be used for children may be correspondingly reduced (Ziol-Guest et al., 2004). It might be positive in terms of reducing a consumer, for example in M-5's case. However, the field research detected more cases showing that among precarious household safety is weakened.

Existing research indicates that an unstable family structure in early childhood is negatively

⁸⁵ A research study (Y. Zhang & Xie, 2015) suggested parents with higher education and income tend to send their children, especially with fewer siblings, to private tutors, which likely promotes children's academic ability. T-10 had two children; instead of attending private classes, he instructed them. However, his formal schooling was only junior school (although he obtained junior college diploma by adult education). This makes the quality of his tutoring questionable.

associated with children's cognitive, emotional and social development, especially in low-income and low-educated households (Ermisch et al., 2012). The negative influence on the next generation's development from an unstable family structure and environment such as divorce, remarriage, changing of primary caregiver and accidents, were confirmed by the field research. Work-family conflicts and limited knowledge or psychological hurt in the single-parent household are transferred to parenting and monitoring children. For example, T-8 (aged 33) showed an indifferent attitude towards her parents and said she would never be a person like her parents. T-8's parents divorced, and she was left with her grandmother for a period. Her father remarried and her mother was busy with her business. Nobody parented her after junior school. She reported a negative influence on her later education and personality and that otherwise her life would have been better. And for P-5's son and M-6, sudden family accidents (parents' severe disease) obstructed them from schooling; they went to work after junior school and, in particular, P-5's son did not contact his father for years. T-3 (divorced), although not disclosing the details, reported a negative influence on her son's education. Insufficient parenting was also the case for the migrant workers (the P-6 couple), who left their children back in their hometown (J. Han et al., 2014; Y. Zhang & Xie, 2015).

In summary, for whatever the reasons, the investment in education and parenting during the child(ren)'s early childhood was lacking, and tended to result in the child(ren) being more likely to end up in precarious employment, as had their parents.

5.4 Conclusion

Family and work both constitute major aspects of people's lives (T-7). The changes in the family model (from extended family to nuclear family), in the context of individualised risk distribution, influences precarity and in-work poverty. Using the data from participants, this chapter argues that, for precarious workers, although the effects of the family are double-edged, the family works more on reconciliation than wellbeing.

Precarious employment is a generational trap of deprivation. The limitations on the early life of children from the families of precarious workers transmit to the next generation's wellbeing deprivations. This increases the sense of guilt for parents, such that they proactively provide extended family support during their children's adulthood, although at the price of themselves being deprived, in such matters as time-autonomy (prolonging working and care responsibilities), interest activities (also in Chapters 6 and 8), and material deprivation. As the long-term change theory analysed, with less parental investment in both education and emotion, children are less likely to provide support to repay their parents, which is also related to their income condition (H. Zhu, 2016). This can be a reason why the younger generation acted less as the provider of extended family support. Therefore, living in a family with precarious work, the deprivation is not relieved, it just transfers between generations.

These findings expand the extant explanations on the dual roles of family – as both contributor (Baker, 2009; Bárcena-Martín & Moro-Egido, 2013; Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Hick & Lanau, 2018; Swaffield et al., 2018) and mediator (Griggs et al., 2013; H. Yin & Wang, 2015) of family-work conflict to other dimensions of life. And especially, about the differences in intergenerational poverty (Fleury & Fortin, 2006). By analysing the dual roles of the family, this research provides empirical data to expand our understanding of the influence of the family characteristics, including financial, human and social capital⁸⁶ (Coleman, 1988), not only on the older generation, but also on the next generation.

⁸⁶ This will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 : Dependency on Social Capital and Isolation in Social Relations

In his famous sociological novel, *The Gold Wing*, which presents an extensive description of families in early modern China, Yueh-Hwa Lin (1948, p. 151) wrote: 'In order to exist in such a world a man had to have many associations with many different circles of people'. Before 1949, China was regarded as a clan-based society (Barbalet, 2015). Unlike Western society where the boundary of the 'family' is distinct, Chinese families – the most fundamental form of social groups, especially in rural China – were somewhat borderline (Fei, 2004). The big family also denoted the small lineage (*shi* 氏), highlighting not the number of members but the structure of 'family' (Fei, 2004). Lineage shows patrilineal relatives (kinship) expand outward to an organisation with complex functions and disciplines like tribes (Fei, 2004). Many families (lineages) aggregate to a clan (*zu* 族) (Fei, 2004). Clans or lineages have constructed one of the most basic forms of a person's social relations or 'guanxi' (关系), the cornerstone of Chinese society over time (P. P. Li et al., 2019; Yan, 2009)⁸⁷.

Guanxi refers to both the connection to social networks (relational bases or *guan*) and the social networks themselves (structural bases or *xi*) (Bian, 2018; P. P. Li et al., 2019). Xiaotong Fei (2004) used the term *cha xu ge ju* (差序格局) to describe one's 'social circle' (Fei, 2004, p. 51). That is, a person stands at the centre of the kinship (based on marriage and fertility), like a spider web extending to countless people, or like a ripple when a stone is thrown into a lake (Fei, 2004). This egocentric spread accumulates personal contacts and builds one's social relationships; how wide the ripple is depends on the power of the central person (Fei, 2004). Therefore, people within the genealogy can naturally connect in formal cooperation (Freedman, 1958).

Along with kinship, regionalism is also an element in *cha xu ge ju*, forming the social groups

⁸⁷ Although not distinguishing lineage and clan, based on Lin (1948) Freedman (1958, pp. 34–35) described such social relations as: (a) a couple of elementary families (*chia*) or households as an economic unit (or the joint family shared a stove) forms a compound (*hu*) as a socio-political unit (based on dwellings), (b) compounds comprise a branch (*chih*) as a religious unit (shared agnatic ancestors while not necessarily living in a compound), (c) branches consist sub-lineage (*fang*), and then (d) sub-lineages compose a lineage (*tsung-tsu*) as a unit with a combination of functions. The units expand to the larger social organisation, the community (Qu, 2019). With lineages, the family is the basic unit of the social structure (Qu, 2019)

based on neighbourhoods and villages/communities (Fei, 2004). Interpreting Lin (1948)'s novel, Jingdong Qu (2019) commented that geography influences people's fate and interaction space. It is in a specific time and space that people gradually establish and expand the social connections by which they know themselves (Qu, 2019). Likewise, *guanxi* can also be intentionally formed – for example, situational ties as with teachers, students and colleagues (Barbalet, 2015). 'Factional groups' are also egocentric networks, where an elite ego controls and allocates resources to others embedded in different positions in the group (P. P. Li et al., 2019).

In the solid agricultural society, the use of *guanxi* appears unclear. Fei (2004) mentioned that as a result of self-sufficiency from the land (settlement, rather than nomadic tribes), inhabitants/peasants needed allegiances and companionship only under occasional specific situations. However, other scholars expressed the opinion that long-term voluntary associations consisted of kinsmen to deliver reciprocal services and interdependency among members (Freedman, 1958; Y.-H. Lin, 1948). Without reliable formal institutions to provide protection (Chang, 2011; P. P. Li et al., 2019), a clan can not only provide economic security, collective reputation and status, but also organised protection against violence and hostility from other lineages and the state (Freedman, 1958).

Due to this, the central authority and lineages seem independent. Yet, they are also interconnected, since lineage elites are part of the bureaucracy (Freedman, 1958). Therefore, kinship could influence the leadership such that some less competent members could gain an additional advantage (Freedman, 1958). Not only in traditional society but also during the Maoist era, with bureaucracy and the centrally planned economy, factories, villages and ordinary people deliberately established *guanxi* with officials and cadres with discretionary power in resource allocation, to gain privileged access to valuable resources, such as jobs and living necessities (Bian, 2018). Nepotism and corruption (Freedman, 1958; P. P. Li et al., 2019; Yan, 2009) produce a negative connotation of *guanxi*. Establishing (*gao*搞/*la*拉) *guanxi* (Gold et al., 2002) with someone is regarded as a 'purposive' strategy for certain goals (Chang, 2011), the so-called 'back door' or *guanxixue* (关系学)

(Gold et al., 2002).

This foreshadows another element of *guanxi* – social exchange – which receives general agreement in its conceptualisation (Barbalet, 2015). Although kinship *guanxi*, or friendship, is seen as reciprocal in Chinese narratives, reciprocity in its essence is also an exchange behaviour. This is not an immediate equal exchange of benefits as in the Western discourse; in Chinese perception, it is an exchange with greater-value (and/or other kinds of) return either immediately or into the future (Barbalet, 2015; Bian, 2018; P. P. Li et al., 2019; Yan, 2009). Participants called it ‘favour exchange’ (*ren qing wang lai* 人情往来). Owing a favour to another is the glue that binds intimate groups, and this constant reciprocity with a higher return for the favour maintains cooperation between people (Fei, 2004). Reciprocity also means obligation – moral fulfillment of either instrumental (material benefits) or emotional (P. P. Li et al., 2019) repayment. Morality sustains the personal relationship. As filial piety and fraternal duty sustain kinship, so do loyalty and sincerity sustain friendship (Fei, 2004). By performing obligations, traditional Chinese people achieve their roles, which in turn gains them reputation, a necessity in practising *guanxi* exchange (Barbalet, 2015).

The accumulation of reputation produces and accelerates trust and/or assurance. Whereas assurance is produced by the intensive interplay for the common interest with common acquaintances, trust comes from the repeated reciprocal exchange (P. P. Li et al., 2019). As Fei (2004) illustrated, trust in the agricultural Chinese society (spatial immobility and isolation) is grounded in the natural contact from frequently repeated interaction with face-to-face groups, which produces familiarity, feelings of intimacy, and thus safety. The empirical data from Burt et al. (2018) suggested that with the reputation mechanism being part of the closure of the circle, trust is associated with the closed network with a linear increase over time. Longstanding exchange and interaction accumulate reputation, which is also why common acquaintances can build assurance toward strangers in the network. Particularly in bridging social ties, expectation, trust and obligation are the medium of the moneyless transaction (Matiaske, 2013). *Guanxi* thus involves sentimental (altruistic help), instrumental (reciprocal expectation and face), and obligational (informal contract) ties (Bian,

2018; Yan, 2009).

The legacy of *guanxi* in the previous solid clan-based society and employment unit (*danwei* 单位) system, where long-term *guanxi* exists due to familiarity in closure-trust circles, has been challenged by socio-economic transformation since the late 1970s. Social isolation increases with the prevalence of nuclear family and precarious employment. Burt et al. (2018) also showed that smaller-scale families increasingly distinguish *guanxi* and other ties, and they trust more, but depend less on the closure. The meaning of *guanxi* jumps over kinship and territory to more situational ties. For instance, P. P. Li et al (2019) excluded both kinsmen and strangers in their definition of *guanxi*, but kept the element of interpersonal exchange for privileged access to resources.

As *guanxi* expands beyond kinships and risk permeates every aspect of life, the instrumental meaning appears significant in post-Reform Chinese society. Yanjie Bian (2018) explained that during the Maoist period, with state planning, the institutional uncertainty and market competition were minimal, reducing the role of *guanxi* in ensuring one's competitive advantage. However, the market mechanism introduced by the Reform and its corresponding new changes have challenged the authority's previous administrative system. Hence, both institutional uncertainty and market competition increased, especially in the initial stage of the Reform (Bian, 2018). Consequently, information asymmetries prevail, while formal institutions and law enforcement are still weak (Bian, 2018). *Guanxi* is once again of significance, to plug the institutional hole in the clan-based society (Bian, 2018).

Bian (2018)'s surveys demonstrate that the overall trend of using *guanxi* when searching for work had been upwards between 1978 and 2009. The role of *guanxi* as a power influencing recruitment even overtook its role as an information channel before the 1990s and after the 2000s. Therefore, while the social network is treated both as a means to and an end in itself in the capability set, *guanxi* to a large extent pertains to instrumentalism, either as a utilitarian meaning – for example, to save face (*mianzi*, 面子) – or by having the commercial quality (Wilson, 2002) of 'capital' that can produce a reward.

Introducing the concept of 'social capital', this chapter will explore how social networks help or preclude participants from overcoming hardship in the risk society. Albeit a borrowed term from the Western context, scholars (Bian, 2018; Chang, 2011; P. P. Li et al., 2019) used 'social capital' in analysing Chinese *guanxi* or even used them interchangeably⁸⁸, because they at least resonate in terms of social exchange and investment-production with relationships. But to treat the social network as capital assumes individuals are 'rational agents', concerned mainly with utility/profit maximisation (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Matiaske, 2013; Siisiäinen, 2003). This can magnify *guanxi*'s instrumental meaning that the participants highlighted in the post-Reform period (Chang, 2011; Wilson, 2002), and keep a more natural value, rather than the interpretation of *guanxi* that also denotes corruption.

Social networks as a form of capital can be seen as entailing an asset (Hurlbert et al., 2009) or a resource (Coleman, 1988; N. Lin et al., 2009) arising from interpersonal relations (Coleman, 1988) and built by social interaction (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). This is an action (Coleman, 1988) of investment with expected returns (N. Lin et al., 2009), the so-called 'productive' networks that make certain outcomes possible (Coleman, 1988). Like *guanxi*, given the investment and returns, the concept of social capital also involves the exchange of power embedded within trust and obligation relationships (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Matiaske, 2013; Siisiäinen, 2003).

Social capital also has the ability to reproduce itself; that is, social networks expand social ties and generate more available and diverse resources, with further returns to, for example, career paths and incomes (N. Lin et al., 2009). Social relations are thus a useful tool in poverty alleviation (Y. Zhang et al., 2017). Disputes exist as to the classification of bridging social capital (between heterogeneous social groups) and bonding social capital (between homogenous groups)⁸⁹. But

⁸⁸ For the differences between the two terms, see Gold et al. (2002).

⁸⁹ For example, Zhang et al. (2017) mentioned a classification with bonding social ties including families, close friends and neighbours, and bridging ties which can include social institutions. This is somewhat different from Beugelsdijk & Smulders (2003)'s classification (see next paragraph).

regardless of the classification, the key finding has been that the power of social capital, especially bridging (more remote) social capital, has positive effects on the overall wellbeing of individuals (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Hurlbert et al., 2009; N. Lin et al., 2009; Y. Zhang et al., 2017), even when its effects may not be felt immediately (Matthews & Besemer, 2015).

Researchers have found that compared with the poor, the middle-class and better-off have more and have gained the most from social capital (Matthews & Besemer, 2015). Nevertheless, the data collected in the field research showed that the underclass, the precarious workers, still relied heavily on their social network to help them gain employment. 84.78 per cent of participants⁹⁰, for example, found their jobs through family members and friends/acquaintances. Mirroring previous research, however, participants were found to have few social networks, especially bridging ones.

In Western societies, there is a tendency to distinguish between bonding (families and friends) and bridging (others involved in) social networks, based on the degree of close associations or the density of associational activity (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). However, within Chinese culture, family ties are perceived as very separate from other social bonds (Ip, 2011). As shown in previous paragraphs, 'family' in Chinese cultural identity refers not only to the nuclear family but includes the extended family as the closest ties of individuals. 'Non-family' or 'social ties' refers to friends, co-workers, neighbours, clubs or unions, communities, and so on. Since the field research confirmed the family-first culture (Chapter 5), friends, close or not, are viewed as bridging social capital in this research.

The classification does not affect the final outcome of bonding social ties and bridging social ties; that is, most participants were inactive in engaging with broader potential ties, such as colleague circles, labour unions and organisations, and other memberships. Some migrant worker participants (M-2 and M-3) did not even know their co-workers, who could offer potential social capital links. Similarly, other non-local participants (P-6 and T-1) did not develop many friendships in

⁹⁰ Among all 46 participants, S-2 and P-7 did not provide relevant data, 5 participants did not rely on their families and friends/acquaintances to find their job, and the remaining 39 participants relied on their families and friends/acquaintances in finding a job at least once.

the host city they lived in. The size of friendship networks and/or the frequency of interaction with those networks was very limited for nine participants. Another seven participants mentioned that they did not like or were not good at social activities or had no access to social activities. 27 respondents were evaluated as not having obtained the functioning indicator of 'social activities'.

The research thus identified that respondents tended to have less diverse forms of social capital (Y. Lu et al., 2013). They were nonetheless heavily dependent on their existing social networks (Y. Lu et al., 2013) for finding employment. And yet, they tended to self-exclude or be excluded from broader social participation, which makes this a worthwhile phenomenon to explore when studying their capability deprivation. With this focus, this chapter argues that the low engagement in social networks is linked to both a low incentive and inability to develop broader social capital, while their existing ties are powerless, due to homogeneity (Y. Lu et al., 2013) and the cost of obligation exchange, which hampers them from improving their wellbeing. Beugelsdijk & Smulders (2003) developed three factors influencing the decision around bridging social capital: the preference for time spent on friends/family and others; seeking to satisfy material wants; and, productivity/return on investment. The structure of the following sections is based on these three factors.

6.1 Incentives to develop broader social links

Participants could be considered as lacking 'rationalisation' (i.e. not being primarily concerned with profit maximisation) and 'agency' ('no engine of action' (Coleman, 1988)) in their decisions about whether to pursue various social networks. Some who once found a job or solved a problem through their *guanxi* did not even realise they had once benefited from that social capital. Nor did they attach much significance to social capital more generally.

When asked to rank wellbeing indicators, the average weight assigned by participants to the capability of 'social networks and activities' was 6.07, ranked 9th among 11 capabilities. Within this capability, while attending weddings and funerals of relatives tended to be an obligation related to

favour exchange (P-4), the points given to the sub-indicator of 'social activities', such as hanging out with friends, gathering, contacting/chatting with others and collective entertainments (karaoke, drinking, playing cards/mahjong and so forth), was only 4.83 (ranked 40th among 41 capability indicators). The importance of that indicator was lower than that of 'interacting with others' (6.17, ranked 36th) and of 'having good relationships with others in the workplace' (7.50, ranked 22nd). However, it can still be assumed that informants did realise the instrumental importance of social capital. For example, the higher value given to workplace relationships could mean they thought good colleague relationships are related to job performance and mood (M-4). One of the respondents (M-5) did indeed note the importance of social networks derived from interacting with others when she needed help. However, when considering the importance of social capital, their undervaluing of social participation was puzzling.

This section explores how their seemingly 'irrational' attitudes toward social capital are related to the failure of social capital to create maximum utility for them. Utility, as explained by Sen (1999), is a subjective state involved in both mental activities such as happiness, satisfaction and desire (early understanding) and choice (more recent focus). In this section, trust in and pain from social capital will be discussed.

6.1.1 Distrust of institutions and the more distant social capital

As shown previously, Chinese people have historically trusted and depended more on *guanxi* than other formal institutions for their sense of security. Furthermore, throughout China's history, opportunism, rent-seeking and nepotism related to the misuse of bonding social capital (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Matiaske, 2013) has not disappeared. Under these circumstances, participants saw the function of *guanxi* more akin to power than to information channels⁹¹, forming a negative attitude towards the use of *guanxi* as unfair competition, such as in getting a job promotion and

⁹¹ In Bian (2018)'s understanding, the roles of *guanxi* include both power and information (social contacts) embedded in the network.

accessing social welfare. The distrust of government and other institutions tends to destroy the generalised trust in people and reduces the production of social capital (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). With this in mind, through participants' attitudes towards *guanxi* in social welfare as an example of distrust in institutions, this subsection demonstrates how unfamiliarity and negative feelings about the use of *guanxi* produce distrust. It argues that trust in more distant social capital tends to be absent in the risk society, where familiarity is weakened as a result of a more open structure (compared with the traditional society of immobility) and inherited negative impressions about *guanxi*.

Three research participants expressed a strong criticism of *guanxi*, in part due to them or their families having been unsuccessful when applying for social welfare, subsidies or scholarships. Others who had succeeded, however, ascribed this success to them having *guanxi* with the necessary authority. This was a widely held perception among participants, especially when discussing social welfare (particularly *dibao*) allocation, even when they did not have firsthand experience of this. For example, O-5, T-6 and T-8 noted that they had heard anecdotes of other people accessing welfare through their *guanxi*. And while that anecdotal evidence may or may not have been based on real experiences, participants held a strong belief in the decisive role *guanxi* played in social welfare allocation. As some PWJ (Public Welfare Job) participants reported, they knew some of their co-workers had used *guanxi* to get their PWJ. Such hearsay enhances the belief that *guanxi* is a precondition to accessing social welfare. Another example involved a couple (S-4), who strongly believed the reason why S-4 had been assigned low-rent housing was likely to be linked to her husband's acquaintance with the relevant welfare official, more than to their economic condition and her breast cancer, which meant they already met the eligibility criteria for such housing. However, since they did meet the eligibility criteria, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not that acquaintance with the welfare official was what got them access to welfare housing in the first place. This example illustrates the ways in which participants are likely to disregard the role of *guanxi* as an information channel, and to highlight *guanxi* as the misuse of power.

Most participants had lived through the early stage of the Reform era, when, as explained earlier, the role of *guanxi* as a form of power to access personal gain was salient. The participants' continued belief in the primacy of *guanxi* in welfare allocation shows how these beliefs continue to influence their attitudes toward *guanxi* in relation to social welfare. M-6, who was disqualified from the *dibao* in the early 2010s, is one of a few participants who noticed changes to the eligibility criteria, which meant that only the extremely poor were eligible to receive the *dibao*. However, others who still highlighted *guanxi* as a means to access welfare were unaware that the dramatic decline in the number of urban *dibao* recipients in Ya'an city was actually due to the aforementioned policy changes. From the mid-2010s onwards, remaining urban *dibao* recipients were either those who were unable to work or else students who – according to policymakers – should not be expected to work (see Chapter 7). This suggests that it is less likely that *guanxi* was the determining factor in urban *dibao* allocation decisions after 2015, although *guanxi* certainly had a role in the early stages of the implementation of the system (Tang, 2005; L. Yang et al., 2020), especially in rural areas (Golan et al., 2017).

The perception that someone has better social capital that provides them with an additional advantage (N. Lin et al., 2009) led some to criticise others for their perceived utilitarian pursuit of *guanxi* (for example, T-6). Others complained that their lack of social relationships led them to their failure (for example, M-8). In fact, the societal perception of *guanxi* as nepotism implies these participants did not trust public institutions (Yan, 2009), such as social welfare, the community and the labour market. This likely reduced their willingness to establish a connection to relevant organisations, when they knew they did not possess *guanxi* within those organisations (for example, O-4). They assumed there was nothing to be gained without *guanxi*, despite government promises (for example, that those who meet certain eligibility criteria can receive welfare). This can be interpreted as a lack of trust in institution (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Y. Zhang et al., 2017).

With the economic transformation, in addition to the soaring uncertainty and competition explained before, the asymmetric decentralisation (Shi, 2012) stoked scepticism towards institutions.

Under the model of centralisation with social governance, local governments found it difficult to find a balance between the central government's macro planning and local citizens' needs (Y. Liu, 2020). Furthermore, local governments usually lack adequate administrative ability, and have been criticised for passively addressing existing social problems instead of proactively preventing those problems (Y. Liu, 2020). They have also been criticised for misreading the broadly drafted national principles as guidelines to local practice (M. Li & Walker, 2021). A further complication has been that some officials have played the hybrid role of state officials and businessmen, which raises criticism of abuse of power (Mok & Wu, 2013).

Under this context, the discretion of local government sometimes triggers a trust crisis. A study (Yan, 2009) found that people have greater trust in the central government/policies than in their local government/implementations. The generalised abuse of *guanxi* as political capital (M. Li & Walker, 2021) and the mistargeting of welfare applicants at the grassroots level (Gao, 2017; Golan et al., 2017; M. Li & Walker, 2021) make people question the government's commitment to the public good (M. Li & Walker, 2021). Moreover, while there is not enough evidence as to whether or not *guanxi* is abused in welfare allocation, the perception of continued power and misuse of *guanxi* was exemplified in comments made by M-4, in relation to low-rent housing allocations. He complained that officials did not take proactive actions without civilians' complaints and prosecution (*min bu gao guan bu jiu* 民不告官不究) in low-rent housing allocations. As he put it, 'Even if [I or somebody else] prosecuted, it would still be to no avail, and eventually [I] would have no place to live [if the low-rent housing recipient was disqualified due to my tip-off]'.

Institutions could be where participants' potential broader *guanxi* exists. Nevertheless, respondents' lack of trust of institutions prevents them from interacting with broader social ties, further reducing any familiarity towards the institutions. Indeed, approaching bridging social networks is complicated, since it is generally difficult for open structures to generate reputation and trustworthiness (Coleman, 1988). A vicious circle thus forms: unfamiliarity creates distrust, which decreases interaction, in turn aggravating unfamiliarity. An example of this is the case of high-

mobility migrant workers. Compared to other laid-off workers from SOEs, migrant workers interact little with either their co-workers or their bosses. As M-3, who had colleagues from all over the country, said: 'I will not seek to build a relationship [with co-workers] on purpose; as long as we can finish the work task, I don't care whether or not we know each other.'

In contrast to the more open circle, efficiency and mutual trust are what family and friendship can provide. Through them, the cost – time and the possibility of failure or being cheated – can be reduced when seeking a job (or other matters). For example, although P-2 did not take advantage of her social ties while job hunting, she preferred to ask friends or acquaintances to introduce a job to her. Another respondent (P-6), who was often refused by employers due to his disability, mentioned:

Without a person who is trusted by the employer and who can introduce you to an employer, they [employer] will not employ you, right? When they see me, my appearance [humpback], they are afraid of the burden I may bring. Suppose I suddenly get ill while I am working in the workshop. They have to pay for the cost. It is only possible for those who know us, know our real health condition, to give us a job.

The role played by friends or acquaintances improves the likelihood of the result (Y. Lu et al., 2013). This is especially the case when there is high uncertainty (Matiaske, 2013), such as for those unfamiliar with the area (the freshman or migrant worker), when deciding to do a job in an unfamiliar city. When asked about the role friends played in her husband's migrant work, P-4 stated: 'He [her husband] never migrated before ... Surely, if a stranger [asked us to do migrant work with him/her], we won't go ... The most basic condition is that we are somewhat relatives or know each other'. Once again, this implies insufficient trust in the labour market. Another participant (M-4) put it this way:

I think being introduced by friends is more reliable than those [jobs] from the Internet or a recruitment advertisement. So many would play with language. Or only after being employed, you find their benefits or other conditions are not the same as you read.

Overdependence on closer social ties together with lack of institutional protection (Ngai, 2004) becomes their strategy to avoid being cheated and to seek success. Thus, in their minds, when unfamiliar with new situations, they fall back on a pre-existing belief: that *guanxi* is a precondition to institutional protection. It thus can be understood why they are more willing to seek opportunities with smaller profits but more guaranteed trust in relationship exchange (Matiaske, 2013). When asked from whom they would borrow money, five interviewees chose families and six chose friends, with two choosing both. Only one chose a bank. Nine participants were asked who they would go to for information about jobs; all nine chose relatives, friends or acquaintances as their first port of call, likely because they knew their families could not help them in this regard.

6.1.2 Informed pain from interpersonal interaction and less social participation

The high degree of unfamiliarity can be a reason why participants, especially migrants, kept minimal social interactions. For example, M-2 and M-3 did not interact with their colleagues, even though they were living in the same dormitory. M-3 and P-4's husband did not proactively integrate themselves into the city they worked in, such as by walking around or visiting landmarks after work. Similarly, M-3 and M-5 generally avoided spending money in the city. Their limited participation in broader ties was related to the family-first culture, which tends to reduce time spent on establishing social networks (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). And family as a supporting source is also likely to reduce 'external forces' (see Chapter 8), to seek other sources of support from bridging social ties.

Strong family bonds can thus be seen as having a negative influence on the expansion of bridging social ties (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). Conversely, it can be argued that the primacy of family bonds can be related to the fact that remote social capital cannot be as trustworthy as the family. This subsection will further analyse why participants depended more on closer social capital through the informed 'pain' linked to social interactions.

Comparing the pleasure from family interactions with wider social interactions, it is clear that reduced social participation is associated with 'hurt feelings', which also contributes to the

distrust discussed before. Similar to findings from other research (B. Li, 2008), when asked why he had not consulted with community officials about how long he could keep his PWJ, P-6 mentioned: 'It is too early to ask [for information] now. [I am] only in the first year ... And [there is a possibility that] the official retires [after three years]. Asking now is in vain.' P-6 had previously experienced disappointment from welfare officials (both in relationship to PWJ and *dibao*), who had 'promised' to assign him welfare (though not as a *guanxi* favour). While local communities had previously had authority over welfare allocation, more recent policy changes have transferred that authority to government departments (see Chapter 7). P-6 was eligible for PWJ, but ineligible for *dibao* after the policy changed. Based on P-6's account, officials had previously made him believe that the likelihood of being allocated welfare was high, but eventually his applications failed. With the eventual result of 'failure', he thought their promise was just a formality or comfort, not a response that could be trusted. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that it was likely that his level of disability was not sufficient to qualify him for the *dibao*, and he also recognised that the decline of his request for a traffic guide PWJ was because he was unsuitable for that job, given his ill health (humpback). While he understood this, his response was to distrust community officials and other institutions.

Other studies (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; H. Han et al., 2016; Matthews & Besemer, 2015; Solinger, 2012) also found that shame derived from one's economic and job circumstances ultimately leads to less engagement in social participation. Some participants mentioned they were not good at communication, had no common interests with others, disliked interpersonal interactions or were shy in personality traits. These self-analyses can also be further explored within the context of social exclusion. The expressed 'dislike of social interaction' can be linked to feelings of humiliation from gossiping, about things such as their living conditions and work situation (O-1 female, S-6 and O-4) and to social comparison (O-1 female)⁹³. A consequence of their trade-off between emotion and socialisation is that some reduced social interaction to shield themselves from

⁹³ This is consistent with Solinger (2012)'s finding that while maintaining good relations with neighbours, the interviewees had mixed feelings and shame, which led them to hide job loss, hence leading them to greet neighbours but avoid any further talk.

such gossiping. Moreover, two cases suggested instead of trying to become part of those groups, they would seek alternatives where they felt more accepted; such as with groups of similar status and circumstances. Regarding the response of feeling like there was 'no common interests' with others, this tended to be associated with prejudice towards others. For example, T-1 expressed that she found it difficult to communicate with colleagues because they were low-educated, rural people. This shows exclusion is bidirectional; the excluded also participate in excluding others within a heterogeneous group.

Exclusion and self-exclusion practices showed that participants' preferences were not on socialising, but on family. Even when they choose to engage in social participation to increase familiarity with the community and to protect their self-esteem, participants tended to develop networks with those of a similar background (Chang, 2011; Y. Lu et al., 2013). Recalling his social interactions with colleagues while he worked for a SOE, S-8 purported: '[because] compared with them [his colleagues], there was no big gap [between us] in every aspect, and all of us were disciplined'.

The discomfort of social interactions likely constrained them from actively participating in society. Lack of familiarity restricts assurance of wider social interaction and its potential returns. For example, an acquaintance of S-10 (her former classmate's sister) once asked her to run a business together, but S-10 refused because she was 'not very familiar with [the acquaintance]'. This illustrates how unfamiliarity with new changes in the institutions and the misuse of *guanxi* in the past transfer a higher level of distrust. In the risk society, with less interaction with the collective, even in bonding social ties, trust is diminished, pushing individuals to become opportunistic and individualistic (Yan, 2009). As M-8 retorted: 'even my brother (cheated) me, who can I trust?' Likely, the disappointment from trusting family members and being cheated by them exacerbated M-8's distrust of broader ties.

6.2 Available resources for developing social capital

The attitudes mentioned in the previous section limited the likelihood that these workers would establish or expand their social circles. Given that participants knew *guanxi* is important and thus complained of their lack of *guanxi*, it could be assumed that they would in fact like to expand their social networks. Based on Matiaske (2013)'s framework, the expansion of those networks is linked to the ownership or access to the necessary resources (the base of power). Considering that trust and social capital reinforce each other (Siisiäinen, 2003), the low level of trust can also be associated with a lack of social capital. This section thus argues that the barriers to approaching and accessing social networks are significant for precarious workers. Their choice to limit their social involvement can be described as a case of them being 'sour grapes' (being bitter); due to the fact that they cannot attain or obtain desired goals and objects, they disvalue that desire or object to avoid the pain associated with this failure (Schermer, 2013).

As explained earlier, social capital is built through social interaction. The rational agent must trade off the opportunity cost (Matiaske, 2013) between socialising, the time and money involved in that interaction, and the potential benefits arising from it (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). Maintaining social connections is a time-consuming process (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003) that requires investment strategies and lasting obligations (Bourdieu, 1986) to benefit providers (Coleman, 1988). Compared with bonding ties, the opportunity cost of establishing broader social circles is much more costly, since these may occupy work hours and time that could be spent on family and friends, which they value more, and which correspondingly produce more utility (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). Aware of this cost, the attitude of participants towards less socialising is not identical to the materialism (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003). They gave priority to satisfying materialistic wants rather than social participation, because their economic condition was insufficient for family expenditure. Hence, working became their first choice.

Attending social activities requires both money and time that precarious workers cannot afford. When the family is absent, social circles can be a supplement for emotional support (S-8 and

M-2) (Jun, 2019). However, when family is present, socialising becomes secondary within the kinship-first culture. As discussed in Chapter 5, the responsibility to support a family (nuclear and/or extended) affects a participant's expenditure plan and daily schedule. A common expenditure cut is to reduce participation in social activities. For example, with limited finances, three participants reported avoiding social activities such as unnecessary wedding ceremonies and parties, since they involved spending much money on gifts. Eight participants excluded eating out or hanging out with friends from their schedules. This was a phenomenon not only presented among the precarious workers in this research; cutting down on social activities has also been observed among others facing financial strain in China (H. Han et al., 2016) and other parts of the world (Jun, 2019).

The desire to earn more money for their families leads them to take long-hours demanding work and/or abnormal working hours (Chapter 4), crowding out family time, not to mention social activities. For instance, M-3, S-7, P-12 and O-4 reported not to have time for social activities, due to work. S-7 had a long commute to her workplace, located in a nearby mountainous area. Her previous job had provided her with more normal working hours and many colleagues with whom she had a good relationship, and with whom she could hang out with after work. By contrast, in her current job she worked for three consecutive days every nine days, and had fewer colleagues. She thus experienced a reduction in social activities. As she put it: 'Anyway, [there are] only two people [in my work shift]; [we] take meals in turns and then go back to work.' Similarly, M-3's irregular leisure time mismatched that of his friends, reducing his opportunities to socialise. As to P-12 and O-4, with the pressure to maintain a living, they remained busy with their businesses and thus had no time for social interactions.

Theoretically, because they tended to hold more jobs and thus potentially have more co-workers, they could enlarge their social circles. However, in reality, compared with their formal counterparts, precarious workers had smaller friendship circles and lower rates of unionisation, due to having less attachment to their workplace (Lewchuk & Laflèche, 2017). Furthermore, their high geographic mobility, limited cooperation at work, and temporary co-worker relationships tended to

scatter their social connections. For example, S-8 recounted the various after-work activities organised in their living quarters by his former employer (a SOE), compared with his later precarious job where he worked and lived by himself. As explained in Section 6.1, these workers tended to be not 'good' at developing new social networks; the low socio-economic position of their job also meant they could not expand their range of social capital or provide more productive social resources (Y. Lu et al., 2013). The social circle around their work determines who they can connect with, as well as the social status of those contacts. As described by other participants, M-6, a chef, mentioned: 'If you had a master ... whose apprentices are either the head chef or the executive chef in the hotel, your contacts would immediately become distinct'. That is, if there is a contact of high social rank in the network, the resources embodied in that network become powerful. However, most precarious jobs cannot provide the contacts with the higher social hierarchy. This is why O-2 preferred to have a formal job – though with lower income – within the public sector, as this role provided a wider social circle and thus more powerful social resources.

Power is a medium of exchange in social relations, just like the role money plays in market exchange (Matiaske, 2013). The social relation is decided by one's location in the network (N. Lin et al., 2009). The higher one's position in the hierarchy, the more likely one will be able to develop more quality social networks and vice versa (Hurlbert et al., 2009; Y. Lu et al., 2013). One would thus become a status-giver, deciding who one would engage with in an exchange. However, since power comes from the granter's 'positions, status, wealth and network centrality' (Bian, 2018, p. 607), lower-status individuals (such as the less-educated, the unemployed, the urban poor) (Hurlbert et al., 2009) tend to be rejected from social networks, both in terms of access and the power relations (the resources embodied in the network) (N. Lin et al., 2009; Y. Lu et al., 2013). Precarious workers' low human capital (education⁹⁴) and occupation position, especially when experiencing downward social mobility, can even ruin friendships. This was the case of P-3 and P-8, both of whom had been

⁹⁴ Social interaction is also influenced by being well-spoken and having good manners, which can be obtained from education, according to respondents. The participants and their families were generally low-educated, and a few showed poor language ability during the interview.

laid off from a SOE. Not to mention the prejudice and mistreatment experienced in their jobs, as was reported by M-5 and O-1 (see Chapter 5).

Given all of the above, it is safe to claim that the deprivation in social participation experienced by the 24 participants is linked to their low position, which in turn is associated with their precarious jobs. Their job and family background played a decisive role in assigning available time, money and status to connections. Some research in that area found that bridging social ties (such as business ties, political ties and voluntary ties) have a great effect on poverty reduction, despite varying degrees (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Hurlbert et al., 2009; N. Lin et al., 2009; Y. Zhang et al., 2017). However, participants had no access to and participated less in these social ties (Y. Lu et al., 2013).

The business ties (networks) are related to the job but, as discussed in previous paragraphs, are 'difficult' to establish. Political engagement received a lower regard than social participation (the average weight participants assigned to 'political freedom' ranked 37th among the 41 indicators). The most common reasons given by participants for choosing this low ranking were: 'not interested', 'not having access to' (for example, T-6 reported she did not know where and how to vote; and M-5, due to migrant work, could not participate in the political activities of her hometown), or 'doesn't work for me', as well as the potential reason of not having time for political activities.

Likewise for voluntary organisation and other associational membership, participants disvalued 'faith/religious freedom', as most had no religious beliefs. Therefore, the churches that can be a social tie in Western society (Beugelsdijk & Smulders, 2003; Hurlbert et al., 2009) did not apply to most precarious workers in China. And although welfare-relevant participants were in more frequent contact with the community⁹⁵, other participants were not so.

Existing research also found central state-administrated areas (large and developed cities) (N. Lin et al., 2009), as well as urban areas more generally (Y. Zhang et al., 2017), had larger networks and that having networks in these places is more powerful, since those areas owned more

⁹⁵ Especially P-7, P-8 and P-10, who received various help from the community they belonged to.

resources. However, the participants lived in a very peripheral, small city in western China, implying their ability to develop social capital was likely further restricted, due to spatial inequalities.

Furthermore, modern technology, including the Internet (Matthews & Besemer, 2015), phones and vehicles (Hurlbert et al., 2009), did not reduce older and lower-educated precarious workers' isolation from broader social ties. Although it simultaneously increased access to their existing social capital, only four participants mentioned using WeChat⁹⁶ at work or with wider social circles. S-5 (female, aged 50) reported the difficulty of modern technology at work, which required providing photos and sharing them by phone with her employer. Once again, this suggests that middle-aged, lower-educated precarious workers benefited less from technological developments, relying on their existing social connections to help them access a job. In contrast, younger and better-educated participants showed less dependency on *guanxi* in their job hunting, since they could more easily take advantage of technology, such as the Internet (T-7), newspapers (T-10) and formal job entrance exams (O-2, T-6 and her husband) to find jobs.

The range of and access to networks decides the resources they can use (Hurlbert et al., 2009). Most access to social networks is blocked for precarious workers, if the material demands have not yet been achieved. Therefore, resources embodied in the networks are also unavailable to them. While it would be possible for them to take advantage of their limited social capital, it seems that even if they have existing networks, the translation of the range of networks into accessible resources is also a 'difficulty' (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011).

6.3 Productivity of investment and obligation exchange of social capital

The volume of one's social capital relies not only on the size of the network but also on the volume the network commands (Bourdieu, 1986). Using Bourdieu's framework, Cannone (2016) argued that people within a similar social stratum likely share social and physical spaces with those

⁹⁶ A popular social media in China, like Facebook in Western countries.

having similar status, habitus and taste, which emerges from and results in unequal access to resources. The homogeneous background that participants share likely makes the resources embodied in the network limited and insufficient for obtaining comprehensive wellbeing (Y. Lu et al., 2013). This, in turn, is also likely restricted by the obligation exchange when using social capital.

A useful example of insufficient resources from homogeneous ties is also the generational transmission of precarious employment. In addition to low education (see Chapter 5), social capital also affects the transition into the labour market. Bingley et al. (2012) suggested that due to parents' resources, such as information sources, contacts and control in the recruitment process, the children in a family with a higher socio-economic position are more likely to work for the same employer as their parents, obtaining higher economic outcomes than those with low socio-economic status. This phenomenon was well understood by participants, who knew their low education closes the door to most formal jobs, even before they could prove they are competent. Children from a less well-off family background were powerless to pursue an ideal job (T-9). Thus, social capital is indeed needed to find a decent job.

However, social capital of young people generally comes from parents, friends or acquaintances. It is less likely that the children of precarious workers will use their own social connections, since in early adulthood or their teen years it is harder to build one's own social networks⁹⁷. For example, M-6 (aged 29 and who had worked as a chef for about 12 years), when asked why he was not the contractor for the restaurant said: 'our circle is small, unlike my master [the contractor] who has worked [in this industry for] so many years and owned a large network [of *guanxi*]'. Yet, young people's parents' social connections, especially to the formal sector, are minimal. Therefore, the options the child(ren) had were limited to: (a) doing their parents' job (as parents pass the skill to their children), such as O-6's husband and his father, P-12 and his son, and T-7 (one employment experience) and his father; (b) doing other precarious jobs that parents'

⁹⁷ Lin et al. (2009) found being older is significantly related to more social capital; also building social capital maybe starts during high school.

acquaintances introduced/provided, such as M-6 and S-6's son; or (c) being self-employed through a small investment from their parents, such as P-12's son and S-5's son.

It should not be overlooked that some participants had more diverse friendship circles. Nevertheless, they did not use them much. In addition to the propensity (Section 6.1) to refuse a potential exchange, a more holistic analysis would suggest that the exchange needs to be of somewhat 'equal value' (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011), even when exchanging favours. As explained earlier, social capital contains both elements of obligation and expectation; that is, doing something for the person and trusting he/she will reciprocate someday (Coleman, 1988). Using social capital is costly under this obligation/expectation context, even within closer ties. This obligation is more or less coercion (Bourdieu, 1986; Matiaske, 2013). Thus, the person using social capital should forge self-interest and could be forced to act with certain norms in the future (Cannone, 2016; Coleman, 1988). For instance, S-8, S-10 and T-6's mother were employed by their either siblings or in-laws. They thus had to be selfless and could not complain or ask for better wages than those the market generally provided (S-8 and T-6's mother) or else could not ask for easier/more interesting job tasks (S-10). Making a request was not easy when such relationships were involved, since it brought a feeling of embarrassment or worry that their siblings and in-laws would be unhappy about it.

Under such highly unbalanced exchanges, 'uncomfortable' feelings of 'social indebtedness' are heightened (Boon & Farnsworth, 2011). As Wilson (2002) suggested, favour exchange sometimes 'does not pay'. Since right and obligation in social relationships must be kept in balance, the favour also becomes a burden, such that people would, for example, choose to employ a stranger rather than a relative (Fei, 2004). To avoid such potential constraint, they tend not to use social relationships unless absolutely necessary. Eventually, those unequal power relationships can result in unsuccessful resource translation, despite involving networks.

6.4 Conclusion

Social participation and interaction are crucial tools for building social capital or *guanxi*, which can play the role of informal protection (Yan, 2009). The number and level of social networks available to individuals result in an unequal distribution of opportunities arising from those networks (Bingley et al., 2012), in turn influencing people's wellbeing outcomes. Participants showed a puzzling behaviour, whereby middle-aged, low-skilled precarious workers depended more on closer social networks in finding a job, compared with their younger, more educated counterparts; but they did not actively participate in social activities that would help them develop their social capital. They particularly lacked bridging social capital; thus their potential information channels and power to improve their wellbeing was limited.

The reasons behind this relationship are complex. Participants' incentives to accumulate the remote social capital tended to be low. They usually showed distrust of broader social capital, as well as distrust of institutions (for example, social welfare). This is linked to unfamiliarity in a new, open structure, which led them to experience pain in social interactions. This was further compounded by their traditional negative perception of *guanxi*, which they linked to unfair competition for personal gain. Yet the low incentives also cannot be disassociated from them feeling like 'sour grapes', due to the barriers they experienced in approaching social capital. On the one hand, participants wished they could have *guanxi*; on the other hand, those receiving privilege through *guanxi* were regarded as shameful.

Analysing their ambivalent attitude towards *guanxi*, the researcher found that insufficient money and time, lower status in the society (especially living alone in the small city), and failure to keep up with communication technology developments all play a role in this social isolation. As Burt et al. (2018) explained, when a person is politically troubled, financially vulnerable, or socially unpopular so that the person becomes unhappy and/or unhealthy, his/her *guanxi* ties get away from himself/herself as a result of decreased trust. Precarious workers' disadvantage would send a message that they are untrustworthy, narrowing their networks. Even when they hold some ties with

others of similar status and circumstances, this social capital contains few resources that can be used to, for example, gain a (better) job and/or overcome other hardships. Further, given the obligation of favour exchange, they would need to pay more for using any social capital they owned. Therefore, both the range and the power of social capital of precarious workers are inadequate, putting them at risk of capability deprivation.

The evidence for influences from the intra-household and inter-household support also adds weight to the argument that poverty and social exclusion are correlated (Böhnke, 2008; Boon & Farnsworth, 2011; Gao, 2017; L. Yang et al., 2020). The analyses and evidence complement social capital research demonstrated by, for example, Hurlbert et al. (2009) regarding the restricted range of social capital. Moreover, based on the analysis in this chapter, the negative correlation between the value of materialism and preference for socialising presented by Beugelsdijk & Smulders (2003) indicates the inability behind these subjective choices to not engage with social capital. The empirical evidence showed that disadvantage usually excludes participants from developing social capital – even when they would want to do so –, which contrasts with Change (2011)'s proposition that less advantaged people may be more likely to use *guanxi*.

This scenario of diminishing bridging social capital among precarious workers under the risk society is worrying. Precarious workers showed excessive dependence on close ties, by which the family reduced the likelihood of approaching a broader social network. However, if Bourdieu's theory of homogeneous background in social capital applies, the output and efficacy of close social ties cannot make up for the lack of bridging social capital. Worse still, bonding social capital is narrowing as a result of increasing fragmentation of the traditionally large family structure – the downsized family (less siblings for the younger), the high rate of divorce, and delayed marriage (Chapters 4 and 5). As a result, the number of close ties who are trustworthy and utilisable is declining; thus the reciprocity exchange and the corresponding resources are further reduced.

The long-term, stable dependency among people has been reduced all round, with the chain effect from the precarious labour market, family and social network. This is, in part, the price of

'evacuation of tradition' (Giddens, 1994) within the risk society. The familiarity of tradition and its relevant structural elements, such as rites, habits and kinship, are the essence of trust, which sustains basic personal identity and connection to broader social networks (including the basic element of safety) (Giddens, 1994). With less familiarity with a society, the sense of safety is increasingly being lost. An antagonism exists between institutional dependency (Beck, 1992) and the distrust of institutions. The risk people face regarding capability deprivation is increasing. Therefore, the question is whether or not the last resort safety net (i.e. social assistance) can be helpful in risk control and compensation, within the context of individualisation. This will be the focus of analysis in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 : The Effect of Social Assistance Policy on Precarity and In-work

Poverty

Compared with the structures or patterns of living together discussed in former chapters, social assistance tends to be less influential in people's ability to achieve wellbeing, primarily due to two reasons. Firstly, social assistance works after the institutions of the labour market, family and social capital have failed to help individuals overcome hardships. Secondly, in urban China, only a very limited number of people receive social assistance. In 2019, for example, the number of urban *dibao* recipients in Ya'an was only 2,892 (YSB & YBNBS, 2020), covering about 0.0198 per cent of the local population⁹⁸. Similarly, the number of people assigned to a public welfare job (*gong yi xing gang wei* 公益性岗位, PWJ for short) that same year was 2,287 (YMPG, 2019), which represented about 0.026 per cent of the working age population⁹⁹.

While the actual coverage of social assistance is very small, social assistance remains important for vulnerable groups. In itself, it is an important capability enhancer for the whole population. This chapter focuses on the individualised risk distribution in social assistance policies (*dibao* and PWJ) and its influence on people's wellbeing, based on the experiences of participants who were involved in PWJs and/or *dibao*.

In the existing literature, PWJ is usually referred to as 'community voluntary work' or 'community social service', but as this type of work is no longer only carried out in communities (*shequ* 社区) but is also attached to other public or governmental institutions, 'community voluntary work' seems inappropriate to represent its full meaning. A public welfare job (PWJ) can thus be more generally be described as a government-provided job. It is one measure of 'workfare', to help those unable to find a job through the labour market. Based on a search of policies, news and other

⁹⁸ The population of permanent residents in Ya'an in 2019 was 1.541 million (YSB & YBNBS, 2020).

⁹⁹ The working age population in Ya'an in the population census in 2010 (newest) was 0.8814 million (YSB & NBSSOY, 2019).

publications from various Ya'an governmental websites¹⁰⁰, it can be stated that there are basically three types of PWJs:

1. Traditional/general PWJs: available for (vulnerable) urban household registration (*hukou* 户口) citizens. Claimants can be employed for three to five years, according to their age before retirement, with post-employment subsidies (*gang wei bu tie* 岗位补贴, the wage the employer pays) equal to the local minimum wage standard plus the employer part contribution to claimant's social insurances.
2. Temporary PWJs: temporary assistance measure provided during a disaster situation (for example, earthquake, floods, COVID-19). Usually, claimants can only be employed for several months.
3. Rural PWJs: targeted at the rural poor. In Ya'an's case, rural poor relates to people who hold a rural *hukou* registration and suffer from extreme poverty. At the time of fieldwork, most cases involved in 'rural PWJs' were linked to the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (*jing zhun fu pin* 精准扶贫) welfare scheme. The wage of rural PWJs is much lower than that of urban PWJs, likely because of lower living costs in rural areas.

This research only studies the first type of PWJs, the traditional/general PWJs. Unless otherwise stated, 'PWJ' in subsequent paragraphs refers to traditional/general PWJs.

Based on discussions with a few community workers, and a close reading of the Law of Promotion of Employment, the Interim Measures for Social Assistance, and relevant Ya'an policies¹⁰¹, it can be established that the eligibility criteria for a PWJ include:

¹⁰⁰ Although sometimes the types of 'PWJ' outlined there are unclear and blurred.

¹⁰¹ Mainly including: Notice from Ya'an Labour and Social Security Bureau on Issuing the Relevant Work in Identifying People with Difficulties in Finding a job (Issued by Ya'an Labour and Social Security Bureau, No.49 in 2009) (雅安市劳动和社会保障局关于就业困难人员认定工作有关问题的通知 雅劳社发[2009]49号); Notice on issuing Measures for Implementation in Identifying People with Difficulties in Finding a Job (关于印发《雅安市就业困难人员申请认定实施办法》的通知); Notice from Ya'an Human Resources and Social Security Bureau on Issuing the Management Measures for People with Difficulties in Finding a Job Placed in Public Welfare Jobs (雅安市人力资源和社会保障局关于印发雅安市就业困难人员公益性岗位就业管理办法的通知); and the online guidance of Application for Public Welfare Job (公益性岗位申请).

- a) Having low employability, such as being over a certain age (above 40 for women and 50 or over for men, the so-called '4050s'); having a low-level of education/skills; and recovering from a disability or serious illness, which does not preclude them from performing easy and simple tasks; and
- b) Having no stable income sources or a low income, due to being a *dibao* recipient and/or a member of a low-income family; unemployed for more than one year; in a family without a member in employment; or a farmer whose land was expropriated.

Common PWJ roles include:

- a) Assisting in matters related to overseeing city regulations in everyday local interactions, including tasks such as regulating vendors and stalls; traffic wardens; disseminating information about laws (legal propaganda), employment and labour-related supervision; public security and so on; and
- b) Community service providers, such as street and public space cleaners, security guards, green keepers and vehicle watchmen.

The targeted groups are much less competitive in the job market and relatively vulnerable economically. By providing easy jobs that most people can be competent at, the core goal of PWJ is making people employed¹⁰², as a way to help them overcome hardship. The existing literature tends to regard PWJ and *dibao* as bound together. Historically, by requiring *dibao* recipients to undertake some community service tasks (as PWJs), the policy assumes *dibao* recipients can be activated to be self-reliant (see Chapter 1). However, the field research showed that, to a large extent, the two programmes are divided in the context of individualisation. The new change in *dibao* and PWJ, with the enforced tendency of individualised risk distribution, influences not only the life and choices of potential applicants and recipients, but also the policy results, for example, the effect and efficacy of poverty reduction.

¹⁰² As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

This chapter argues that the trend toward individualised risk distribution in social assistance (*dibao* and PWJ) has a significant effect on recipients, by unevenly distributing the opportunity for people with real vulnerabilities to access social protection programmes, and making them more likely to suffer chronically from various capability deprivations, even when they are able to overcome extreme economic poverty. It discusses individualised risk in social assistance and its effect on the capability set (Section 7.1) and capability deprivation (Section 7.2).

7.1 Individualised risk in social assistance and its effect on the capability set

As outlined in Chapter 1, social assistance in China has followed a trend of individualised targeting since the start of the market-oriented reforms. Data gathered from the fieldwork about the three distinct features of individualised risk distribution confirmed the decline of collectivism in social assistance, and the reinforcement of the individual person's responsibility to 'help themselves'. This finding followed Carola Conces Binder (2019)'s findings that individualism (especially in lower-income areas) is closer to neoliberal individualism which highlights self-reliance and encourages competition.

First, self-reliance has been prioritised with the individualised risk distribution feature, such that family-related characteristics and needs become secondary to an individual's ability to work. Hence the protection of vulnerable families has been turned into the protection of vulnerable individuals within vulnerable families. The *dibaohu* (低保户) or *dibao* 'household' has been replaced by individual *dibao* recipients. That is, even in a family or household, only the eligible member(s) can receive *dibao* assistance. Regarding PWJ, the policy defines 'family' within an unclear family model, ignoring the livelihood sources from those who are in fact living together. And although there is a family means test (such as around ownership of housing and cars), it is the characteristics of the applicants themselves – such as being farmers whose land was requisitioned, being part of the

'4050s' group, being laid-off or disabled – which essentially determine whether or not they can be allocated a PWJ, even in cases where a spouse can earn sufficient money to support the household.

The second point of individualised risk distribution is authority transfer over welfare allocation decisions, which is also a factor contributing to the former feature, resulting in greater competition. Within the PWJ system, the number of jobs allocated by local communities has significantly decreased. Instead, the authority over PWJ allocation has been transferred from communities to local government departments, which tend to be less familiar with each applicant's real conditions compared to local communities. The more vulnerable applicants have to compete with less or non-vulnerable applicants, or wait longer for a PWJ vacancy in the community.

Under the two changes, assistance for poverty and vulnerability has been divided to a large extent, producing unequal risk distribution even among the vulnerable, the third sign of risk individualisation. At first glance, as with the whole of national social security (Sander et al., 2012), this seems an expansion towards a more effective and efficient system without undermining egalitarianism. Yet, in fact, neoliberal individualism's tolerance for redistributive inequality (C. C. Binder, 2019) and social welfare minimalism (Midgley & Tang, 2002) are very much in place. On the one hand, the vulnerable able-bodied in urban areas but who are not officially classified as living in extreme poverty fell through the cracks of social protection. On the other hand, social assistance benefits are kept so low that recipients can only alleviate extreme poverty, leaving them powerless to address other capability deprivations (Section 7.2).

The above three points around individualisation trends illustrate how social assistance has become more targeted. However, such targeting and disassociation are questionable in terms of enlarging the capability set of individuals and families.

7.1.1 Individual characteristics, segmented family vulnerability and ineffective targeting

From the perspective of Ya'an local policies, the urban poor constitute those suffering from absolute poverty, including (potential) *dibao* recipients, as well as those suffering from relative

poverty, for example low-income families. These two definitions are based solely on an economic understanding of poverty. Only those identified as living in absolute poverty are eligible to receive *dibao* – the cash transfer without any requirement of compulsory work – whereas being identified as living in relative poverty excludes individuals and families from *dibao* but can still be an eligibility criterion for accessing PWJ. Nevertheless, whether one can eventually be assigned *dibao* or PWJ is not only a matter of how poor – in financial terms – one’s family is, but is also dependent upon one’s ability to work as well as other individual characteristics (for example, low employability) that demonstrate a person deserves to receive assistance.

By examining the eligibility criteria of both *dibao* and PWJ, this subsection argues that consideration of an individual applicant’s ability and characteristics takes precedence over consideration of family-related circumstances. However, an inaccurate definition of poverty and vulnerability without an appropriate family means test causes mistargeting – narrowing the coverage and efficacy of protection. The section starts by analysing the phenomenon of *dibaohu* being replaced by *dibao* individuals and the exclusion of the able-bodied from *dibao*, in order to explain how the principles of ‘family economic conditions’ and ‘labour ability’ interact. This is followed by an analysis of the reasons and results of giving more weight to individual abilities and characteristics, than to family characteristics.

7.1.1.1 Stricter eligibility criteria for identifying the poor and individual *dibao* recipients

The general tendency of *dibao* eligibility is tightening, not in the benefit level which increases every year, but in the eligibility criteria to be considered ‘poor’. As mentioned in a previous paragraph, a large number of urban *dibao* recipients had their benefits cancelled in 2015¹⁰³, likely as a result of changes to the eligibility criteria. In 2019, the number of urban recipients decreased even

¹⁰³ Based on the Statistical Communiqués of Ya’an National Economic and Social Development collected from 2010 to 2019, from 2015 onwards the number of recipients was kept low. Data from the year 2014 – 307,524 – may be in error (the researcher had a short-time internship in a branch of local civil affair department from 2014.12 to 2015.1, with a main job to review recipients’ family assets, such as ownership of housing and shops to disqualify ineligible recipients).

further, to less than 10 per cent of the 2013 figure (YSB & YBNBS, 2014). The rationale behind this large-scale disqualification of *dibao* recipients was a ‘correction’ to the *dibao* allocation, by which through fraud or for other reasons, ‘non-poor’ households had been receiving the *dibao*. The *dibao* eligibility review became increasingly stricter, making able-bodied adults ineligible. Thus, *dibao* recipients in the name list of community print bulletins¹⁰⁴ tend to be only those with a severe disability and who cannot thus work, as well as juveniles/undergraduate students who are regarded as ‘not having to work’ in the policy.

The two core principles of *dibao* – economic conditions and labour ability (in addition to having a local *hukou*) – in identifying potential *dibao* recipients (extremely poor/without ability to work) and PWJ claimants (relative poverty or vulnerability/with ability to work) define both absolute and relative poverty in very harsh terms. A family with a member who is able to work can hardly be covered by the *dibao* system, because their income can easily reach the *dibao* standard. Similarly, because the able-bodied are expected to work, protection for the poor family (*dibaohu*) has been changed to protection for individual member(s) in the poor family who is/are unable to work (*dibao* individuals).

As to the concept of extreme poverty in the *dibao* policy (according to the local community bulletin board), eligible households (family members living together) need to have an average income that is below *dibao* standard (560 CNY/person/month (urban) in 2019) (YSB & YBNBS, 2020), while family assets need to be within an ‘acceptable’ level. The ‘acceptable’ level includes having none of the following: a vehicle, non-essential housing (such as an investment property, ownership of more than one property or housing, and having housing with a large area), ownership of a business, and savings and stocks valued at more than 24 times the *dibao* standard.

By comparison with *dibao*, eligibility rules for identifying low-income families (an eligibility criterion for PWJ) are slightly looser. A low-income family – which Ya’an policy describes as living in

¹⁰⁴ Urban communities usually publish and publicly display the names and eligibility criteria of those receiving *dibao* within their jurisdiction.

relative poverty – refers to households whose average income is between the *dibao* standard and twice the *dibao* standard (YGO, 2009). Similarly to *dibao*, excessive family assets – having a vehicle, an average housing area of more than 15 square metre per capita, unnecessary living items with a value of more than 5,000 CNY, eating/entertaining in luxury places, and self-funded overseas study or working overseas – would disqualify applicants (YGO, 2009).

It should also be mentioned that ‘being able to work but being unemployed’ immediately disqualifies an applicant from the *dibao*. The principle of ‘labour ability’ takes priority over the principle of ‘economic conditions’. This means that no matter how poor, an applicant deemed to be able-bodied and able to work, but who does not currently hold a job, cannot be a recipient of *dibao*. The intention of the policy and the social convention is that able-bodied people should work to be self-reliant; and that as long as they work enough, they can overcome poverty. Some respondents agreed with this premise. As T-10 remarked: ‘in today’s society ... wherever you go [to work], you can easily earn equal to 100/200 or 200/300 CNY [per day]’. Similarly, in a discussion with community workers, they highlighted that the able-bodied, especially the young, can find a job if they really want to have a job. Human Resources and Social Security Departments organise and manage Job Market Platforms, where jobseekers can be employed within 48 hours of applying to start earning money¹⁰⁵. This logic portrays the unwillingness to take a job, regardless of how harsh the job is, as a character flaw of individuals.

The two principles cause a vicious circle: since the able-bodied are expected to have to work, once they find a work, their family assets/incomes will likely disqualify them from the *dibao*. Some participants or their families, as individuals with precarious work, can earn money equal to or higher than the average (annual) wage level in Ya’an (62,197 CNY in 2019). This is illustrated by the income levels of several of the respondents: 60,000 CNY for M-2, 60,000-70,000 CNY for P-1’s husband, and 80,000 CNY for M-5 and M-6. When employed, workers can easily reach the *dibao* standard or twice the *dibao* standard benchmark. Even the minimum wage standard – 1,650 CNY/month before tax for

¹⁰⁵ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

2018 (YHRSSB, 2018) – was higher than twice the *dibao* standard. This means that in a family with two parents and one child, even when only one person works, the family's average per capita income (550 CNY/month) could almost meet the per capita *dibao* standard (560 CNY/month). If both spouses work and have wages equal to the minimum wage standard, their average income (1,100 CNY) would basically reach the low-income family standard (1,120 CNY) and thus disqualify them from the *dibao*.

The result is that, as the statistical data in previous paragraphs showed, the actual coverage of *dibao* is noticeably limited, encompassing primarily those who are unable to work. *Dibaohu* become *dibao* individuals. At the time of interview, for example, among the respondents, the seven *dibao* recipients included P-8's mother (advanced age), S-2's mother (old age, physically disabled, with no income sources), S-6's adult son (with an intellectual disability), M-6's mother (with severe disabilities), M-3's niece (orphan under 18, who lived with her grandmother), P-1's brother (with intellectual disabilities), and O-1's brother (also with intellectual disabilities). According to feedback from participants whose families/extended family members received the *dibao*, other family members (even within the nuclear family) who were able to work were not covered by *dibao*. Data from *dibao* lists displayed on printed bulletins in three communities visited listed only one *dibao* household with more than one *dibao* recipients (it had three recipients). The above mentioned examples serve to illustrate and support the rapid and dramatic decline in *dibao* recipients in Ya'an since 2015.

7.1.1.2 Family Assets and Support, and Individual Characteristics as Eligibility Criteria

With the change from *dibao* households to *dibao* individuals, the core principle of labour ability weakens the other core principle of the family means test. Against unconditional universalism, means-tested social assistance is a individualist's preference (Midgley & Tang, 2002) and a commodity-logic of liberalism for the residual welfare state model that only provides minimal welfare after the failure of the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Like 'competitive individualism',

realigned individualism with collectivism emphasises self-help as a way to equalise opportunities, while encouraging work incentives and market laws (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Ya'an's social assistance pathway has prioritised individual's labour ability. However, while the policies use the means test as a precondition to welfare allocation, the focus on individual self-reliance fragments the household's vulnerability. In other words, on the one hand (as in the above subsection), a family with members able to work is excluded; on the other hand, through the implementation of the means test, the policy defines 'part of the family' only within the nuclear family (usually parents and non-adult children) but neglects extended family members who could potentially be supporters. The intention behind this is probably to reduce the negative effects of family obligation on family burden and relationships (independence and harmony of extended families) (Stein-Roggenbuck, 2017), especially with the context of a neoliberal individualist ideology that assumes the individual, not his/her relatives, should be responsible for his/her outcomes. This is also likely to foster universalist's welfare right entitlements (Stein-Roggenbuck, 2017) as a political agenda. However, this definition of the 'family' leaves a loophole allowing some non-deserving applicants to become welfare recipients. With the family means-test procedure only happening within the nuclear family, for example, the two eligibility criteria for PWJs – having 'no stable income sources' and 'low employability' – become problematic, as they tend to trigger the hiding of family assets (although this may often happen unintentionally).

Five of the aforementioned *dibao* recipients¹⁰⁶ had in fact waged family members 'living together', lifting their real household income above the *dibao* standard. P-8, with a pension and a wage of about 4,000 CNY/month in total, looked after his ageing mother who had *dibao* and one other allowance of more than 600 CNY/month in total. S-2's mother had two sons who both had incomes, providing her with financial help. Although the income of S-2's brother was unknown, S-2 himself could earn about 4,500 CNY/month and received a monthly pension of 3,400 CNY as well,

¹⁰⁶ The family economic condition of O-1's brother and P-1's brother was unknown, and they were likely rural *dibao* recipients (as were M-6's mother and M-3's niece).

sufficient for supporting his mother. As for S-6, he had *neitui* (early retirement) allowance of about 1,000 CNY/month, and his son lived with him. Although the average household income of S-6's family made his son eligible for receiving *dibao*, he and his son, for the most part, live with his ageing parents who have sufficient pensions. M-6's mother lived with her son (M-6 is single and his father had passed away). Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, M-6 could earn 50,000-60,000 CNY/year, enough to also support his mother. M-3 was divorced, and his daughter was married and lived with her husband's family. When in his hometown (a county of Ya'an), M-3 lived with his niece (the orphan) and his mother, who received a monthly pension of 1,612 CNY. M-3 was a migrant worker with an income of about 45,000 CNY/year, and enjoyed low-rent housing in the central district of Ya'an because of his local *hukou* registration. M-3's mother alone¹⁰⁷ or combined with M-3 can make their average household income higher than *dibao* standard.

In the above cases, respondents were able to access *dibao* not because of *guanxi*.¹⁰⁸ Rather, it is hypothesised that the reason lied in the ways in which the 'family' is defined when conducting the family means test. All of the above cases show that the concept of 'family' or 'household' in assigning welfare did not really consider those 'living together' and being related as being part of the family. This can be confirmed by the legal responsibility lines between 'family members' to provide mutual support, as outlined in the official government document (YGO, 2009), including:

- a) couples (marriage),
- b) parents over non-adult child,
- c) grandparents and non-adult grandchildren whose parents passed away, and
- d) siblings and non-adult siblings without parents or with parents having no ability for supporting.

The four kinds of legal responsibility lines suggest that the legal responsibility exists only

¹⁰⁷ According to the four legal responsibility lines below, the niece of M-3, as in point (c), should be supported by her grandmother (M-3's mother), and the support between aunt/uncle and niece/nephew is not a compulsory requirement.

¹⁰⁸ Unfair competition due to family connections (the issue of *guanxi* is discussed in Chapter 6). Based on the researcher's experience, it is usually not likely that *guanxi* got them access to urban *dibao*.

among nuclear family members. And to some degree, the legal responsibility of adult children towards their parents and vice versa is excluded. While an adult child's responsibility to support his or her parents is considered to be a precondition when making *dibao* allocation decisions¹⁰⁹, the participants did not mention this as being part of the means-test procedure they had undergone.

Rather, it is the recipients' characteristics – especially their ability to work – that play a more important role in deciding their *dibao* allocation outcomes. As T-1 reported when asked why they failed to apply for *dibao*: 'he/she [welfare officer] said that ... in any case [we] did not belong to the *dibao* group; meaning that we can labour'.

Changes in people's economic conditions or individual characteristics could affect their eligibility for *dibao*, but it needs not affect the eligibility of their extended family members who might be living with them, for example, parents and adult children. The example of M-6 is illustrative of this situation. After transitioning into adulthood, M-6 was identified as 'having ability to work' and thus was disqualified from *dibao*. Although the policy requires supporting responsibility, once he could earn enough money, his income was not reviewed in relationship to his mother's family means test, which allowed her to continue receiving her *dibao* allowance. Actually, M-6 (a child then) and his mother had been *dibao* recipients since 2007, even though M-6's father (then deceased) had had a job and stable income. It is likely that they had qualified for *dibao* due to them not being on the same *hukou* booklet (M-6's self-report), which meant the means test would not have taken his father into consideration. A similar case was that of P-3. In the early 2000s, he and his son (aged below 18) enjoyed *dibao* while his wife was not included, because her name was not on P-3's *hukou* booklet (P-3's self-report). Even when a family member's *hukou* might be a reason for not receiving *dibao* in 2000s, the cases show how the characteristics of the individual were more important than family circumstances in determining eligibility for social assistance.

Compared to *dibao*, individual characteristics – and employability in particular – seem to be even more crucial to eligibility in the case of PWJ. While 'no stable income sources' (no family

¹⁰⁹ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

members with formal job or farmers with land requisitioned) and 'low income' (being a *dibao* recipient or being part of a 'low-income family') can be eligibility criteria related to 'family', the principle of low employability was shown to be the most important eligibility criterion for PWJ among the participants. All PWJ participants in the sample were so-called 4050s¹¹⁰, with a low education level no more than high school graduate, or suffered from a health issue that only allowed them to do very simple and easy tasks (P-5 had the sequela of a serious accident, P-6 had a hunchback and P-7 had breast cancer).

Among participants who were involved in PWJ, with the preconditions of (a) sharing expenses and living together within/between generations, or (b) legal couples (marriage) and/or non-adult children when referring to 'family members', family assets notably varied. At the time of interview, the participants with the lowest incomes (P-2, P-7 and P-9) had a family income below twice the *dibao* standard per capita, while P-1, P-11 and P-12 were the 'best-off'. P-1's family consisted of only her and her husband, as their daughter was married and lived separately. P-1 had the minimum wage level, but through migrant work, her husband could earn between 60,000 and 70,000 CNY per year (equal to or even more than the local average wage). P-12 owned two self-built properties, of 200 square metres and 500-600 square metres respectively. And before doing PWJ, he had a monthly income of around 5,000-7,000 CNY. While doing PWJ, he also did part-time work in his spare time. His wife received a monthly pension of about 1,300 CNY; due to looking after her grandchildren, she lived with their son's family, whose annual income was around 100,000 CNY. As to P-11, his family had received land requisition compensation of about one million CNY, and had ownership of two apartments both of 70 square metres. His wife received a monthly pension of about 1,200 CNY, and his son's family could earn 6,000 CNY/month in total. Given their assets, P-1, P-11 and P-12 can definitely be identified as both non-poor and non-vulnerable.

These cases illustrate the inefficacy of the targeting of PWJ, which in theory should be

¹¹⁰ Some graduates had once carried out PWJs in community offices, but this job allocation were cancelled in 2019. (As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*)

targeted at the poor and vulnerable only. Nevertheless, community workers insisted that the means-test process was 'strict'¹¹¹. Furthermore, more than half of respondents participating in workfare jobs said they went through a means-test process. However, the fact that these respondents and their families (P-1, P-11 and P-12, despite them being categorised as having 'no stable income sources' and 'low employability') cannot be considered to be poor or vulnerable, shows that means-testing was not the main consideration behind decisions over PWJ allocations.

The eligibility criteria of 'no stable income sources' and 'low employability' are problematic, without a more carefully designed family means test and economic threshold of 'vulnerability'. As the fieldnotes¹¹² showed, except for *dibao* recipients and low-income families who are regarded as trapped in poverty, the 'no stable income sources' principle is the way to identify the 'vulnerable' in economic terms, referring to no family members having employment contracts. For example, the PWJ family means test reviews whether a family owns property other than where they reside¹¹³ or what could be considered luxury vehicles¹¹⁴, but does not review the family's income. In effect, this means that as long as no members in the family are in formal employment, even if a spouse has considerable income, the applicant can still be eligible for PWJ¹¹⁵. It thus equates 'no stable income sources' to insufficient income. Similarly, 'low employability' is equated to having no means to support one's livelihoods.

Furthermore, without considering intergenerational support responsibilities (between parents and children and vice versa) within the process of PWJ allocations¹¹⁶, the problem of 'hidden family assets' for eligibility for social assistance correspondingly emerges. Among the three participants who transferred family assets to their children or relatives, only P-3 explicitly stated that

¹¹¹ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹¹² As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹¹³ PWJ means test ignores the housing square metre and only has limitation as to how many official ownerships one has. (Notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*).

¹¹⁴ No more than 80,000 CNY (Notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*).

¹¹⁵ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹¹⁶ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

he had done so in order to be eligible for PWJ¹¹⁷. However, P-11 and P-12 had diverted some of their assets not for the purpose of seeking PWJ employment¹¹⁸. The family means test on properties and cars usually reviews ownership of assets through official certificates under the applicant's name¹¹⁹. This means that even when a family owns more than one property, for example, as long as these properties are not appearing on the couple's account in the Department of Real Estate Management, it will be assumed that the family does not own any housing. This mechanism can explain why P-11 and P-12 can be deemed as eligible for PWJ, despite having gone through a family means-test process. That is, the family means test was conducted within the nuclear family (couples) but did not involve their adult children's assets, which P-11 and P-12 had transferred to the next generation (hidden assets). Thus their official accounts only showed ownership of their residential property. As mentioned above, P-11 received one million CNY as part of land expropriation compensation, and he gave it to his child. And P-12 also used his money to help his son buy the property and run the business.

Neither of the core principles of ability to labour nor economic condition are unreasonable, but when they are combined and concretised, issues of mistargeting arise. In limiting its consideration for collectivist support (reciprocal support from extended family members living together), the government follows individualist's self-responsibility principles to guide wellbeing outcomes. However, the de-collectivisation of targeting, along with an economic limit, is harsh for *dibao* but weak for PWJ, reducing the efficiency and efficacy of social protection. The able-bodied are excluded from *dibao*, without considering their economic hardship. The asset transfer between extended family members also widens the likelihood of covering those who are unable to work but have other (extended) family members as livelihood sources in *dibao*, and those with precarious

¹¹⁷ Back when P-3 was doing PWJ, he and his sister had a lottery store. The store belonged nominally to his sister (business licence was assigned to his sister), and thus he was eligible as 'no stable incomes and property'. Undoubtedly P-3 was in need, even if he had income from the lottery store, but if his name was on the business licence, he was disqualified immediately.

¹¹⁸ 'Saving for children', see Chapter 5.

¹¹⁹ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

employment and/or without stable income sources but having enough livelihood in PWJ. Therefore, given the very limited quota for PWJs and *dibao*, the unworthy could crowd some of those in need out of the system.

7.1.2 Transfer of authority over PWJ allocation and management and greater competition

In practice, the inaccurate family means test is also related to a change in the PWJ system. That is, that authority over PWJ allocation and management has been transferred from local communities to government departments, who are less familiar with the real condition of the applicants. By further illustrating the eligibility criterion of ‘no stable income sources’ with the participants involved in ‘farmers with land requisitioned’, this subsection will focus on the second point of individualised risk distribution in social assistance, illustrating how the authority transfer influences the collective’s involvement in social protection in a negative, rather than positive, way.

Farmers whose land has been requisitioned are usually assumed to be ‘well-off’, due to the compensation they receive for their land, and as unwilling to do PWJs¹²⁰. In contrast to these assumptions, half of the respondents in this study who were engaged in PWJ had had their land requisitioned. Not all of them had become ‘rich’ as a result of the land requisition, as the compensation is linked to the size of the expropriated land or housing area. But undoubtedly, at least a couple of them (P-11 and P-12) had become ‘rich’, thanks to that compensation. Also, compared to other participants who had their land requisitioned, P-11 and P-12 were both recruited by government departments, rather than by their local communities. It can thus be argued that the efficacy of the family-focused means test was further undermined by the transfer of PWJ authority from local communities to government departments. As confirmed by community workers¹²¹, P-1 disclosed:

¹²⁰ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹²¹ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*, and in Community A on 4 June 2020, online.

In the past, we were placed by the community, [but] now the City Management Department manages us with full power¹²² ... At the beginning, we applied to the community. Later, to recruit and place people [on PWJs] is the business of the City Management Department ... The community is no longer responsible. If you want to submit an application, submit to the City Management Department.

At the beginning of this chapter, the more common types of PWJ outlined by the policy were listed, including roles such as (a) assistants, usually managed by local government departments, and (b) community service providers, usually community-led PWJ. Interviews with participants pointed to a clear division of labour between local government departments and communities as early as 2012, when P-3 applied for a PWJ in the City Management Department¹²³. And at the time of being interviewed, P-1 and P-4 signed the contract with and were managed by the City Management Department, but their first-year contract was signed with the community (2016-2018), when the community still had authority over PWJs. When the fieldwork was conducted, there were still a few community PWJ positions, but the trend was to transfer them to the government department¹²⁴.

Although some participants could not give an exact answer as to which department their contract was tied to, theoretically, whether working for the community or a government department, they first had to go to the community to acquire the relevant eligibility certificates (P-1 and P-12). Then, they were transferred to the Employment Bureau office (P-9, P-10 and P-11)¹²⁵, where they went through for review (P-1), checked the job they wanted to do and signed a contract with the government department (P-12) or the Residential District Office (*jiedaoba* 街道办, government level immediately above the community)¹²⁶ they worked for (P-6 and P-7). In this

¹²² P-1's PWJ was cleaning, managed by the City Management Department. If PWJ workers are, for example, traffic wardens, Traffic Department manages them (as in the case of P-6 below).

¹²³ P-3 also mentioned that the authority has not been transferred to City Management Department yet. He asked the community but failed, and then he went to the City Management Department.

¹²⁴ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹²⁵ It is now integrated and called Human Resource and Social Security Department.

¹²⁶ The local community has no power to set PWJ positions, and the authority over setting community PWJ positions is based at Residential District Office or Villages or Towns (*xiangzhen* 乡镇). Community PWJ workers just work in community but are not subordinate to the community (As per the researcher's notes from

process, 'the community just served as a bridge' (P-11) to obtain information, a certificate or a workplace (for example, the case of P-6, P-9 and P-10). Some departments also recruited claimants first (whether they meet the eligibility criteria or not), and then asked them to go to the community merely as a formality¹²⁷. This is likely the reason why some participants (for example, P-2 and P-11) did not report that they went through either a community or the Employment Bureau office when applying for PWJ.

This transfer of authority to government departments, however, has had some positive outcomes for those carrying out PWJ, as these departments are more likely to be able to provide opportunities for applicants to continue working in that department, outside of the PWJ programme. For example, once the PWJ employment period of P-2 terminated, she continued to work for the same employer doing the same job, as a labour dispatch worker¹²⁸. And with satisfactory performance, P-8, who was recruited by the City Management Department and placed in the community for overseeing city regulations-related work, was then employed by the community as a pensioner casual worker.

It is unclear whether or not the authority transfer would be associated with any presupposition of corruption among officials at the grassroots level (cf. M. Li & Walker, 2021) and under-qualification in service delivery (cf. Chan & Ngok, 2016). However, the authority transfer likely translates into greater competition for PWJ posts. This is not explicitly stated but is actually what the local government wants to create, if the trend of the whole society is individualising risk. The market-oriented procedures involved in government department recruitment of PWJ's – first publishing information socially (rather than just within the community), then interview/assessment

communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*).

¹²⁷ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹²⁸ P-2 said her contract is now signed with a company and she is managed by Environmental Sanitation Department. Given that she was aged 47 and had done 'PWJ' for more than 3 years, it is likely that the first three years was PWJ and the signed contract with Environmental Sanitation Department. After the employment period of PWJ was terminated (if recipients still have more than 5 years before retirement, they can only do PWJ for three years), she still worked for Environmental Sanitation Department, but her contract was signed with the company, as a labour dispatch worker.

and competitive selection before assigning contracts, as in a PWJ recruitment advertisement displayed (Comprehensive Administrative Law Enforcement Bureau of Lushan County, 2021) – denote the winners are not the most vulnerable but the fittest, as in P-6’s case below. The local community level, which is more familiar with the financial and overall circumstances of their residents (Grosh et al., 2008)¹²⁹, has become less able to help applicants get a PWJ.

In the past, the community could give priority to the applicants suffering more hardship¹³⁰, but now, communities can do little to allocate PWJ among their more needy residents. All applicants to community PWJs must wait until a PWJ vacancy becomes available. This can take a long time, due to the fact that there are only a limited number of PWJs at community level, and no new PWJ positions in the community are likely to be created in the future¹³¹. The community PWJ will disappear after all current PWJ employment periods expire, unless any contingency such as COVID-19 happens, which resulted in some PWJ employment being extended¹³².

The field research showed that the applicants for community PWJ have to wait longer for a job than in the past. To illustrate this, among those who were doing community PWJ in 2017/2018 when the community had more PWJs, P-1’s waiting period was three to four months. In contrast, P-6 applied to the community for PWJ before October 2018 and was eventually placed in a PWJ in the April of 2019:

At the beginning I contacted the flag [a kind of PWJ as traffic guidance near the crosswalk], and they said ‘no problems’. Then two months later, [I was] interviewed. The interviewer was the traffic police. In the past, they [maybe, community workers] said they conduct the interview, not the traffic police ... They [maybe, traffic police] refused me [P-6 had hunchback]. Refused, I went to the community [2018.10] ... The community secretary said ...

¹²⁹ In the fieldwork, the community workers in P-7 and P-8’s community knew P-7 and P-8’s situation well. P-10, in another community without any community worker in the interview, also repeatedly mentioned the community knows her hardship and tries its best to help her.

¹³⁰ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹³¹ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹³² As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

[I] must wait until a job was made available ... In the last year [2019], there was a PWJ [position] cleaning the street, he [the community secretary] immediately told me [of this].

Again, due to issues with the family means test mentioned earlier in this chapter, more non-vulnerable people become eligible (for example, family with 'no stable income source' but having sufficient incomes from precarious employment and land requisition) to access PWJ. Without intervention from the local community, those who are most in need lose their priority over placements in government department PWJs. Some non-vulnerable applicants (for example, P-11 and P-12), regardless of whether they have *guanxi*¹³³ in a government department or not, are likely to occupy the limited PWJ opportunities, which should be allocated to those with greater needs (for example, P-6). The issue here is not on how much *guanxi* works, or whether or not relevant officials in government departments help in welfare fraud (no sufficient evidence of that). The issue is rather that government departments do not usually carry out a strict family means-test process; the community that used to do this is now used solely to certify that 'the person has difficulty in finding a job'¹³⁴, but not whether this individual or family is 'in need' or not.

To summarise, the above mentioned authority transfer has weakened the family means test and collectivist engagement (community). The original advantage that local community had in assessing whether person A is more vulnerable than person B, in terms of giving priority to be allocated assistance no longer exists. Instead, every applicant must compete with one another by showing greater competence, rather than need.

7.1.3 Separation of poverty and vulnerability and unequal risk distribution

As the previous analysis has highlighted, the links between *dibao* and PWJ have been weakened, even though both of these welfare programmes are meant to be involved in poverty

¹³³ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*. Three participants also mentioned *guanxi* works in PWJ.

¹³⁴ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

alleviation, which is understood in economic terms only (the principle of ‘economic conditions’). This then raises the assumption that, in urban areas, only the ‘three-nos’¹³⁵ and *dibao* recipients may suffer from this type of poverty¹³⁶. Although the policy describes low-income families as living in relative poverty, its economic standards for what constitutes ‘low-income’ are not much looser than those applied under the *dibao*. The able-bodied are largely excluded from the category of living in poverty or being regarded as ‘poor’. Instead, if they wish to apply for social assistance, they apply to be assigned a PWJ, when meeting at least one of the eligibility criteria¹³⁷. Although poverty is also covered (being a *dibao* recipient or from a low-income family), the eligibility criteria for PWJs is in fact what the policy describes as ‘vulnerability’, defined as a person unable to find a job. The goal of social assistance is thus to help them gain employment¹³⁸. Social policy changes show how assistance targeted at the poor and the vulnerable has been guided by the principle of ‘labour ability’, without seriously considering family vulnerability, especially under the gradual exit of governmental responsibility for protection. In this context, poverty is defined in very narrow and strict terms, while vulnerability is defined in very loose and broad terms. This section will discuss how the separation of poverty (*dibao*) and vulnerability (PWJ) results in unequal access among vulnerable groups to a more comprehensive assistance.

Being able to work does not mean that one’s family cannot experience financial hardship. T-1 once applied for the *dibao* but failed, because she and her husband were regarded as being ‘able-bodied’, and thus were assumed to be self-reliant through work. The reality for T-1’s family at that time was that they were poor, only slightly better-off than *dibao* households. She was a cleaner with a wage marginally higher than the minimum wage level (if not considering unemployment), while her husband did PWJ. Their family lived in low-rent housing. Their daughter was at school (non-adult). T-1’s husband suffered from severe disease but dared not be hospitalised due to inadequate

¹³⁵ This means no income, no supporters and no labour ability.

¹³⁶ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹³⁷ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹³⁸ As per the researcher’s notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

money. With such wages and limited assets (not having a vehicle or private housing), while they could not be regarded as living in extreme poverty (*dibao*), they were nonetheless relatively poor (eligible to low-income family standard). The social assistance system had provided T-1's family with low-rent housing and PWJ. However, the reason why they were not eligible for *dibao* (they were able to work and earn money) was harsh and ignored the fact that they lived with poverty.

Similarly, with regard to PWJ, it is harder to overcome economic hardship for 'ineligible' vulnerable people. P-1's brother was a *dibao* recipient (poor) with mental illness (low employability). Before he became a *dibao* recipient, he had been fired from his carwash job because he was getting old and had a poor health condition. P-1 helped her brother apply for PWJ, but failed to secure him a job. She mentioned how she had approached the City Management Department about her brother's tough situation and asked if he could be employed as a cleaner by the department. The City Management Department's response to her was that he could only get a job if he was a farmer whose land had been requisitioned. P-1 was a new urban resident (farmer with land requisitioned), but her brother still held a rural *hukou* (no land requisitioned). PWJ is mainly set for urban residents,^{139 140} making her brother ineligible for a PWJ in the city. Land requisition possibly makes those affected lose stable income sources, but it does not necessarily mean they (for example P-1, P-11 and P-12¹⁴¹) are more vulnerable than others. After all, the nature of PWJ is not compensation for the land expropriation policy, but a measure of social assistance for the most vulnerable (the poor with low employability), where a strict family means test and accurate identification of 'poverty' and 'vulnerabilities' are necessary.

The only vulnerable and eligible group that can avoid being impacted by this rule are (poor) families without any member in employment; once they apply, the policy requires that they are placed on PWJ immediately¹⁴². However, other poor families must 'trade-off' between programmes.

¹³⁹ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

¹⁴⁰ Rural PWJ is mainly set for rural identified poor people (part of Targeted Poverty Alleviation).

¹⁴¹ They suffered from some kind of deprivation, but generally had the ability to live beyond a minimum acceptable life.

¹⁴² As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

In fact, those from *dibao* families can hardly ever take PWJ, because they either do not have labour ability, or they have to choose to receive either the *dibao* or take on PWJ¹⁴³. It is not that the policy precludes PWJ claimants from enjoying the *dibao* or vice versa, but that the minimum wage level post subsidy (about 1,300 CNY/month after tax/social insurances, based on the feedback of the participants) can easily meet the *dibao* standard (560 CNY/person/month). Even if eligible, with the mechanism of 'make-up deficiency payment', a family with a PWJ worker can only receive a limited *dibao* allowance, almost meaningless for achieving a 'good' life. It is the same case for a low-income family: either wait longer for community PWJs, which simultaneously involves more stigma (Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006), or risk higher failure in the application of department PWJs.

7.2 Individualised risk and its impact on capability deprivation

As part of the process of individualised risk, vulnerable people's ability to maintain a basic livelihood is overestimated. This section will discuss how, rather than fostering wellbeing, vulnerable people's engagement with social assistance creates a sense of 'powerlessness', as a result of their continued capability deprivations during and after carrying out PWJ. It is argued that individualised risk distribution limits the role social assistance plays in reducing capability deprivation, even when being allocated *dibao* and PWJ.

Dibao lifted recipients out of extreme poverty, but recipients were still deprived in capabilities, except for 'basic income for basic nutrition'. M-6's mother, due to *hukou* registration, enjoyed rural *dibao* and the disability allowance, amounting to 500 CNY per month. Her house was located in an urban area (due to urban expansion and rezoning of rural land); however, she could only get access to the rural *dibao*, with which she could only meet basic food needs (M-6's report). Even for urban *dibao*, the *dibao* standard (560 CNY/month/person) is insufficient to support a basic lifestyle. On average, participants mentioned that the minimum expenditure of a family of three

¹⁴³ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ* B.

people was about 2,000 CNY per month. Taking this into account, although this research did not engage in the supplementary benefits of *dibao*, but was just based on the *dibao* standard, it is questionable whether *dibao* can allow families and individuals to meet their basic demands, let alone lift them out of poverty. Furthermore, in reality, all *dibao* recipients do not have the ability to support themselves. Without other visible means to address capability deprivations other than food needs, *dibao* recipients usually stay in *dibao* for life.

The case of PWJ is similar. Rather than enhancing people's employability, as noted in the literature (Chapter 1 and 2) and shown in this study's fieldwork, PWJs only reproduce precarious workers and working poor (capability deprived). Even when those most vulnerable are placed on the welfare roll by doing PWJ, their living situation cannot be fundamentally changed, even when PWJ wages do allow them to escape extreme income poverty and have a 'better' life. PWJ is certainly precarious work, with a minimum wage, dead-end jobs and 3-5 years of PWJ employment period only. Not only are the post subsidies too low to support a family, but the low-end, simple and 'meaningless' jobs are also a mismatch for highly skilled claimants. Their wellbeing indicators, such as doing a favourite/meaningful job (6 out of 13 participants¹⁴⁴), being treated with dignity or not being excluded/prejudiced (5 out of 13 participants), avoiding a sense of inferiority/sham/stigma (6 out of 13 participants) and the sense of feeling fulfilled and valued (8 out of 13 participants) were not obtained. Some PWJ jobs did not provide days off over the weekend, nor even on special festivals¹⁴⁵. Claimants thus had to be restricted with space (staying in Ya'an) and time (being occupied on public holidays), which further affects their capability indicators, such as mobility and social activities. It can thus be argued that 9 out of 13 families still suffered from capability deprivation during their workfare employment period, in which the families of four were still trapped in income poverty.

¹⁴⁴ The participants once had a better job and reported that doing PWJ is 'forced by life', but they still 'like' it because it is their job.

¹⁴⁵ Although daily working hours were within 8 hours, most PWJ participants doing the work of street cleaning reported they still needed to work on weekends and public holidays, with or without extra pay.

As was the case for P-3 and P-10, PWJ helped P-4 escape extreme poverty. Although at the time of interview P-4's husband had found a higher-paying job, the wage of PWJ also helped improve her family's average income, allowing her family to get closer to the 'non-vulnerable'. And by doing PWJ, P-10 obtained the capability of basic literacy and numeracy, as this job required literacy and numeracy skills which forced her to acquire them through self-study. P-8's mental pressure of production and social insurance burden was reduced. Indeed, in addition to the wage which is economically helpful to claimants (10 out of 13 PWJ participants were from low-income family before PWJ), another benefit of PWJs is that they play a part role in contributing to claimants' social insurances. This helps to reduce the claimants' current financial burden from social insurance fees (according to PWJ participants) and secures claimants' basic living in the future (P-6 and P-2). It thus produces a sense of safety. Their mental pressure was correspondingly decreased. And unlike *dibao* that is likely stigmatised by welfare dependency issues, PWJs allowed some claimants to earn respect and dignity through their labour (P-2, P-6 and P-11). Similar positive effects are a decreasing risk of health problems, especially for the elderly (P-11 and P-12) and those with ill health (P-5, P-7 and P-10), who can only be competent with simple and easy work tasks. And for female respondents in particular, the lower working hours of PWJs, compared with jobs in the labour market, enabled them to better balance work and family care (P-2, P-4, P-7 and P-9). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the majority of PWJ participants still suffered from capability deprivation during their PWJ period.

Furthermore, once the PWJ employment period comes to an end, if not retired, PWJ participants are unlikely to find a better job. In fact, any job becomes harder for them, as their employability decreases objectively (ageing, almost no improvement in skills and education, and no measures on improving any health condition). While there are pre-job trainings for PWJs, most are information about laws, policies and requirements for doing PWJ (based on a search for news about 'trainings of PWJ' on Ya'an People's Government websites), almost useless for improving job skills.

No PWJ participants reported ever receiving skills training. This means that any future job is unlikely to be much better than PWJs.

For those whose PWJ period had already finished when the interviews were carried out (P-2, P-3, P-8 and T-1's husband), only P-2 and P-8 were able to continue employment in their PWJ workplace. And while the economic condition of P-8 and T-1's husband had largely changed, due to their retirement and pensions, P-2 still suffered from capability deprivations as she did during and before carrying out PWJ. When doing PWJ (in 2012), P-3 and his wife ran a small lottery ticket store; after his PWJ employment period ended, he went back to the store, no better or worse off. The reason behind the improved economic condition and subjective wellbeing of P-3's family, that had lifted them out of capability deactivation at the time of interview, was that he had retired and thus received a considerable pension, not much associated with his PWJ.

The future benefit from social insurances, partly contributed to by the PWJ programme, is not as satisfactory as expected. For the five kinds of social insurances, unemployment insurance is believed useful for those whose PWJ employment period has ended but who have not yet retired. They can enjoy a maximum two year's unemployment allowance in total (also reported by P-1). The effect of health insurance could not be attested from the research, but it is believed that health insurance is helpful, especially for those with a poor health condition (for example, P-10). However, the effect of the remaining three kinds of social insurances needs to be further investigated. Maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance seem less relevant, because of PWJ claimant's age (P-2) – 4050s are much less likely to give birth – and the small risk of accidents at work.

The pension also shows the very limited role played by PWJs. The pension in China is calculated by the years and rates of contribution. The PWJ only partly contributes to its claimants' social insurances during the three to five years' PWJ employment period. And since the contribution rate is related to one's wage level, PWJ claimants' old-age insurance can only be contributed at the minimum level. The retired PWJ participants (T-1's husband, P-3 and P-8), certainly had considerable

pensions, but they resulted from their long-term contribution before and/or after PWJs, not the three to five years of contribution from the PWJ. Half of the PWJ participants, the farmers with land requisitioned, already had 15 years' contribution due to the land requisition policy¹⁴⁶, which had contributed the majority of their accumulated contribution years. The additional three-to-five years' contribution from PWJ was comparatively insignificant in their future pension. This was the case for all claimants and potential applicants, who should contribute to old-age insurance for a minimum of 15 years, whether self-funded or combined with employer funding (required by law). Without denying the aforementioned advantages of having social insurances partly contributed to by the PWJ programme, PWJ's contribution to pension only plays one-third of the role at most in securing future life.

Thus, PWJ or *dibao* hardly changes the capability deprivation experienced by applicants, other than lifting them out of extreme poverty. As Table 7.1 shows, the actual 'functionings'¹⁴⁷ that participants were deprived of before and during PWJ did not change considerably after carrying out PWJ, other than around 'livelihood and property'. Objectively, *dibao* and PWJ do not have the goal of improving social indicators, such as physical health, education level and family. However, it still has little effect on the enhancement of an individual's employability and employment options (for example, with stable and acceptable wage and benefits, and meaningful work).

PWJ does offer less physically and mentally demanding work. However, as was discussed in previous paragraphs, for some participants PWJ can, in fact, carry other deprivations around 'mobility', 'happiness and satisfaction' and 'social connection and inclusion'.

Table 7.1

¹⁴⁶ Those involved in land requisition benefited from the special policy (already invalid at the time of interview) that allowed them to be enrolled in old-age insurances with 15-years contribution paid in full ('*yi ci xing bu jiao*', 一次性补缴).

¹⁴⁷ Table 7.1 shows the functionings (the actual result of feasible capabilities), not the capabilities (feasible opportunities). From capabilities to functionings, there is one's agency (such as interests, goals and preferences) that makes the eventual wellbeing achievement perhaps different from his/her capability achievement.

Deprivations PWJ participants and their families actually experienced

	Before PWJs	During PWJs	After PWJs
P-1	Mobility; Education; Employment; Social activities, Agency	Mobility; Education; Employment (+ ¹⁴⁸); Social activities, Agency	Not applicable
P-2	Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Education; Employment; Family ¹⁴⁹ ; Social networks and activities; Agency	Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Education; Employment (+); Social networks and activities; Agency (+)	Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Education; Employment (+); Social networks and activities; Agency (+)
P-3	Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Education; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Mobility; Education; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Mobility; Education; Agency
P-4	Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Education; Employment; Agency	Mobility; Education; Employment; Agency	Not applicable
P-5	Body and physical health; Mobility; Education; Employment; Family; Social networks and activities;	Body and physical health (+); Mobility; Education; Employment (+); Family; Social networks and	Not applicable

¹⁴⁸ '+' means while still showing a deprivation in this particular capability, the extent of that deprivation was reduced. Vice versa, '-' means the extent of that deprivation was increased.

¹⁴⁹ When P-2 applied for PWJ, her family consisted of her and her daughter. Given that the main reason she chose PWJ was for work-family balance, it can be inferred that before PWJ, her capability on family was deprived. At time of interview, she had remarried, and could take care of her family, thus the capability on family is regarded as 'obtained'.

	Happiness and satisfaction (likely ¹⁵⁰); Agency	activities; Happiness and satisfaction (-); Agency	
P-6	Body and physical health; Mobility; Education; Employment; Social networks and activities; Social protection ¹⁵¹ ; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Body and physical health; Mobility; Education; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Not applicable
P-7	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Not applicable
P-8 ¹⁵²	Mobility; Employment; Family; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Mobility; Social networks and activities (-); Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Mobility; Social networks and activities (+); Agency
P-9	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Education;	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property;	Not applicable

¹⁵⁰ P-5's family broke up and he lost his job due to serious illness. During this period, he could only stay at home and could not take care of himself. He also reported a psychological gap and misunderstanding from people around him. It can be inferred that his indicator on happiness and satisfaction was deprived.

¹⁵¹ Why P-6 was identified as deprived in the functioning of social protection is that he once applied for PWJ but was refused because of his humpback (his report), and he was refused *dibao* because he was identified as 'able to work', although he had the disability certificate of level 3. Level 3 of disability is ineligible for *dibao* in policies; being refused PWJ is likely an experience of being excluded from the social protection system.

¹⁵² It is hard to evaluate P-8's family income and family size before and during PWJ. Based on P-8's report that PWJ had lower wage than his former job before PWJ, it can be inferred that his income before PWJ was more than the minimum wage level, non-poor from his 'personal' regard.

	Employment; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Mobility; Education; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	
P-10	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Education; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Body and physical health (+); Mobility; Education (+); Social networks and activities (-); Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Not applicable
P-11	Mobility; Employment; Agency	Mobility (-); Social networks and activities; Agency	Not applicable
P-12	Mobility; Education; Employment; Agency	Mobility (-); Education; Employment; Agency	Not applicable
T-1's husband ¹⁵³	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Employment; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Body and physical health; Livelihood and Property; Mobility; Social networks and activities; Happiness and satisfaction; Agency	Body and physical health; Mobility (+); Social networks and activities (+); Happiness and satisfaction (+); Agency

7.3 Conclusion

With varied paths, elsewhere in the Western world, such workfare programmes tend to intentionally intensify marketisation, commodification and competition, in regard to activating

¹⁵³ At time of interview, T-1's husband had just submitted the application for retirement but had not yet received the pension. This has likely caused the wellbeing achievement indicators 'after PWJ' to be better than 'during PWJ'.

claimants (Greer, 2016) and delivering services (Knuth et al., 2017). Likewise in Ya'an, *dibao* and PWJ programmes have emphasised an individual applicant's level of ability and vulnerable characteristics, and transferred authority over PWJ from communities to government departments. In this situation, poverty and vulnerability have been treated as separate issues. The expectation has been to provide better and more efficient aid to people in need, while avoiding welfare dependency and promoting employment. Individual persons are increasingly required to navigate risks, and the able-bodied are assumed to have the ability to overcome any hardships through work.

The change has a clear economic rationale, especially in small, less developed cities where the fiscal budget is limited. However, as a result of individualisation, social assistance has not provided equal opportunity for social protection to all citizens (as a basic capability: no option in the capability set for some real vulnerable people), and is hardly a helping mechanism for recipients to overcome capability deprivations (as means: failed to enable clients to have an acceptable life).

Urban *dibao* in Ya'an witnessed large-scale disqualifications since 2015, though there was no evidence of *dibao* recipients having been transferred to other programmes (M. Li & Walker, 2021), since, for example, the number of PWJs in 2019 (2,287) was almost as low as in 2012 (2,834)¹⁵⁴ (YMPG, 2012).

Issues of mistargeting without an appropriate family means test in both programmes were significant (M. Li & Walker, 2021). Under the individualised marketisation and decentralisation (Shi, 2012; L. Yang & Walker, 2020) in Ya'an, *dibao* is based on the self-responsibility principle. PWJ only allowed precarious workers to avoid extreme poverty, but did not represent a serious strategy to tackle broader inequality. With problems of mistargeting and benefit delivery, these programmes work very modestly in reducing both relative and permanent poverty (Gao, 2017). Those unable to work become lifelong recipients, whereas the able-bodied with hardships are largely excluded or suffer from chronic capability deprivation. Such social policies eventually increase the problem of

¹⁵⁴ There is no accurate data available for other years except 2012. And based on the source, the number of 2,287 refers to traditional PWJs, not those targeted for rural poor people.

stratification and punish the welfare recipients (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

It could be argued that this situation may only apply to the Ya'an case, given that PWJ policies are set locally, given the absence of national guidelines, and the fact that PWJ plans are usually not made publicly available¹⁵⁵. Yet these findings, with respect to both *dibao* and PWJ in Ya'an were consistent with research carried out in other parts of the country (Gao, 2017; Golan et al., 2017; Lan & Ci, 2018; Tang, 2003, 2004b, 2005; Xiao & Li, 2017). If the trend towards a risk society is increasingly reinforced, a similar picture can be repeatedly displayed across China. As with other 'structures of living together', social assistance – as the last resort safety net – does not effectively support vulnerable people. Distrust about the reduction of the social welfare encourages dependency on family for support (Böhnke, 2008). However, given the powerlessness of family support (Chapters 5 and 6), in practice, the welfare regime in reality ends up excluding precarious workers.

So far, the research has presented the roles of the labour market, the family, broader social support networks and social welfare in the process of capability/functioning deprivation. The next chapter will explore how these macro/meso structures shape micro attitudes and choices, in the causal chain of in-work poverty.

¹⁵⁵ As per the researcher's notes from communications with workers in Community B on 8 April 2020, *Shequ B*.

Chapter 8 : Subjective Wellbeing, Agency and Coping Strategies

A person's wellbeing achievement or deprivation is associated with the society he/she lives in (where the 'structures of living together' or institutions exist) as well as with his/her personal agency (Deneulin, 2008). Following the discussion in the previous chapters, it can be argued that within China's transition into a risk society, social structures and institutions – the market, the family, social relations and social welfare – have failed to improve the lives of precarious workers. Their alienation pervades, showing up as the loss of ability to predict/perceive (meaninglessness) and control (powerlessness) outcomes; loss of the standards on how to behave within socially approved norms (normlessness); conformity to social structures (isolation); and loss of the intrinsic meaning of activities and self-reward (self-estrangement) (Seeman, 1959).

Alienation, in turn, restructures rationalisation, something Max Weber (1930/2005) captured through the concept of shared subjectivities. Through historical comparison, the psychological effects of that alienation are uncovered from the logical consequences of a certain ethos (Weber, 1930/2005). With regard to the Chinese ethos, this chapter explains the relationship between participants' alienation behaviours and rationalisation around emotion and aspiration in their agency process.

Ethos (value systems, moralities and tastes) is a matter of collective identity that is informed by the culture and history of a group of people and their emotions (Prinz, 2016). From a sociological viewpoint, morality acts as a social constraint on individuals, to make them behave according to certain norms to maintain the survival of the society (Fei, 2004). In China's context, several values coincide. The traditional Confucian ethics of submission and order, which tended to discourage people from making independent decisions and challenging authority (L.-H. Lin et al., 2013), was delegitimised by Maoist 'liberation', which cultivated people's awareness of citizenship and which instead fostered de-traditionalisation (Yan, 2010). Nevertheless, Maoism's collectivism-first and altruistic values, such as 'sacrifice', 'dedication' and 'obedience' to the collective interest, also tended to discourage people to 'think and reflect', which made them work as a 'machine' to build society (J.

Liu, 2020). As a result of revolutionary sacrifice for the collective, an individual's inferior status (for example, poverty) was legitimised as 'glorious' (L. Yang & Walker, 2020).

The restraint on autonomy and freedom during the Maoist period (J. Liu, 2020; Yan, 2010) has been shocked once again by the Reform. To compete in the global market, China has adopted a development-first strategy (see Chapter 1). The growth of precarity, privatisation, materialism and individualism under the openness to globalisation and marketisation (Cao, 2020; J. Chen & Lian, 2015; Steele & Lynch, 2013; Y. Xu & Hamamura, 2014; Yan, 2010), draws attention to personal autonomy (Yan, 2009), especially as some of those considered to be 'inferior' – such as migrant peasant workers and laid-off workers – became the new rich through 'hard work' (for example, doing small-scale private business). Success thus came to be seen as being achieved by personal effort (Yan, 2010), while personal disadvantage was attributed to personal failure (L. Yang & Walker, 2020). Although out of political considerations (i.e. the need for social stability) (Ralston et al., 2018) there has been a re-embrace of Confucian harmony, the general way of thinking within Chinese society has evolved towards individualisation (Yan, 2010).

The coexistence of these somewhat conflicting values is crucial in studying the agency process of participants, the last link in the causal chain of precariousness and in-work poverty (Figure 3.1). Nussbaum (2000) once commented that since the self is dominated by tradition, autonomy is not held by some, even privileged, people. The majority of participants in this study were aged in their 40s and 50s, and thus had lived through the social transformation outlined above. Their initial low autonomy in the pre-Reform era was followed by the germination of their autonomy in the post-Reform era. Nonetheless, it was accompanied by the expansion of their alienation, which in turn reshaped their agency and influenced their wellbeing. As a way to reveal their mental activities and processes, this chapter will focus on the lived experience of these participants, as they navigate the challenges of subsistence and precarious work.

Understanding agency, defined as purposeful actions with one's autonomy in his/her pursuits/desires to reach a state/object (see Chapter 3), is complex. The concept of action integrates

cognition, desire, belief, intention, emotion and so on (Nussbaum, 2000). As the capability approach requires that agency should be considered with desire and aims (Garcés, 2020), to put it simply, agency or action can be related to motivation, the goal-directed process with an expectation to success (Cook & Artino, 2016). Although self-determinant (Cook & Artino, 2016), 'motivation' is not absolutely 'autonomous' (innate), but ineluctably involved in the external elements that can be fed into the value. The 'external force' can be internalised toward the 'self' (Ryan & Connell, 1989), such that people 'voluntarily push' themselves to reach desired states. In other words, one 'wants' or 'should' (in contrast to one 'likes' or 'has to'¹⁵⁶) do something in a given way. One's autonomy is in fact the negotiation of motivations informed by the internalised external value, even when one is unaware of this.

The field research found that aspiration and emotion are correlated motivations in influencing participants' self-determination in wellbeing. Like aspirations, subjective wellbeing is what people pursue (also see Chapter 3). Participants tended to sacrifice aspiration to protect emotion and reach mental harmony, when external living conditions could not be improved. Emotion can influence how people act (Tappolet, 2016) by transforming values into action (Oakley, 2020). Rationalists see emotion (for example, shame) as irrational, pushing people to act against their best interests, the so-called 'akratic actions' (Tappolet, 2016). However, as Justin Oakley (2020) argued, configuring self-worth, emotion can also deepen cognition, reinforce a motivation and integrate the conception of self. Emotion helps to not only track the reason behind an action, it also provides a practical reason to do something – focusing on the importance for oneself (Tappolet, 2016).

Therefore, emotion is not only a precursor of wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2000) but also a source of autonomous action (Tappolet, 2016). Since emotions, as 'perceptual experiences of value' (Tappolet, 2016, p. 118) with sensory experience (Tappolet, 2016), normally accompany a certain

¹⁵⁶ Four types of motivation based on self-determination theory: intrinsic motivation (I like to do something for fun); identified motivation (I want to do something because it is my personal value, belief and goal or I valued the relationship involved); introjected motivation (I should do something); and extrinsic motivation (I have to do something), with the decrease of self-determination (Deal et al., 2013; Grant, 2008; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

desire (Tappolet, 2016), they may (or may not) enable a certain action. One's perception/desire/affectivity, the self-set 'importance', Tappolet (2016) argued, depends on autonomy. In decision-making, although an emotion would be irrational for some people, it might be rational for others. As Weber (1930/2005, p. 140) noted, 'a thing is never irrational in itself, but only from a particular rational point of view'.

While being a motivation source, an emotion may not lead to an action. The goal (desire) set by that emotion could be overruled by other goals, the beliefs of the person could interrupt his/her emotion, or the emotion might be just contemplative and not involved in desires at all, such that the potential reaction of that emotion is cut off before it is acted on (Tappolet, 2016). Interestingly, participants in the study tended to show ambivalent emotions towards improving their wellbeing. For example, they tended to be satisfied with the status quo, while knowing (or not knowing) their wellbeing deprivations; or they went with the flow and had no dreams/plans or proactive solution for (potential) hardships, while complaining they are 'forced by life'¹⁵⁷. It is worthwhile asking what, in the complex intra-process of agency, cuts off their emotions to foster efforts to make a change.

Indeed, participants showed a low aspiration; based on the field research, it can be concluded this the low aspiration was grounded in the adaptive preference of risk aversion. The present research follows Sen's (1985b, 1999) and Nussbaum's (2000, 2001) explanation of adaptive preference. That is, one's pursuits for life (the concept of agency in Sen's understanding) are habituated with the reflection on the feasibility of a particular desire for the long term, and thus people naturally become insensitive to their deprivations. Risk aversion, also referred to as uncertainty avoidance (March, 1988), relates to the preference for avoiding risks and maintaining predictable stable returns.

To repeat, participants have lived through a period of rapid socio-economic transformation and with the related alienation of the risk society. Their life course has taught them to choose what is

¹⁵⁷ In Chinese, 生活所迫, *sheng huo suo po*, or 为了生活, *wei le sheng huo*. This means, given the demands of living, they have to do something that they dislike.

safer, rather than what is more profitable; otherwise, they would fail. Making choices but being unable to control the results brings self-blame; having dreams but being unable to achieve those dreams produces disappointment. For them, having aspirations cannot realistically improve their living standards, but can in fact bring about worse subjective outcomes. Thus, in their autonomy to make trade-offs, the motivation toward aspiration serves the motivation of emotion.

In this chapter, precarious workers' attitudes of passively enduring or even persuading themselves to accept a precarious life is interpreted, after acknowledging their irreversible living environment and their reasoning behind 'irrational decisions'. The chapter argues that learning from failure over time (adaptive preference), 'passive' life attitudes and actions were participants' coping strategies for the inability to make a change under the adverse social environment. On the one hand, such behaviour protects their emotions; on the other hand, it blocks them from obtaining better comprehensive wellbeing (risk aversion).

The chapter is organised as follows: Section 8.1 discusses subjective wellbeing under the risk society; Section 8.2 analyses the strategies used by participants to conceal deprivations; Section 8.3 further engages in the result of agency from the long-term adaptive preference for risk aversion; and finally, Section 8.4 draws conclusions.

8.1 Pressure and happiness under structural limitations

In regards to happiness, life satisfaction and a meaningful life, in addition to work (Booth & Van Ours, 2008), the family plays the most important role in wellbeing (Ryff, 1989). In fact, the family tends to be even more important than work, especially for women under a traditional gendered division of labour¹⁵⁸ (Nordenmark, 2017). Consistent with other studies on Chinese culture (Ip, 2011)¹⁵⁹, this study showed that participants placed more value on the capability indicator related to

¹⁵⁸ Where men must act as breadwinners, while women are expected to take on care responsibilities in the family.

¹⁵⁹ Ip's research found the most important wellbeing indicators selected by ordinary people in Taiwan are

family than on those capabilities related to work, social activities and other institutions. When asked about their satisfaction with overall life, participants' responses gave evidence of the role of family in helping them, attributed to their subjective wellbeing achievement. Over-reliance on the family can be understood through what Standing (2011a, p. 22) called the affected emotion – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation – caused by precarious employment and relevant institutional restriction that damages an individual's sense of safety. Because people cannot obtain happiness from the outside world, the intimate relationships across one's whole life that the family provides is the primary component of subjective wellbeing.

This section focuses on the family, the strongest prosocial motivation among individuals (Menges et al., 2017), to elucidate the positive and negative emotions of precarious workers. 24 out of 46 participants were evaluated as being deprived (or having been once close to being deprived) in the indicator of 'happiness and satisfaction'¹⁶⁰. Standing's four aforementioned emotions and the loss of intrinsic meaning of work (Seeman, 1959) are noteworthy. This section argues that for precarious workers, fulfilling their responsibility toward family is a pressure, such that even while energising work motivation, it cannot offset but contribute to the workers' deprived subjective wellbeing.

Despite there being various theories on motivation, they can be classified into two poles – intrinsic and extrinsic motivation – based on the most recognised self-determination theory (Cook & Artino, 2016)¹⁶¹, especially in-work related matters (Deal et al., 2013). Intrinsic motivation is associated with autonomy and comes from one's curiosity, inherent interest and enjoyment (Cook & Artino, 2016; Menges et al., 2017); whereas extrinsic motivation is driven by social values, external pressures and instrumental purposes (Cook & Artino, 2016; Deal et al., 2013). The intersection of

ranked as health, family, social connections, and then a job and sex (Ip, 2011). However, the participants in this research ranked family at 4th place (followed by health, livelihood and property, and education), employment at 8th place and social networks and activities at 9th place. This is perhaps because the subject of this research is the precarious workers, who likely have strong demands for better finance, which can be provided by jobs.

¹⁶⁰ This is the proxy indicator for subjective wellbeing, including the sub-indicators of 'fear and anxiety', 'inferior, shame and stigma', 'love and trust', and 'fulfilment and value'.

¹⁶¹ Given the consistency with the human agency (Wehmeyer et al., 2009).

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is defined as prosocial motivation, that is, the will to make others benefit (Grant, 2008; Menges et al., 2017). The existence of prosocial motivation complicates the relationship between autonomy and motivation. The 'self-determination' (or 'autonomy') and 'other-determined' as the watershed between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deal et al., 2013; Wehmeyer et al., 2009) is not always distinct. Although prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation are different in terms of autonomy, goal-directedness and temporal focus, some would assume that prosocial motivation is a special form of intrinsic motivation (Grant, 2008). Extrinsic motivation can become intrinsic, if the external value internalises¹⁶² (Cook & Artino, 2016). If the family is an internal value, then family motivation as a special and powerful prosocial motivation is more intrinsic. Thus, especially when without an intrinsic motivation to an activity, prosocial motivation drives one's agency and thus leads to success (Menges et al., 2017).

For most precarious workers in this study, work needs not follow their interests, but rather, forced by their circumstances, taking on any job is worthy (they should do that job) (Menges et al., 2017). Their top motivation to work was to support their families (Umrani et al., 2019). Intrinsic motivation for work was low (Deal et al., 2013). For example, when discussing the favourite jobs participants had once had, most described them in terms of 'money', 'flexible time for family care', and/or 'benefits to families'. Fewer cited reasons behind a favourite job as being related to interest, curiosity, accomplishment, freedom, adaption and stability, and good working environment or atmosphere. 15 per cent reported they had not in fact liked any of the jobs they had once had, or had no feeling about liking or disliking those jobs. Respondents who had once had work linked to intrinsic motivation only occupied 25 per cent of all respondents. The direct financial rewards of work – to cater for family needs (Deal et al., 2013; Menges et al., 2017) – is what most focused on (X. Zhang et al., 2019). Thereby, the lack of intrinsic motivation to work further links the meaning of having a job to family ethics and values. It is here that family plays a key role in motivating workers to stay employed and work hard, even in an unenjoyable job (S-10).

¹⁶² The internalisation occurs after intrinsic motivation (innate) (Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Some literature argued that family motivation, combined with family emotional support (Kwok et al., 2015), increases self-efficacy (confidence) and influences endeavours to success (Umrani et al., 2019). As a result, it compensates for the stress and lack of enthusiasm for doing the disliked job (Menges et al., 2017), and achieving higher job satisfaction (subjective wellbeing) (Kwok et al., 2015). However, the increased subjective wellbeing from family motivation comes only from the motivation based on pleasure (that produces self-actualisation and self-esteem), not pressure (Gebauer et al., 2008).

Back to the prosocial motivation theory, given that to some extent prosocial motivation is not a real reflection of the 'true self' (Deal et al., 2013), prosocial motivation can be seen as somewhat extrinsic motivation. Even as a form of intrinsic motivation, since responsibility for others (not hedonics for oneself, the real intrinsic motivation) is involved, family motivation is eudemonic (Menges et al., 2017). Gebauer et al. (2008) conceptualised a distinct 'pleasure-based prosocial motivation' and 'pressure-based prosocial motivation', which corresponds to more intrinsic and extrinsic motivation respectively. It is hard to appraise whether participants' prosocial motivation is pleasure-based or pressure-based. Usually both are involved. For instance, O-1 (female) stated that her happiness was based on various contributions she made to her family, including working to earn money for the family. This is an interdependent self-construal perception, that involves both pleasure-based and pressure-based prosocial motivation (Gebauer et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, pressure-based prosocial motivation was significant when involving both precarious employment and family. The starting point of motivation and action is associated with the family. Some participants reported that after forming their own family, they matured and began to set goals for a better life. For example, T-6 had once been a precarious worker and tried several times to take a formal job entrance exam but failed, until she faced marriage:

I really wanted to pass the exam, especially when I asked my husband the question that if his family looks down on me [due to her unemployment] ... Back at that time, I really wanted to pass the exam, so I forced myself [to prepare for the exam seriously] ... I closed my shop [her

former job] ... for half a month ... I woke up at 7.30 am to read books, and finished the paper questions within the required time [in the mock-up test], as well as going to the interview-training class.

She then talked about how she had previously failed in the exams:

I had had no pressure like this time [the last time she took the exam and got a job offer], so I had not prepared for them [previous exams] seriously. Then I had not been the girlfriend of my husband yet ... but now [the last exam] my husband and I were already involved marriage. This was a matter of two families. So, the pressure was huge ... In the past, I had never been pushed as this time ... I had always thought passing is fine and not passing is fine as well.

When comparing her differing attitudes towards, and results for, the formal job entrance exams, we can observe that in her former exams, the epistemic function of emotion was present (stigma as a precarious worker¹⁶⁹); however, her emotions seemed contemplative and thus she made no effort. It was only when 'pressure' came from the family and its related sense of 'responsibility' (Gebauer et al., 2008) that her desire to 'pass the exam' emerged (normative judgement). In this case, the belief of fulfilling family responsibility (morally right) overrides previous perceptions toward the exams. The affection of pressure (internalised external motivation) was more significant than the affection of stigma (external motivation) in informing action. This was also shown by other five participants, whose work motivation increased as a result of wanting to contribute to the family.

By comparison with T-6 above, T-8 showed a pattern of 'playing it by ear'; that is, to have a more spontaneous attitude toward work. Personality and personal characteristics (based on T-9's self-report) could explain people's motivations to work; however, it was also the case that T-8's family was comparatively better off than other respondents. There was no need for her to take economic responsibility for supporting the family (external pressure). Therefore, compared with being a good

¹⁶⁹ T-6 mentioned that some people around her husband looked down at them, because she was unemployed for some time before that time.

mother (childcare), she did not show high motivation towards career (earning money). The same was also the case for O-6 and O-7, both females in their early 20s and from comparatively well-off families (though they themselves had low incomes). They both started to work once their children were old enough to be left with a carer or at day care, and showed 'thoughtlessness' towards life plans and career aspirations in the interview.

These cases put forward an argument that for precarious workers (usually relatively low income and unstable employment) who have urgent demands to support their family, family as a prosocial motivation to work represents a pressure-based motivation (X. Zhang et al., 2019). At the time of the interview, most respondents did low-hierarchy jobs or were unemployed. The love toward and the pleasure and attachment to family cannot be underestimated.¹⁷⁰ However, even in those instances, three participants mentioned 'pressure' and 'burden' when talking about their attitudes toward family. Another 13 interviewees also explicitly acknowledged the theme of 'responsibility' toward family. For others, despite being implicit, the awareness of duty on the family to stimulate work was significant. For example, T-8 gave top priority to her daughter, without directly mentioning 'responsibility' for family; but when talking about how her life could be if she chose again, she mentioned that she would not have a child. Similarly, P-1 stated that one 'must support one's family, no matter how hard life is'. This means that once precarious workers have a family, the family magnifies responsibility. Responsibility becomes more important than pleasure, especially when work is involved¹⁷². Also, as noted before, some participants used the term 'forced by life' to explain why they work. This means that they do not like their job, but in order to support their family, they should do that work (O-4).

In summary, as Amartya Sen (1985c) argued, given the values (such as fulfilling an obligation)

¹⁷⁰ Participants allocated 8.26 out of 10 points to 'love and trust', ranking at 8th place among 41 indicators. And some could not explain the reasons, but still highly valued family.

¹⁷² This challenges Gebauer et al. (2008)'s finding that those with higher attachment showed more pleasure-based motivation than pressure-based motivation. This is because generally participants valued kinship, that their attachment level is high, but pressure could not be less than pleasure because they need money for basic living. As the authors themselves acknowledged, their explanation in this regard is 'tentative' (Gebauer et al., 2008).

and desires, the agency aspect of a person sometimes plays a negative role in his/her wellbeing. For precarious workers, despite the increased subjective wellbeing and agency from prosocial motivation to family, the deeper emotion behind is pressure to fulfil their responsibility toward family. Especially for those doing low-end jobs, if the family means pressure/responsibility and work is primarily about making money, then work motivation stimulated by prosocial motivation is more external (Deal et al., 2013; Johnson, 2005). It is less likely that such pressure results in higher subjective wellbeing from work (Gebauer et al., 2008), or that they were (more) satisfied with the job than the middle class or managerial level, particularly when their spouse also has a low socio-economic position (M. Chen, 2018). Instead, the emotional distress from the economic burden to meet family needs (Crettaz & Bonoli, 2011; Standing, 2011a) remains hidden (discussed in the next section).

8.2 Masking agency and the illusory good life

It is unlikely that people never feel uncomfortable. Yet, it is interesting to find that some participants were not even aware of their negative emotions, and/or they had no sense of whether their life was good or bad (judgement). Some were aware of unpleasant emotions, but soon shifted their attention. And most interviewees did not show an outburst of emotion (for example, resentment), even when talking about the unfair treatment they encountered.

Autonomy requires critical reflection, such as tracking the reason behind an emotion (Tappolet, 2016). Without such reflection on emotion, or merely by concealing negative emotion, it is hard to see agency as a capability to reach wellbeing achievements in life. Digging deeper into emotions, this section will interpret the process of how precarious workers imagined their life as, at least, 'not bad'.

8.2.1 Four avoidance strategies for negative emotions

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, emotion is related to perceptive experiences.

Zhu & Lin (2010)'s study implied that the higher the level of education received by welfare recipients, the higher stigma they felt, mainly because they have more misgivings about exposing their image of 'poor economic condition' to the public. Based on this, most participants were comfortable in a precarious environment, likely linked to their low education impeding their critical thinking ability. Nevertheless, it appears unconvincing that people do not know what is shameful or honourable, given that for so many years they have lived in a society where various norms teach them what is 'good' and 'bad'. Therefore, in addition to the relationship between educational attainment and a low level of self-reflection (Yan, 2009), there must be other factors controlling the connections between reflection and emotion. This sub-section will elaborate on four strategies participants used to eliminate their negative emotions and make themselves feel better, when they perceive the external environment is 'unchangeable': no attention, no comparison, no thinking, and no planning/dreams.

Firstly, instead of directly reacting to the negative emotion, participants in this research usually tended to divert attention from the negative emotion. For example, taking a Public Welfare Job (PWJ) relevant to overseeing city regulations that involves conflicts with vendors, both P-11 and P-12 could treat the hurled abuse peacefully, although they still felt uncomfortable. P-11 chose to forget negative feelings by spending time with his grandchild(ren) or watching TV; while P-12 usually 'laughed it out of court' and 'ignored it'. As was the case for P-11 who had interacted with various clients as a self-employed bricklayer, P-12 had done small business for a long time and had frequently interacted with customers. From their experiences, they knew that adjusting a psychological state is better than arguing against it or indulging in a bad emotion. For example, P-3 experienced huge drops in career and social status. When talking about being treated with dignity and social inclusion, P-3 said: 'some people would judge you ... you just treat it as if they don't judge you; you pretend you don't hear ... don't treat it as prejudice'.

Secondly, bad emotion also occurs when comparing one's own disadvantage with other people's advantage, the so-called 'losing face' (*mei mian zi*, 没面子) (M-8). In such instances, they

adopted strategies to avoid feelings of inferiority, envy, regret, dissatisfaction, upset, anger and so on, by not comparing themselves with others (*bu yao pan bi*, 不要攀比) (mentioned by seven participants), focusing on personal satisfaction without minding what others owned (as shown by five participants), and/or comparing their current achievements with past hardships (as shown by three participants). As O-1 said, 'I cannot make comparison with others, because comparing with others makes you [me] angry; once making a comparison, you [I] feel others have a good life while yours [mine] is bad'. Sometimes, participants inevitably made a social comparison, but soon they focused on the downward comparison and told themselves that 'while worse off than the upper classes, [they were] better off than the lower classes' (*bi shang bu zu bi xia you yu*, 比上不足比下有余) (mentioned by five participants). These participants certainly had various discontents, but given that they could do nothing to change their circumstances, the only option was to adjust their mentality. They persuaded themselves that 'contentment brings happiness' (*zhi zu chang le*, 知足常乐) (mentioned by six participants). As P-10 said, regarding helplessness: 'how could I maintain satisfaction? ... our life [filled with hardships] cannot be described [as to how hard they are] ... we can only be content and then happy'.

Thirdly, according to the capability approach, an effective practice of agency requires rationality, that is to reflexively scrutinise goals and bring about changes (Garcés, 2020). This calls for exercising thinking. However, some participants did not want to think about questions, nor did they want to set goals or make a difference. In other words, in a new society that encourages people to be smart, they chose to limit self-reflection or to just 'play stupid'. The best example is T-4 (female, aged 51, with primary-school education to grade 4) who frequently said, 'I don't know' and 'I never thought about that', when asked why one indicator is more important than another in her ranking of wellbeing indicators, why people work, what her ideal job is, and so on. It can be argued that T-4 responded in such a way not to save face or to be perfunctory, since she in fact refused to withdraw from the interview when the interviewer (given her frequent response of 'do not want to think' (*bu*

xiang dong nao jin, 不想动脑筋)¹⁷⁶) asked if she would like to stop the interview. It is likely that information (knowledge) and options, a precondition for exerting agency (Garcés, 2020), were unavailable to exercise thinking, given that most participants were born in the Maoist era, which discouraged autonomy. Under this tradition, people tended to listen to their parents or let parents make decisions for them (Yan, 2009) (as shown by eleven participants). In this regard, not exercising autonomy or thinking can be understood as a habit, but it can also be interpreted as a method of ‘self-protection’. In other words, it is more likely in the risk society that thinking means pressure or anxiety toward what people must face; but as they are unable to make things better, they avoid the practice of thinking.

Fourthly, the above interpretation also makes sense regarding participants’ tendency to have ‘no dreams/plans’: dreaming/planning creates an unrealistic desire that can only breed ‘dissatisfaction’. When discussing the agency dimension of wellbeing, 21 participants reported that they seldom dreamt about the future, set a career plan, or arranged their life. As mentioned before, these attitudes cannot be isolated from level of education, family background and patriarchal culture, but are also linked to the self-protection mechanism. After all, even though they once had dreamt and made an effort to reach their goal, due to various constraints they eventually failed. As P-10 articulately put it: ‘to dream is wonderful, but the result is often disappointing’. Since ‘plans fail to achieve changes’ (S-9), they have formed attitudes consistent with traditional Taoist philosophy of ‘no action for nature’ and Confucianism’s value of accepting their lot. For example, three participants mentioned ‘going with the flow’ (*sui yi er an*, 随遇而安 or *sui bo zhu liu*, 随波逐流). Four mentioned ‘whatever will be will be’ (*shun qi zi ran*, 顺其自然,). Two mentioned ‘proceed without a plan’ (*zou yi bu suan yi bu*, 走一步算一步). One said ‘resigned to my fate’ (*ting tian you ming*, 听天由命). And another stated ‘go with fate’/‘following nature’ (*sui yuan/sui xing*, 随缘/随性). As S-8 said, when he talked about his attitudes toward the indicator of ‘be able to make plan and choice about one’s own

¹⁷⁶ Also directly or indirectly mentioned by another nine participants.

life': 'because I worked so many years, there is no difference as to [whether] I choose or do not choose [what life I would like to have], so [it is] not necessary to [plan the life]'.

If the above explanation is reliable, then their 'choices' to not pay attention, not to compare to others, not to think, and not to have dreams are the compulsory unwanted choices, which is a restriction on agency (Garcés, 2020). Since participants were unable to manage the outcomes (Seeman, 1959) in the risk society, instead of choosing the life they should be responsible for, they preferred to be chosen by the life. This provides them with an excuse to escape from self-blame for any failure (given their high value on responsibility) or disappointment from expectation.

8.2.2 Rationalisation by self-persuasion

The above sub-section addressed the issue of how precarious workers prevent negative emotions arising from their vulnerable situation. The question remains how they persuade themselves to accept a precarious life. The field research found that participants go through a reasoning process when they face injustice or feel uncomfortable but are unable to change their circumstance. This also helps explain why most of them did not act and/or had no dreams or plans for the future.

An emotion represents the value properties of something. For example, if someone feels fear towards something, then it can be said this thing produces fear for that person (Tappolet, 2016). Given this, if participants regard their dream as 'unrealistic', then there must be something informing their evaluative judgement of 'unrealistic'. With a focus on the 'role models', this sub-section discusses the most significant two strategies in their rationalisation process of lessening their agency, such as seeing more limitations than potential benefits in decision-making, and attaching moral merits to the precarious life.

Role models normally inspire a person's goals and show them how to reach success, while also informing them about expectations as to the possibility of success (Morgenroth et al., 2015). This can explain why most participants had low aspiration. They either lacked good role models to

emulate (Gao, 2017) or the models around them messaged an 'impractical' expectation. Deneulin (2008) used the case of arranged marriage to expound how the structures of living together can put a brake on women's agency. Deneulin (2008) added that living in a society where there is no collective action around promoting education, gender equity and the ability to question norms, people lack agency to boycott arranged marriage (Deneulin, 2008). This implies that a precondition of agency – a referable example – to ask for something different is absent.

The case of M-8's wife (a traditional Chinese rural woman in her midlife) is a convincing example. M-8 commanded his wife and every family affair, including decisions as to whether or not his wife could find a job and what crops they would farm. When asked why he did not ask his wife to help him with the farm work (M-8 worked but also farmed land), M-8 retorted: 'she does not have such ability' or 'she cannot ... [because] she is too slow [low efficiency]'. It was not that M-8's wife had no ability to do farm work, rather, it was her husband's (M-8) labelling of her as having 'no ability', which 'deprived' his wife from the opportunity to farm and further develop that ability. At the same time, living in a backwater village, women around her showed a similar template of 'self-sacrificing roles as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife, and a filial daughter' (H. Fu et al., 2018, p. 819). After moving to the city, M-8's wife had little interaction and participation in the local society, hence her geographic living space was still limited and isolated. Even in the city, she had no suitable role models to learn from. Undoubtedly, M-8's wife could see the lives of other urban women. However, becoming a role aspirant of a role model also depends on the future similarity between the role aspirant and the role model (Morgenroth et al., 2015). Thus, she was unlikely to treat these urban women, who did not share much in common with her, as her 'imitable' role models. M-8's wife did not play a leading role in the field research's interview, rather M-8's command of the conversation could be seen as reflecting his wife's attitude that obeying the husband (not questioning his demands and decisions) was the proper thing to do.

M-8's wife's case is typical of many Chinese women, in particular those with low education levels living in a rural area. As Liu (2020) argued, with these unwritten norms from historical gender

inequality (Confucianism), decision-making power is held by men, precluding women from attaining socio-economic power. It is thus hard to envision how women such as M-8's wife could develop their autonomy.

Role models can also persuade people to desert their 'ambitious' goals through expectancy value. Expectancy-value theories emphasise the two correlated variables influencing the degree to which one is motivated to do something: the perceived likelihood of success (expectancy) and the perceived desirability (value) of that success (Morgenroth et al., 2015). T-8 (female, aged 33) is a good example of such a situation. When asked why she had not fought for her dreams at a younger age, T-8 mentioned that it was because her dreams could never come true. As discussed in Chapter 4, T-8, a labour dispatch worker, wanted to become a civil servant (formal worker). In addition to such limitations as time and education, the failure of her colleague – who had a higher level of education and better paperwork ability than her – in the civil servant entrance exam made her think that her own likelihood of success was low. This, in turn, lowered T-8's sense of self-efficacy and her agency in seeking a better career. Therefore, before T-8 could exert efforts to pass the exam, she concluded that she 'could not pass the exam at all', resulting in her taking no follow-up actions (T-8 never enrolled in the exam).

In this regard, it is safe to claim that precarious workers tended to see more barriers than benefits when considering following their goals or aims. They considered their desires to be 'unrealistic'. Taking the example of S-10 (female, aged 54 with a junior middle school level education) illustrates the correlation between expectancy and desire (Morgenroth et al., 2015). S-10 had a good role model – one of her female friends who in her eyes was 'successful' and 'admirable' and who provided her with an inspired goal and a successful pattern. However, S-10 did not follow her as a role model, because the expectation of success was insufficient to stimulate her to take action. As she put it, 'at my age, everything seems too late for me ... she [her friend] is 10 years younger than me, and has a higher level of education; she is smarter than me ... I am much less cultured ... I lack courage'. Her low confidence from comparing herself with her role model decreased her expectation

of success.

Labelling themselves as unconfident was common among participants. That lack of confidence tended to be linked to 'being too old' (P-12, aged 57; P-4, aged 49; P-9, aged 46; S-3, aged 50; S-5 male, aged 50); 'no longer young' (M-6, aged 29); 'uncultured/having a low level of education' (M-2, aged 39, illiterate though having other skills; P-10 who was illiterate but had acquired basic literacy and numeracy; another six participants who had education ranging from primary school to junior college school); and being timid (O-1 female). The embodied self-stereotyping legitimates their belief that if they were to take action on their goals, they would not succeed. With the decline in expectancy of success, the desire gradually weakens.

The expansion of personal autonomy in contemporary Chinese society (Yan, 2010) had an uneven effect in an increasingly unequal society, leading to psychic disharmony, as those aware of their low socio-economic position had to also renounce their aspirations. Participants tended to focus on morality, as a reflective interpretation of their disadvantage. Cognition, desire and affectivity (whether or not feeling/being aware of it) are recognised as the three constitutive elements of emotion (Oakley, 2020; Tappolet, 2016). Morality can be an element of 'desirability'. Drawing on the related literature, Morgenroth et al. (2015) concluded that there are three contributors to desirability: sociability, morality and competence. Morality can also function as perceptive experiences when people make a judgement (Gray et al., 2012) and is related to affections. When people judge themselves or are judged as 'wrong', they would experience spiritual suffering; and vice versa, when they judge themselves or are judged as 'right', they would feel good (Prinz, 2016). Morality is thus a variable in personal identity (Prinz, 2016) and cannot be separated from actions and emotions (Oakley, 2020; Prinz, 2016).

This field research highlighted the role of morality as a self-serving cognition practice used by participants to control emotion. People often frame themselves as either a hero (offset the blame by past goodness) or a victim (incapable of the blame for the suffering), to escape blame when acknowledging they did something wrong (Gray & Wegner, 2011). When participants considered that

they were responsible for the failings in their lives, they used strategies similar to the 'hero' and 'victim' scenarios outlined above: flagging the goodness of their behaviour and attributing the wrongdoing to others.

Flagging good deeds can make 'failure' free from self-blame. Some participants had a sense of inferiority/shame/stigma causally related to their precarious job (such as O-1 male¹⁷⁷, P-5¹⁷⁸ and M-3¹⁷⁹) or identified their job or their life as being at the bottom of society (such as another six participants). Precarious jobs and low economic position are likely to be involved in discrimination, especially when one had once had higher social status. But, in the context of their being unable to control their external reality, they used the Maoist moral virtue of 'labour glory' to comfort themselves. For instance, from being a state-owned enterprise (SOE) worker (higher status though having a low wage) to becoming a self-employed nanny (much lower status), after early retiring with a low pension from the SOE, S-10 told herself: 'doing a low-end job, people may look down on me, [but] I feel it does not matter, [because] I do not steal or rob. I earn money through my labour'. Similarly, while dissatisfied with wage levels, 10 respondents highlighted the value of commitment and responsibility to their work, an Confucian doctrine. As T-9 put it: '[you have to] love whatever job you take up' (*gan yi hang ai yi hang*, 干一行爱一行). Fulfilling duty is how most participants justified their deprivations. For example, P-2 insisted on a work ethic of customers first (she once worked as a waitress), and thought she got on well with the customers because 'no matter how ridiculous requests the customers make, you can only say they are right'. When P-2 encountered prejudice, her strategy was that as long as she feels no shame after 'self-examination', she ignores other people's judgement.

P-2's method was linked to the second strategy, that is to attribute the wrongdoing to others to comfort themselves that they are not blameworthy. For mental wellbeing, people tend to show positive illusions, including self-serving attribution biases (Gentsch et al., 2015). Self-serving

¹⁷⁷ Mentioned workplace at the construction site.

¹⁷⁸ Mentioned feeling sick while cleaning the dog droppings.

¹⁷⁹ Mentioned unable to earn acceptable money from demanding job.

attribution bias refers to people's tendency to attribute the positives to themselves, while attributing the negatives to others or the external environment (Gentsch et al., 2015), instead of the accurate assessment of fact (Taylor & Brown, 1994). Most participants did not ascribe structural factors to their personal failure and were daunted when they encountered difficulties in decision-making. Even then, they engaged in self-serving attribution biases. This attitude is illustrated by P-1's remark in response to being stigmatised: 'If you respect me, I respect you; [vice versa] if you don't respect me, I don't respect you'. Put differently, if a person acts properly, but still receives no respect, this is a problem of those who do not show respect to the person in the first place. This attribution enabled P-10 to feel better when being looked down upon. Once again, it is not that P-10 did not know the frustrating fact of being discriminated against (as in her own words in Section 8.2.1); rather this represented her strategy for alleviating and controlling the pain and hurt from unjust treatments.

Following on Weber's comments on Benjamin Franklin's statement that honesty serves to increase capital and thus is a virtue (since it is useful for the person), moral attitudes can be perceived as having utilitarian properties (Weber, 1930/2005). To use morality as a tool to self-comfort suggests once again that participants know the reality is unchangeable (expectancy), and that the only solution is to negotiate their perception (desire) and self-esteem (experience). Morality here also plays a role in helping people endure disadvantage. Therefore, the fact that some participants viewed their life as 'not bad' does not mean that their life was really 'not bad'. What their responses evince was a muffled psychic disorder and/or found reasons to maintain their concept of self in the materialism era, when they are unable to succeed. Precarious workers have learned to hand over their 'autonomy', by persuading themselves to accept the status quo.

8.3 Adaptive preference and risk aversion

One can argue that people, especially at a young age, have dreams and aspirations. Some participants did indeed have aspirations for work and life in their younger years, and knew what their

desired job was. Respondents expressed that they had had dreams of being a teacher (S-4 and T-1), a policeman (S-8 and T-10) and a fashion designer (O-1). The question is why they ultimately chose to put aside those aspirations.

The theory of 'learned helplessness' suggests that even when people feel unpleasantness, such that he/she had high motivation to make a change, the low anticipation of outcomes lowers his/her motivation (Teschl & Comim, 2005). Thus, to ease the cognitive dissonance, people develop a reduction strategy whereby, compared with taking action, they are more likely to alter their goals (Teschl & Comim, 2005). This 'learned' reduction strategy is reflected in P-8's statement that 'people hope to plan their life when they are in the schooling age, but entering into the society, nothing tracks as what they planned'.

This section focuses on the concepts of adaptive preference and risk aversion in the process by which precarious workers get used to 'failure' and lower aspiration. The study argues that participants' risk aversion is an outcome of their adaptive preference (conscious or not¹⁸⁰) toward their lifelong setbacks within their social context.

8.3.1 Adaptive preference: survival, learned failure and thwarted life aspirations

Like emotional actions, people sometimes have habitual actions performed naturally (having reasons to do so, but unaware of the reasons when performing) (Tappolet, 2016). As with making decisions and weighing up risks, reflection needs education, time, energy and information (Standing, 2011a). The origin of adaptive (or autonomous) preferences in enduring a precarious life is clear; that is, participants lacked appropriate conditions to exercise better agency. Due to the urgent demand for survival, economic security is the foremost need of precarious workers (Standing, 2011a).

Therefore, rather than their own interest, feasibility of that decision and their career plan,

¹⁸⁰ As analysed by Nussbaum (2000) and Schermer (2013), Jon Elster thought adaptive preference is formed unconsciously, while autonomous preference is formed with control, reflection and awareness. Some scholars also used adaptive preference more broadly, as 'conscious' preference, see Schermer (2013)'s discussion.

precarious workers focused on where they could quickly earn money. For example, M-2 and M-6, living in a worse-off family, gave up education (they expressed regret about this in the interviews) to earn their daily subsistence. Six interviewees recounted similar cases, whereby they made the arbitrary decision to take on a job without much information about what that job entailed. For example, when asked how she came up with the idea of running a restaurant (one of her past jobs lasting half a year), P-1 said: 'I have heard that [running a restaurant] is good – the profits were considerable ... [we] people in the rural cooperatives can do whatever job, as long as it can make a living'.

The arbitrariness manifested in participants' job choices is somewhat contradictory to their prudence in taking action to fulfil their goals and ambitions. This sub-section will use the cases of several participants, to interpret how the urgent demand for survival and the learned failure engender the adaptive preference of lowering livelihood demands.

The field research revealed that not only did participants tend to blindly follow others, but also most had exceptionally low demands with regard to their living standards. When asked to vote for the wellbeing indicators they considered 'important', they only assigned weights above 8 (out of 10) to the indicators of 'body and physical health', 'livelihood and property' (they blurted out 'food' when talking about living necessities), 'mobility', 'education' and 'family'. Other indicators appear to be of much less significance. When asked to evaluate their living standard, some of them did not think their life was so bad that it needed improving, though based on the researcher's capabilities matrix (Appendix 3) they were capability deprived. Among welfare recipients, while two identified their living standard as 'not reaching the average', six thought their living standard was average or a little bit higher than average¹⁸¹. In fact, in regard to both income and comprehensive wellbeing, most of them were far from meeting the average living standard level. In addition, some participants kept a low consumption even after their incomes increased, and preferred saving for their children (see

¹⁸¹ In the interviews, some participants sometimes considered their living standard as 'on the average', but sometimes also as 'at the basic level'.

Chapter 5) and/or future use.

The fact that participants highly valued the material dimension of wellbeing further implies that the sense of security has been lost. As the poverty scarcity theory suggests, financial hardship breeds a sense of scarcity associated with poverty (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021). This feeling induces an additional attention to scarcity-related demands and overlooks other valuable information (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021). Hence, the more they lacked money, the more they focused on money and the more they averted risk to long-run investment and future implications (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021). The scarcity sense becomes a habit. For example, when talking about perpetuating a low living standard despite having more money, P-10 said: 'you must consider that one day you cannot [may not] earn money'. These phenomena suggest they either have no forethought for their own deserved life (given the strategies disclosed in Section 8.2), or they have already adapted to the status quo of low living standards. Five participants directly admitted that they did not have a higher aspiration for their living standard.

The gradually erased pursuit of wellbeing is associated with failures and knockbacks experienced in the past. Take P-8 as an example. When P-8 worked in the SOE (in the 1990s), he set a goal of becoming a manager. He eventually became a manager, but was later laid off. Because he faced a huge burden of avoiding hunger and being clad, he never set such a goal again. All his attention was on how he could earn money to pay the bills. He worked for private factories in Ya'an for about five years, but the local wage was too low to maintain his household expenditure. Thus, he went to Guangzhou as a casual worker to earn more money to support his family. The bad working environment and poor accommodation were intolerable, so he came back to Ya'an one year later, to do casual work in Ya'an and neighbouring cities. In the early 2010s, he applied for a PWJ. Due to there being no job vacancies, he found a 'better' job (as a car salesman) compared with what he had done in the past, and kept this job for about two years. Once the PWJ became available, he quit the car salesman job immediately and became a PWJ worker.

P-8 is one of few precarious workers who showed agency (mainly measured by whether or

not the person has ever set goals, planned a career and/or reflected on the self/life). Even so, P-8's 'aspiration' was thwarted and increasingly lowered over the decades. He dared not dream of having a higher income or status, but just hoped to have a more stable job, even with a lower wage. He had peace of mind in accepting his low socio-economic position compared to how he felt when he was laid off:

The biggest [psychological gap] occurred when I was just [became] unemployed. When you [I] were in the factory [SOE], you [I] were a manager. Suddenly I was unemployed and switched to other jobs, managed by others. There must be a psychological gap ... The [psychological gap before and after PWJ] is slight ... [Before being laid off] I wasn't very rich, but my livelihood was guaranteed. Suddenly, I lost such a guarantee.

The long-term exertion of psychological adjustment mediates agency. As was the case for P-8, participants with experience of moving from SOE to casual work and/or PWJ (such as P-3, P-5 and P-6) generally displayed more 'anger' or negative evaluation towards the employers, the society and their life than other participants who were never employed as formal workers. Yet, overall they still had a peaceful mentality. 'Habit is second nature', was P-10's remark when talking about the frequency of being misunderstood.

P-8's feeling of stigma has faded as time went by. As was the case with other welfare receivers (P-3, P-5 and P-10), long-term adaption weakens the sense of stigma, exclusion and prejudice. This interpretation makes sense for those without huge drops in employment and finance, the participants who have always done precarious work. P-10 (her PWJ often involved conflict since she had to regulate interactions between vendors and residents) stated about her emotion toward her PWJ:

There is no other way. [You] do it or [you] do not. You've already done it [this job], so you must adhere to finish ... In the beginning, I felt [uncomfortable when receiving hurled abuse] ... Later, my attitude was 'it doesn't matter'. Anyway, there are always people who do such a job. Even if I quit, there are still people who can do it ... Anyway, it's the nature of my job ...

Doing it for a long time, I've adapted to it and hardened ... Anger every day can only make your [my] health get worse.

Either taking strategies (as discussed in Section 8.2) or being unaware of adaption, precarious workers eventually submit to their inability to change their reality. When talking about their sense of fulfilment and value, P-7 reported that she cannot smile at life since she has already experienced too much hardship, but time has faded everything. Comparing two participants (M-7 and M-6) who were both chefs, with a low-education (at junior school level) and male, it became clear how they became increasingly insensitive to negative treatment. M-7 (aged 48) was not concerned about a job upholding the principle of 'equal job, equal pay'. By contrast, M-6 (aged 29) had once resigned, due to feeling uncomfortable about the unequal treatment from his boss (M-6's boss provided his co-workers – who were relatives of his boss – with higher wages and easier job tasks). M-6's unwillingness to demand that his rights at work were enforced (an attitude also shown by five other participants¹⁸²), was linked to failure to achieve his request for 'equal job, equal pay' on two previous occasions. As he put it: 'once I know this, I never try ... because even if I asked, it is useless'. This example implies previous failure taught M-6 that asking for his rights at work was just a waste of energy, and not as good as keeping acquiescent, which at least would not bring disappointment.

After stopping to struggle, participants indeed had a more balanced spiritual life, though muffling the real deprivation they experienced (Sen, 1985b, 1985c, 1999) and failing the desires they ought to have (Schermer, 2013). If the emotion is their reflective endorsement of the preference, then non-autonomous preference is transformed into autonomous preference (Schermer, 2013). These findings of how adaption and the life course influence how people cope with stigma follow Rogers-Dillon (1995)'s finding of the relationship between life history and stigma.

¹⁸² This is different from Yan (2010)'s analysis that individuals in the post-Reform era develop to construct their 'self' with rights, likely because of geographic and time variables – as Ralston et al. (2018) found, the individualism and collectivism varied between areas with higher, medium and lower development and across periods from the early Reform to the later – as well as the different experiences of the subjects.

8.3.2 Habituated risk aversion: cost, age and aspiration

People can adapt to an environment that they previously felt was undesirable, and as they become much more adaptive to the status quo, they no longer want a change. Existing research has shown a negative correlation between risk aversion and income, particularly in less developed countries (Vieider et al., 2019). When people face resource constraints, they likely consider the opportunity cost, although not always the optimal consideration (Spiller, 2011). Especially when uncertainty brings stress and fear, the decision-maker's risk aversion increases and develops a habit of less risk-taking (He & Hong, 2018). The outcome of the previous experience informs current choice. Without rejecting the opposite pattern (March, 1988), the potential outcome of being a loser shatters any prior expectation to win, growing risk aversion in their later decision; on the other hand, the potential outcome of being a winner weakens risk aversion, by anticipating a higher probability of success (Post et al., 2008).

Participants live in a risk society and have been exposed to various institutional barriers, for which they choose 'safe', instead of 'more possible return' as the survival strategy (He & Hong, 2018). Adaptive preference results in a preference for 'stability' or 'risk aversion' (as shown by 20 participants). For example, they would rather keep an unsatisfactory job than switch jobs. As mentioned before, participants likely overestimated the limitations, rather than the benefits. Without enough external force, they prefer to keep the previous lifestyle, rather than seek a new outlet. This is demonstrated when weighing potential gain and loss, as well as feasibility: the cost of the decision is what they are most concerned about. Most participants were in middle age. Especially given the case from P-8 and the comparison between the cases of M-6 and M-7 in the above sub-section, age likely plays a role in risk aversion (Albert & Duffy, 2012; March, 1988), although possibly varying by risk domains depending on their risk perception (Bonem et al., 2015).

This sub-section suggests that precarious workers' low aspiration level is a response to their risk aversion habituated with ageing. They consider the cost of taking the risk more as they become

older – having a family (responsibility and pressure) and experiencing more failure, frustration and anxiety in attempting to have a good life (expectancy).

Having a family strengthens risk aversion. Referring to the cost, it is related less to how much they should invest in a change, but more to how much that change would produce loss to them. Once again, the desirability pertains to sociality (cooperation and association with others (Brambilla et al., 2011)), morality (responsibility) and competence. Those in a higher position face more substantial social consequences (for example, reputation) of failure than those in a lower job hierarchy (Deal et al., 2013); those with a family undertake more risk in deciding than those without a family. As shown by three participants, the greater cost of failure reduces their willingness to address uncertainty. Therefore, instead of seeking other possibilities, they prefer to make their job 'safe' (conservative) and stable (X. Zhang et al., 2019)¹⁸³. For instance, not only the older (aged 40s-60s), but also younger participants (O-2, O-6, M-6, T-6 and T-7) highlighted 'stability' in employment (rather than higher profitability of the job, if the gap is not very distinct). Among the younger, reasons include avoiding potential income interruption in job interval (M-6, single); the anxiety of uncertainty (O-6, married mother); and the worry of adaptation problems in a new environment due to ageing (T-9, married father). It seemed like ageing killed their curiosity (T-7, single).

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the deeper consideration was for the family (O-2 and T-6). The (family) responsibility awareness grows risk aversion. For example, discussing attitudes toward her former job switching experience and the future formal job¹⁸⁴, T-6 (female, aged 28) said: 'I now think stability is the most important [meaning she valued the formal job]; now for me, I only hope my child can grow up safely, and I can provide him with a good environment'. Also, as S-2 reported, to afford the failure is harder after having a family. O-1 presented the worry about loss that precluded her from running couture (her dream): 'if loss, I had no way to satisfy the family

¹⁸³ The example X. Zhang et al.(2019) used was creativity, that involved uncertain outcomes of creative endeavours and possible long-term investment.

¹⁸⁴ At the time of the (first) interview, T-6 had got her formal job offer, but she had not yet started the work due to pregnancy.

expenditure; [my child's] schooling needed money'. The consideration of how the family would undertake the consequence of misfortune drives the risk aversion that reduces the possibility of success, because they never even try.

Cost and age are associated, not only because people tend to have a family as they age into the late 20s, but also because ageing means accumulating much memory and experience in society (as T-10 began to recall the past, after reaching 35 years of age). Their aspiration declines, likely because life goals change with age. For example, P-11 and P-12 thought while younger, they focused more on profitability than job stability; but now in their late 50s, their preference for earning more money had turned to preference for stability. More than likely, this is because they had adaptively learned life's lessons from both peers (attitudes) as the reference point (Balsa et al., 2015; March, 1988) and the role model discussed in Section 8.2.2, as well as their own life history, that determines the influence of past experience on later choice and preformation (Albert & Duffy, 2012; He & Hong, 2018; March, 1988; Post et al., 2008).

Echoing the empirical research of Ryff (1989), for 22 participants when asked about the hardest period in their life, their hardships were linked to family and incomes in their younger age. Those hardships developed their risk perception. As denoted by S-2, in the change from 'being forced by life' to the enthusiasm to his business (self-employed chef), his incentive comes from the increased turnover; otherwise, enthusiasm would soon lose out. Note again, one of the features of precariousness is anxiety for instability and insecurity. The risk aversion decreases their aspiration. The reduced aspiration due to exogenous pressure can also in turn be responsive to the increase in risk aversion (March, 1988).

8.4 Conclusion

As Beck (1992) argued, the ability to predict and endure dangers in the risk society is as important as the ability to obtain material goods in the industrial world. Today, social problems have

become personal mental (Beck, 1992) and emotional dispositions (Standing, 2011a). Agency is associated with goals, choices, obligations, values and other mental activities (Sen, 1985c). Emotions are also what people pursue, and they are part of the agency process (Nussbaum, 2000; Tappolet, 2016). Through analysing the passive dispositions of participants toward living their circumstances, this chapter argued that participants' low levels of agency and passive dispositions are a manifestation and coping strategy of precarious workers' inability to affect change in the risk society.

Thoughts connected to poverty have a negative influence on cognitive capacity and the ability to self-control (Bartoš et al., 2018; Bruijn & Antonides, 2021). The effective exercise of agency must meet (a) enough options, (b) enough information for critical thinking, and (c) internal desires/goals (Garcés, 2020). The relatively young participants could be temporarily regarded as non-deprived in the capability of agency. With more opportunities than their older counterparts, they could be more optimistic about making a change and could exert more efforts to change their external environment. But still, 36 out of 46 participants were assessed as deprived in this indicator.

Participants likely sacrificed agency to protect emotions. They exhibited little catharsis of emotion, limited reflection on their life circumstances, a low level of aspiration, no dreams or plans to achieve them, lack of imagination regarding their own higher living demands, carelessness about rights, unwillingness to make life arrangements, and so on. Their tranquil spiritual life and low material desires were not linked to, for example, religious belief, since almost all participants did not have a religious faith and disvalued the wellbeing indicator of religious belief (on average, the points assigned to this wellbeing indicator were only 4.33 out of 10). Instead, they have developed risk aversion with lifelong adaption in reaction to frustration from constant failure; they dared not risk the loss from any attempt to make a change. Therefore, they would psychologically adjust to persuade themselves to go along with the status quo, rather than struggle to change their circumstances, which, in their perception, is highly likely to be unattainable.

The seemingly insufficient risk perception is a consequence of social multiplier effects. Beck's (1992, p. 53) premise that 'risk consciousness and activism are more likely to occur where the direct

pressure to make a living has been relaxed or broken, that is, among the wealthier and more protected groups', was confirmed in this study, where precarious workers appeared to have little risk awareness. However, as Beck (1992, p. 59) also warned, the growth of risk awareness depends on the exercise of rationality that 'arises socially'.

At first glance, China's risk society seemed to open the door for mobility and freedom (Yan, 2009). But with little institutional protection (Yan, 2009), participants' past failed striving, their peers and family circumstances (Balsa et al., 2015), as well as other broader socio-economic institutions, resulted in them feeling like they had no control over their circumstances (Standing, 2011a). Beck (1992) put it thus: it is affliction that kills the consciousness. As Standing (2011a, Chapter 6) discussed the affected thinking of precarious workers in the Western context, the 'docile minds and bodies' are disconcerted with the politics, representation and power, but live with irrational fears. Likewise, in the Chinese context, decades of experiencing hardship have taught precarious workers to adapt, to avert the risk and lowered agency. Therefore, it becomes understandable why, when participants were asked to weigh the wellbeing indicators, the capability of agency did not rank very high (5.82 out of 10 points, ranked at 10th place among 11 capabilities). When participants perceived agency as unattainable, they then tended to undervalue agency.

Adaptive preference is both positive (relieving pain) and negative (lowering agency) for overall wellbeing (Teschl & Comim, 2005). The opportunity cost means once people choose one option, they lose the opportunity to choose another option. Precarious workers' aspiration reconciles with their urgent desire for survival. They have too many 'prudential' reasons to subordinate their agency. They intentionally or unconsciously adopt strategies to stop the bad mood and eventually have less tension in their mentality. Yet, their gains in happiness also prevent their self-reflection on how they could make improvements in their objective reality (Schermer, 2013). Their lack of desire for change is linked to an awareness of their deficiency to active action (Fei, 2004), blocking any the attempt to control externalities. Their life also keeps the same 'unacceptable' in an objective meaning.

The cases of several participants suggest that more purposeful planning of their life circumstances could potentially open a much wider range of options, that could in turn improve their life/living standard. But they were not interested in arranging life in advance. The use of internal control of mentality and the abundance of external control serve to duplicate their previous experiences of having 'no choices' or 'being forced by life'. Therefore, putting the threads together, we can observe that these capability deprivations are correlated. The deprivations in material and relational dimensions are associated with the deprivation in subjective and agency dimensions; while subjective and agency dimensions, in turn, contribute to more deprivation in the former.

Chapter 9 : Conclusion – Capability Deprivation in the Risk Society

China's socio-economic transformation from the late 1970s, which involved a dual process of de-collectivisation and individualisation, resulted in the formation of a risk society and a more unpredictable future (Beck, 2000b; Yan, 2009, 2010). With the retreat of the state from safeguarding the livelihood of its citizens, individuals are now required to proactively undertake this responsibility (Yan, 2010). This process has broken the collective dependency of the Maoist era, and raised people's awareness regarding the value of autonomy and personal rights (Yan, 2009, 2010). However, without the basic protection of social capital and sound social policy, the 'shadows of prosperity' became a reality for many (Beck, 2000b).

In the same way that welfare states play a dual role of livelihood security and social stratification (Esping-Andersen, 1990), China's governance reregulation and decentralisation were designed to deliver better services and protection to its citizens. In reality, however, those processes increased the extent of commodification. While most scholars would not endorse the catastrophist scenario painted by Ulrich Beck (1992), the rapid growing army of the precariat, defined as those with unstable and insecure employment linked to uncertainty, indeed confirms the threatening nature (Curran, 2013) of Beck (1992, 2006, 2009)'s risk society to breed in-work poverty.

This research intended to understand the experiences and dynamics of in-work poverty in China within the capability framework. It asked whether and why precarious workers suffer from capability deprivation within the context of China's own risk society.

By collecting firsthand information on the lived experience of precarious employment and in-work poverty from 46 participants, the research examined how the structural risks posed by the institutions of the labour market, the family, social networks, and the social protection system (re-)construct precarious workers' actions and behaviour. This analysis was grounded and informed by Bourdieu's logic of the way in which structural factors shape agency (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015), Deneulin (2008)'s 'structures of living together' framework, and Sen (1985c)'s theoretical analysis on structural factors influencing people's wellbeing.

Most participants, who lived through China's socio-economic transformation, were suffering from capability/functioning deprivation and in-work poverty associated with precarious employment. The research argued that the capability deprivation of precarious workers is the result of a risk society that not only precludes them from institutional protection, but also destroys their aspiration to pursue a better life. Precarious workers tend to be the outliers of the rapid socio-economic transformation. The person's position in the labour market decides how institutions function for him/her, such that the market is the primary source of protection. Due to their low socio-economic status, the corresponding institutional dependency (as Beck (1992) anticipated in the risk society) did not allow and restricted people from obtaining comprehensive wellbeing. The research results also suggest that for precarious workers, institutions often mean more risk than security, although precarious workers heavily rely on them in their daily life. Institutions, as instrumental aspects of freedom, are interlocked with one another. Their joint significance contributes to an individual's general capabilities, and these capabilities, as both means and ends, interrelate with and influence each other (Sen, 1999).

9.1 The story of the precariat

The labour market has witnessed an enhanced commodification that strengthens the authority of the employer, while weakening an individual worker's security (Esping-Andersen, 1990). This influence was definitively 'decisive' in the attainment of a minimum acceptable life. The characteristics of precarious employment – low wage rate, long hours working and/or abnormal working hours, high geographic mobility, income interruption with frequent periods of unemployment, and no labour contracts or employer-contributed social insurances – negatively influence all dimensions of wellbeing, especially during crisis periods such as that elicited by the COVID-19 pandemic. The market adopts many tactics to deprive precarious workers. For example, not assigning 'equal' job tasks to workers with the same job position, to rationalise unequal pay.

However, with diminishing collectivism (for example, the weakness of workplace unionisation as more workers have short employment relations), the bargaining power of workers is decreasing. Employers tend to be the rule-makers when it comes to labour agreements and conditions.

Working in such a context has significantly negative effects on participants' family dynamics (Esping-Andersen, 2002). For example, the research found that long work hours reduced family interaction and parenting, which manifested in relatively high levels of divorce (32.6 per cent) among participants. Among younger participants, long work hours and low pay correlated with delayed marriage and low fertility. Furthermore, the field research found evidence of intergenerational transmission of precarious employment. Relatedly, family responsibilities and the associated family-work conflict often stopped participants from seeking and taking on work opportunities that could improve their wellbeing.

In China's context, the older generation tends to provide support to the next generation's family (Yan, 2009), even at the cost of the older generation's wellbeing. This usually manifests in prolonged working lives, reduced material conditions, limited participation in social activities as a cost-cutting strategy, and reduced leisure time to care for grandchildren. Nowadays, children have become the economic cost (Giddens, 1998). Given this, within the (extended) family, deprivation is not reduced, but rather, it transfers between generations, which often means the younger generation can escape deprivation at the price of the older generation being deprived. Hence, for those already in a precarious situation, the family plays a more negative than positive role in the pursuit of more comprehensive wellbeing.

The downsized family – a legacy of the one-child policy – coupled with the influence of the labour market has also tended to exacerbate long-term dependency relationships among family members, and to limit people's engagement with broader social ties. The reduced opportunities for flourishing through participating in the labour market (Cheung & Chou, 2016), asymmetric decentralisation processes, and past misuse of social connections are likely to undermine trust in the fairness of the society. In post-Reform realm, the soaring uncertainty related to resource access,

information transparency and market competition reshapes the form and extent of *guanxi* – social capital – involvement and dependency (Bian, 2018; Chang, 2011). Participants made limited use of their available social capital, which could potentially facilitate opportunities to improve their wellbeing.

Paradoxically, their limited resources made them highly dependent on existing *guanxi* for finding work and overcoming other kinds of hardship. Generally, participants showed a low incentive to develop new relationships and sources of social capital. They were less trusting of broader social capital (more distant relationships), fearing being disappointed by less familiar friends and relations. This mistrust was compounded by the discrimination they experienced in social interactions, due to their low socio-economic position. Given their inability – time, money, position, location and communication skills – to access more diverse sources of social capital, the low incentives to socialise, and/or their disvalue of socialising, manifested in participants feeling ‘bitter’ about lacking *guanxi*, while at the same time criticising those who obtained personal gains because of their *guanxi*. Yet, even when some have a certain level of social capital within their own homogeneous circles, the power embedded in those social circles is not enough to help them improve their wellbeing. In fact, given the reciprocal obligation embedded in such exchanges (Yan, 2009), using such social capital can lead to deprivation in other dimensions of wellbeing.

After the failure of those ‘risk-prevention’ institutions, participants would apply for social assistance as a safety net of last resort. However, similar to the institutions above, the social assistance system also falls short in providing precarious workers with enough protection to safeguard their wellbeing. The *dibao* and PWJ in Ya’an confirmed the reality of welfare regionalism under asymmetric decentralisation, and the related differentiated welfare delivery constrained by local fiscal and administrative capacity, as well as institutional devices (Gao, 2017; Mok & Wu, 2013). In this less developed city in western China, the reinforced tendency of individualised risk distribution in the welfare programmes likely narrows opportunity for social protection and produces an inefficient and ineffective outcome in alleviating capability deprivation.

People live with institutions; their opportunities rest with the institutions and their function (Sen, 1999). Not only is their capability set narrow, but inadequate institutional protection also influences their lifestyle and even their outlook on life. Precarious workers' imagination about a worthy life is restricted, related to the deficiency of some wellbeing elements as referable examples. For instance, participants only considered basic items, such as food and clothes, as their living necessities. And they eventually voted for a list that even dropped elements such as longevity, clothes (warm), mobility and social participation, which the literature widely acknowledged as 'basic' for an acceptable life. Based on the field research, it was found that, as a result of their inability to withstand structural risks, participants tended to make what seemed like 'irrational' decisions as a coping strategy. After experiencing unfair treatment, as mentioned before, some participants were not even prepared to ask for basic work rights, such as 'equal pay for equal work'. Participants tended to self-exclude from social participation and to distrust social welfare as a mechanism that could guarantee their basic livelihood. Furthermore, they were unaware of (or intentionally strangled) negative emotions, dared not to dream, lowered their aspiration to pursue a better life, and averted risks even when they may provide financial returns.

While their passive reaction, instead of proactively managing risks, could be seen as the source of their wellbeing deprivation, it was found that their actions (or lack thereof) were associated with the adaptive preference from the constant failures (in the labour market and with social welfare) they had experienced in the past. The long-term learning from their failures in life have warned them to be risk averse: to seek what is safer, rather than what is potentially beneficial. The adaptation preference for no aspiration becomes their self-shield to maintain good emotions. In other words, they have already learnt that there is no difference between choosing or not choosing life; therefore they would rather be 'forced by life' than planning their life, which at least does not trigger self-blame for wrong decisions. Agency plays a core role in one's wellbeing (Hojman & Miranda, 2018; Kotan, 2010; Robeyns, 2016; Schweiger & Graf, 2014; Sen, 1985c, 1993, 2004b, 2005). The limited (or lack of) agency or the forced self-determination of participants under the

restricted options they operate under (Yan, 2009), however, mean they live permanently with the risk of capability deprivation, if they are not already deprived.

Therefore, the research also unveiled that what has happened in China's welfare regime is not decommodification, which means the quality of life is independent of participation in the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Instead, there is a reinforced commodification in the institutions. Examples of this range from labour force cuts as a cost saving mechanism, seeking matched socio-economic background in marriage, restricting exchanges to those with similar low positions in social capital, and competition for social welfare. Such commodification is also present in people's thoughts, for example, attributing success to personal effort but failure to personal fault. As the influence from reconstructed institutions (in the risk society) on individuals is growing (Yan, 2009) while coping abilities are unevenly held among people, society is weeding out the underclass, who have a more limited ability to deal with the changes and vulnerabilities of the risk society.

It can be argued that tradition, where familiarity and trust are created (Giddens, 1994), is the accumulated experience of a society (Fei, 2004; Giddens, 1998); so perhaps precarious workers selectively inherit some characteristics of tradition for self-protection (Yan, 2009). But on the way to China's modernisation, the sense of familiarity is losing out while pain has been continuously produced by the institutions, and thus trust is being destroyed (Giddens, 1994). With less opportunity for institutional protection, institutions for precarious workers, or more broadly, the vulnerable, have become more instrumental (for obtaining material wellbeing), but less utilitarian (for producing a sense of achievement, trust, safety, cultivating aspiration, and being free from worry, pressure and anxiety).

9.2 Significance, contributions and implications

Precarity in the labour market and in-work poverty have received little attention in China, primarily because this is a recent phenomenon in China's socio-economic transformation. The scope

of the existing research tends to be narrow and only describes these phenomena incompletely. It also does not offer a consistent explanation or conclusion regarding the causes and implications of these two social phenomena. This research explores a new perspective on precarity and in-work poverty by combining the capability approach with an analysis of the lived experience of workers, to study the social structure and workers' personal experiences. Through its evidence-based approach, this research provides an authentic picture of precarity and in-work poverty in western China. It contributes to the understanding of precarity and in-work poverty and its multidimensional outcomes (Gao, 2017) in the Chinese context. This analysis will be relevant to China studies scholars in particular, but also for social and public policy scholars more broadly, as it provides detailed insights into the factors influencing precarious worker's choices, their adaptive strategies with different abilities to the process of de-traditionalisation, the ways in which marketisation has changed people's lifestyles and value systems, as well as providing insights that can inform policy designs to address precarity.

Firstly, by bringing capability deprivations into focus, the research conceptualised poverty as multidimensional, helping clarify the controversy as to whether or not, and how, precarious work leads to capability deprivation. Existing poverty studies usually conceptualise poverty as economic deprivation, muting the broader and less tangible implications of being poor and living in poverty. The capability approach is rarely adopted by the existing research on poverty, due to its complexity in conceptualisation and operationalisation. The capabilities list developed as part of this research, and the evaluation of people's wellbeing based on this list, will be useful tools for other researchers seeking to critically analyse poverty and wellbeing-related issues in China and beyond. Furthermore, for the evaluation guidelines of capability deprivation, the research set a household income threshold to identify vulnerable and non-vulnerable families, while at the same time evaluating other wellbeing indicators related to individual members (Appendix 3). This method deals with the problem of concealing an individual person's deprivations in his/her family achievement, and simultaneously excludes non-vulnerable households, even with members being deprived in some

capabilities.

Secondly, the research collected data about the 'lived experience' of workers, and focused on the subjective wellbeing and agency of those workers, areas that have been neglected in analysing why people live with hardship. This helps us see the relationship between personal choice and wellbeing outcomes, and the role of social progress in this regard. The research was a practice of investigating and tracking precarious employment's scarring effect from the perspective of agency under the capability approach (Egdell & Beck, 2020). The findings highlighted the 'meaninglessness' in precarious life and the negative coping strategies associated with insufficient welfare protection (Grosh et al., 2008). Regarding social structure, whereas some studies on post-Reform China tend to explain social inequalities and precarity as solely the result of neoliberalism, this study adopted Beck's 'risk-society' theory in order to highlight the important role that state-led de-collectivisation, the continued influence of collectivism and compulsive self-determination, has had on China's transformation, while allowing the research to explain and illustrate how society produces and transfers risks to people with different abilities in the new era. As Sen (1999) suggested, the examination of interdependencies between and within institutions, explicitly illustrates the chain effect triggered from one structure to another in replicating people's wellbeing deprivation. Theoretically and ethically, the 'failures' and the 'irrational decisions' of the vulnerable group become understandable.

Furthermore, drawing on the risk society theory, data gathered in the research that highlighted participants' emphasis on stability rather than profit in the context of high uncertainty, implies a new standard of social stratification based on risk (Beck, 1992; Curran, 2016) in China's society. In line with the capability approach, the research also highlights the importance of equal opportunity (Esping-Andersen). The individualisation since the Reform, by redistributing resources and opportunities and changing lifestyles, brings social re-stratification (Yan, 2009). On the surface, China has set various institutions and safety nets to guarantee a minimum standard of living. In actuality, however, these safety nets do not allow the precariat to participate in the various

institutions that could help them manage risk. The traditional working class – now the precariat – is placed between those living in extreme poverty, but who can rely on the state to sustain their livelihood, and the better-off who can rely on the market to achieve a meaningful life (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Chinese government's poverty alleviation efforts have primarily focused on absolute income poverty (Hammond, 2019), hiding other kinds of hardships suffered by vulnerable people. As the official discourse purported, China's upward trajectory in the global economy has already allowed it to eradicate extreme poverty in 2020. However, the strategy of using informal employment as a survival and safety net strategy for precarious workers remains questionable. Elsewhere in the capitalist world, knowledge and capital are replacing human labour, while trade unions' bargaining power has declined (Esping-Andersen, 2002). These twin processes have reinforced exclusion and inequality, which in turn intensifies the poverty trap in the relative meaning, if not in the absolute meaning, making it harder to identify 'poverty' under traditional benchmarks (Beck, 2000b). This research found this same situation to be the case in western China.

The research thus highlighted the need for government policy to address other dimensions of poverty beyond economic or income indicators, and construct feasible opportunities (capabilities) for people. This may pose a challenge for cities in western China, such as Ya'an, where the financial situation and administrative capability is worse than in more developed areas. Thus, regional inequalities need to remain a key focus of economic, social and welfare policies. However, China's move away from egalitarianism, and its push for high-quality development (W. Xu & Liu, 2021) that continues to prioritise economic indicators, will further reinforce the trend of commodification. To improve the quality of life for Chinese people (Xinhua, 2020) will need more coordination between its economic and social goals.

Therefore, the research suggests two paths related to empowerment and social investment (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Giddens, 1998; Grosh et al., 2008). Since the market plays an essential role in various dimensions of wellbeing, the first step is to improve precarious workers' employability. This requires education, skills training and even care services for female workers, for them to be able

to more actively participate in the labour market. However, this measure may be less suitable for middle-aged or older workers, whose physical condition is deteriorating closer to retirement, as well as being less practical for the younger generation in the context of limited job availability. In fact, recently on the Internet there has been heated debate on the ‘involution’ (*neijuan* 内卷) phenomenon in China’s education sector. This involution refers to the incessant competition brought about by contending for limited resources, for example, entrance to a good university. With more and more young people attaining higher education degrees, as labour supply and demand in the high-end job market reaches saturation, many of them are likely to end up in low-end jobs. The effect of education in reducing inequality thus appears doubtful (Giddens, 1998).

Hence, this challenges the idea of a supposed built-in employability in education (if there ever was one in the first place) and its capacity to eventually convert into obtaining a good job. One possible strategy would be to continue to develop the economy to create more jobs. But this is also risky, because economic growth could in fact cause higher automation and cut workforce demands. Furthermore, this measure would intensify commodification in the labour market and beyond; and, as the research has shown, this tends to expose highly disadvantaged precarious workers, unless enough protection and/or stable jobs are provided. After all, it is the deconstruction of stable employment that generates interlocking risks for precarious workers, which leads them to be perceived as a burden on society (Daguerre, 2007). This raises the need to rethink investment into employment, to more explicitly promote capability-enhancing jobs (Giddens, 1998).

This research argues that since the growth strategy is unlikely to be discarded at this point in time, the whole social protection system needs to assume greater responsibility for guaranteeing a sustainable livelihood, particularly for the most vulnerable. Given its market socialism, contemporary China seems to have been following Anthony Giddens’s (1998) ‘third way’, by which he meant (in the context of the welfare state) transcending Left (social democracy) and Right (neoliberalism) policies, to pay more attention to social equality (inclusion and opportunity), balancing rights and responsibility, and facilitating an individual’s freedom (autonomy) (Giddens, 1998). Social integration

needs joint action. Similar to Esping-Andersen (2002)'s 'three welfare pillars' (market, family and the government), the discourse in China has been about establishing and developing a multi-tier welfare system (Y. Lin et al., 2020). The field research, however, showed that this multi-tier system has placed greater responsibility on individuals and their families to manage risks (Gao, 2017; Hammond, 2019). It is thus argued that the market and the government should play a greater role in helping citizens manage risks.

Here, the research hopes to highlight the importance of making welfare 'preventative', rather than 'reactive' (Esping-Andersen, 2002). As a premise measure, for example, the labour market (re)regulation can do more in such areas as entitling formal and precarious workers to equal rewards; restricting temporary contract and labour dispatch; limiting long-hour working; lifting statutory minimum wage level; and rebuilding/strengthening labour unions that include all types of workers.

In a multi-tier welfare system, social insurances are meant to be the mainstay and social assistances the bottom line (W. Yin, 2018). Even though social insurances are meant to be a 'preventative' safety net, policymakers should consider the extent to which low-paid precarious workers can afford to participate in the system and how they can be encouraged to enrol in it. In the social policy area, scholars have already warned about the risk of redistribution possibly helping the better-off, rather than the worse-off, due to design errors (Grosh et al., 2008). Furthermore, it has been shown that existing protection systems may in fact be counterproductive to employment and economic growth (Esping-Andersen, 2002). These issues are mirrored in China's social insurances. Within the social insurance system, in addition to basic insurances, the multi-tier welfare system also introduces supplementary insurances and commercial insurances, which precarious workers are less likely to enrol in, compared to employees with ongoing positions in the *danwei*. Conversely, employers may be less inclined to sign a contract with workers, because of the legal obligation to contribute to workers' social insurances. The research thus suggests measures, including lowering contribution rates or subsidising self-funded contributors.

The research does not dispute the necessity for social assistance, even as a responsive

protection. A well-designed social assistance system can compensate for any (re-)distributive inequalities, promote human capital and protect fertility (Grosh et al., 2008). Based on the Ya'an case, given that risk-averse people may want more egalitarianism and safeguarded welfare (Esping-Andersen, 2002), the issues are basically the essential welfare improvement and welfare access expansion of non-contributory, publicly-financed programmes.

The research suggests that there is a need for local government to recalculate the *dibao* standard, in order to more accurately reflect relative poverty, and to redefine who the deserving and undeserving are (Gao, 2017). Like the pre-Reform period, the ability to work is still the clear divider between those who can and those who cannot access public welfare, which misleads local practices to only cover the disabled, especially when the rules are vague (Hammond, 2019). Given the marginal effect, policymakers see allocating limited resources to the poorest as the best option (Grosh et al., 2008). Thus in Ya'an, the local government pays more attention to the depth of poverty and to those who have lost the ability to work, but less on vulnerability and the potential for the able-bodied who are barely making a living to fall into poverty. In this regard, the role of *dibao* and the disability allowance is mixed. However, if the hypothesis that targeting the poorest is more suitable for those with high poverty incidence (Grosh et al., 2008) is reliable, it could be argued that Ya'an, or China more broadly, should not only count *dibao* recipients, because the (extreme) poverty rate is set at a low level. Furthermore, as has been noted by some scholars, category-based poverty identification can suffer from mistargeting and thus tends to affect the effectiveness of assistance (Barrientos, 2013; Hammond, 2019). As to the PWJ programme, the scope of means-testing, the waiting period, the transparency of the policy and other relevant information, the clarification of rules, and the appropriate monitoring system (Grosh et al., 2008) all need careful reconsideration. It must be highlighted that the availability of information (Gao, 2017) influences the decisions of both policy actors and potential applicants (Hammond, 2019).

Welfare is both an economic and psychological concept (Giddens, 1998). Like other institutions, well-designed safety nets can also protect people's agency (Daguerre, 2007; Grosh et al.,

2008). As the research showed, due to insufficient institutional protection, the worse-off tend to adopt negative coping strategies (Grosh et al., 2008), by sacrificing future goals in order to meet more immediate needs. If the policies were more protective for basic subsistence and potential development, then the dependency on extended family, social capital and social welfare would be more balanced. If the sense of safety were increased, then people's value systems could be closer to real autonomy (not having to choose from among unwanted options). And this would protect the effective practice of personal agency, which requires sufficient opportunities, information and critical thinking abilities.

9.3 Limitations and future research

As was discussed in Chapter 3, the research had originally hoped to put into practice Sen's (1999) proposal of a public democracy, involving transparent voting and critical security in conceiving a capability list. It also aimed to follow Robeyns' (2006) suggested method of a 'trade off' of different voices, by letting relevant people select and determine the weights of individual capabilities.

Following Sen's model of public democracy, the research used one-on-one interviews to develop a capability list. In relation to putting together a tentative list of wellbeing indicators, only in the cases of two couples, a group discussion occurred. One-on-one interviews, however, helped avoid potential dissent from individual participants being muted within a group context. As Alkire (2006) argued, there is a risk that the voice of the poor would be stifled in any public debate seeking a consensus.

In the end, the capabilities that emerged from the interviews were not used in the analysis, because the voted list showed large discrepancies in relation to what the literature identifies as being basic for a minimum living standard. Instead, the research kept a list of capabilities drawn from the existing literature, and assigned equal weight to all capabilities, as the threshold to evaluate capability deprivation (Appendix 3). As mentioned before, important variables identified in the

literature, such as longevity, having warm clothes, mobility and social participation (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 1983, 1984, 1985b, 1992, 1993, 2005), received a low ranking from participants. This discrepancy does not argue against Comim's (2008) suggestion of bottom-top deliberative participation in filtering people's real values, or against Sen's proposal for public reasoning. It instead highlights the need for a deeper public discussion, to provide a space for more voices to be heard.

The small size and homogeneous characteristics of participants in the research, although in line with lived experience studies, could explain the above discrepancy phenomenon. This tended to be the case for most participants aged in their 40s and 50s, who had lived with a precarious life for several decades. As the research found, this experience formed an adaptive preference related to scarcity, such that participants disvalued some basic wellbeing indicators. There might be other explanations that future research could explore. And given the above reasons, the capability list based on their formulation can be seen to be unreliable in evaluating wellbeing. Furthermore, following Schermer's (2013) and Sen's (1999) analysis of the links between education, the ability for reflection, and participatory freedom and people's preferences and autonomy, it can be argued that the relatively low level of education of participants in this study (most were middle school graduates), and their lower levels of reflection around what a worthy life entails (Chapter 8), were not sufficient for them to carry out a conscious deliberation about their wellbeing. Conversely, it could be argued that it is unrealistic, in the interview context, to expect a rational measured response to 41 indicators.

Perhaps the more accurate reason – and where more can be done for future research – is in relation to the size and characteristics of the groups studied. Firstly, public opinion, usually gathered through survey, requires a large sample size, to minimise the margin of error and to counter any bias within small groups. In this respect, the research recognises that more quantitative studies are needed to examine the reliability of the capability list formed in the research, as well as the aggregation guideline of capability deprivation. Such biases can also be said to arise from the homogeneity of the group of participants, all of whom were precarious workers. The similarity and

nature of their life experiences would necessarily influence and limit what they perceived to be meaningful. Establishing what a socially acknowledged minimum acceptable life entails, necessitates a diversity of views from all social strata and employment circumstances. Future research could seek to expand and improve the diversity of participants within China or in another context, to generate a more accurate list of basic capabilities and to adopt other methods to evaluate wellbeing. Similarly, in meeting Sen's ideal of freedom being a matter of deliberation (Patrón, 2019), future research could also take a participatory action research approach, to facilitate the empowerment of vulnerable groups.

Beyond the capability list issue, future research could also aim to encompass people in more than one age bracket. A limitation is that the sample of participants consisted mostly of middle-aged workers, whose experiences of precarity and poverty are likely to be very different from those of younger workers.

It should also be mentioned that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the design of the study, and it is also likely to have had an effect on participants' responses. For example, the effects of the pandemic are likely to have increased the levels of anxiety among participants, due to the related social isolation, as well as health and income interruptions. It can be assumed that, for some participants, their subjective experiences would have been potentially more negative due to those effects. It should nonetheless be stated that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were compounded by the often longstanding disadvantage and precarity of participants. Future research could be conducted during a more stable non-crisis context. However, the crisis seems ongoing. Future research could also focus on the efficacy of other social programmes deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic, designed to tackle the effects of job losses brought about by the pandemic. None of the participants in this research had taken advantage of those safety nets. Such research could thus focus on the observed limited uptake of these programmes by precarious workers. Finally, in terms of research design, it had been originally intended to conduct interviews in two cities, to compare their social assistance programmes and implementation, which varies from locality to

locality. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the fieldwork had to be carried out at a single site.

Moreover, while the research studied the interaction among a range of institutions – the labour market, the family, social capital, and social welfare – other institutions, such as the education system, could be analysed in relation to precarious employment and in-work poverty. In fact, while the thesis was being drafted, some measures in the education system were reported, which could have direct impact on employment outcomes. These measures included supporting and expanding vocational and technical education, supporting private schools, and regulating after-class tutoring institutions (S. Cheng, 2021; Zou, 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, even within the institutions examined, there have been recent changes to the family planning policy allowing couples to have up to three children (W. Xu, 2021), which may bring about changes to the links between family characteristics, employment and precarity. These recent adjustments are likely to have an impact on the labour market, such as potentially enhancing the educational qualifications of jobseekers and decreasing female labour participation, as well as on other interconnected institutions, to reshape employment and wellbeing. Future research could focus on these issues.

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Appendix 1: Ethics Approval



Research Integrity & Ethics Administration HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 6 November 2019

Dr Beatriz Carrillo Garcia
Sociology & Social Policy; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Email: beatriz.carrillogarcia@sydney.edu.au

Dear Beatriz,

The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has considered your application. I am pleased to inform you that after consideration of your response, your project has been approved.

Details of the approval are as follows:

Project No.: 2019/799
Project Title: In-work poverty among precarious workers in western China
Authorised Personnel: Carrillo Garcia Beatriz; Ma Xueyang;
Approval Period: 06/11/2019 to 06/11/2023
First Annual Report Due: 06/11/2020

Documents Approved:

Date Uploaded	Version Number	Document Name
01/11/2019	Version 2	Interview questions (version 2) (clean)
01/11/2019	Version 2	PIS 3 (version 2) for precarious workers (clean)
01/11/2019	Version 1	PIS 4 for officials (a new document separated from PIS 3 - final)
14/09/2019	Version 1	Safety Protocol

Special Condition/s of Approval

It will be a condition of approval the written warnings made by the interviewer to the interviewees in the PIS form wherein participants will be cautioned about the researcher's legal obligations in the event of them disclosing any illegal or criminal activity as outlined in your application response, and the researcher will caution the participant or stop the interview if he/she begins to disclose such information.

It will be a condition of approval that certified translations of public documents be provided once these have been approved in English. Please see this reference on our website for further information about appropriate certification under Translations

<https://intranet.sydney.edu.au/research-support/ethics-integrity/human-ethics/guidelines.html>

Condition/s of Approval

- Research must be conducted according to the approved proposal.
- An annual progress report must be submitted to the Ethics Office on or before the anniversary of approval and on completion of the project.
- You must report as soon as practicable anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project including:
 - Serious or unexpected adverse events (which should be reported within 72 hours).
 - Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

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Appendix 2: Outline of Semi-structured In-depth Interview

This is the English version of the interview protocol. The interviews were carried out in the Chinese language. The Chinese version of the outline follows.

Place: Date and Time:

Gender	Age	Household Registration Status	Marital Status	Children	Pensioners	Social Assistance Programme(S)

About poverty and wellbeing

1. How would you characterise a minimum acceptable and meaningful life? Can you give me some examples to illustrate that? Among those examples, which are the most important, and which are less important? Can you explain why?
2. Do you think you have attained the things you have listed as important to having an 'acceptable life'? Have your family members also attained those things? Which specific things do you feel you have yet to fulfil and why?
3. Do you consider that you are living a good life? Do you think your family members also live a good life?
4. How would you evaluate your work life?
5. Do you think some precarious workers are actually living in poverty or struggling to make ends meet? Why do you think that is the case?

About job and employment

1. Can you please tell me about your employment history? Why do you do the work that you are current doing?
2. What are your family members' jobs?
3. How did you find your current and past jobs?
4. What is your opinion about your past and current job?
5. How does your work compare to that of other workers in your workplace?
6. What do you hope to get from this job?
7. How long have you been at your current job? Did you change jobs in the past few years? How often did you change your job?
8. What's your favorite job you once had? Why did you like that job?

9. What do you think is needed for having a better job? What job do you think would be better/good than your current job?
10. What is the ideal job that you think you could have?
11. If you know someone is exploited by his/her employer, what would you suggest they do?
12. What do you do after work?
13. Would you rather be in precarious employment than be unemployed with nothing to do?
14. Why do you think people undertake precarious jobs?
15. Would you and why do you think some precarious workers become working poor?
16. Do you think you would be better off if you could have a job in a public or government organisation?

About extended family support networks

1. Who do you usually ask for help when necessary (for money, family care, finding a job) Why?
2. How do you allocate your time between family members, friends, or other activities after work?
3. What do you think family means?
4. Who do you think you have responsibility to support in your family?
5. How do you support your adult child and why do you think you should do this? (for those with grown-up children)
6. How are your family responsibilities allocated?
7. Why do you continue to work, rather than ask the younger generation to do so? (for pensioner workers and those whose adult family member do not work)

About social assistance

1. Are you willing to claim social assistance, especially employment assistance? Why?
2. How do you feel about being a welfare claimer?
3. Who do you think the government should give welfare assistance to? What types of assistance do you think are more appropriate (for example, money or in-kind help)?
4. What is your opinion about the *dibao* program and the government's employment assistance schemes? Which one do you prefer, if applying?
5. What kind of government assistance have you ever enjoyed (in the past or present)? What was your experience of being a recipient of that help?
6. Do you think it's acceptable for low-income groups (*dibao* recipients, for example) to have expensive items or enjoy paid entertainment?

7. Do you think the poor or welfare receivers are looked down upon? If so, what do you say to those looking down upon welfare receivers, and why?
8. If you were a policymaker, what policies would you recommend to reduce poverty and to provide better jobs for people?

About agency

1. Do you have dreams? When and why don't you have dreams? (if the answer is 'no')
2. Do you arrange your life or make plans in advance, and why?
3. Do your parents make decisions for you? Why do you listen to them, instead of making your own choices? (if the answer is 'yes')
4. Do you make decisions for your child(ren) and why?
5. What's your opinion about making choices?
6. Who do you think should be responsible for your life circumstance?
7. What do you think you're successful at?
8. What and when do you feel most hard done by in your life?
9. Do you compare your life with others and why?
10. How do you evaluate your life?
11. To review your life, what would you say?
12. What do you do if you feel uncomfortable?

半结构化深度访谈大纲

地点: 日期和时间:

性别	年龄	户口状态	婚姻状态	子女	养老金	社会救助

关于贫困和福利

1. 您认为可接受（过得去）的生活是什么？能不能举例说明？在这些例子中，哪些是最重要的，哪些不是很重要？能不能解释其原因？
2. 您实现了您在“可接受的生活”中列出的内容吗？您认为还有哪些是没有实现的？为什么？
3. 您觉得您自己是否过上好日子（还过得去的生活）？您认为您的家人也过上好日子了吗？
4. 您怎么评价您的工作生活？
5. 您怎么看待一些还处于贫困中或仍然处于艰难求生的不稳定就业人员？您为何会这样想？

关于工作和就业

1. 您能告诉我您的就业史以及为什么您要做您现在的工作吗？
2. 请您告诉我您的家庭成员的工作？
3. 您是怎样找工作的（当前和过去的工作）？
4. 您觉得您现在的工作和以前相比怎么样？
5. 您觉得和公司其他员工的工作岗位相比，您自己的工作怎么样？
6. 通过这份工作，您希望获得什么？（您觉得工作能给您带来什么？）
7. 这份工作您做了多久了？在过去的几年里，您换过工作吗？您一般多久换一次工作？
8. 您之前做过的最喜欢的工作是什么？您为什么喜欢这份工作？
9. 您觉得要获得一个更好的工作需要满足哪些条件？您觉得比您现在的工作更好的工作是什么？
10. 您觉得您能找到的理想工作是什么？
11. 如果您知道某人的工作权利被老板侵害，您会建议他怎么做？
12. 下班后您一般做什么呢？
13. 您是宁愿不稳定就业还是宁愿失业和“无所事事”呢？

14. 您认为有些人为什么会做不稳定的工作？
15. 您是否认为某些不稳定就业者变成了“有工作的穷人”？为什么？
16. 您是否认为在政府或公共机构工作会让您的生活更好？

关于大家庭支持网络

1. 如果有必要，您一般会向谁寻求帮助呢（在金钱、家庭照料和找工作方面）？为什么？
2. 在下班后，您如何在您的家人、朋友和其他活动之间分配时间呢？
3. 您认为家庭的意义是什么？
4. 您认为在您的家中，谁是您有责任要供/赡养的？
5. 您以何种方式供养您的成年子女呢？为什么您觉得您应该这样做？（针对有成年子女者）
6. 请您告诉我您的家庭责任是如何分配的？
7. 为什么是您在继续工作，而不是让下一代去工作呢？（针对领取养老金的就业者及成年家庭成员未就业者）

关于社会救助

1. 您是否愿意申请社会救助特别是就业救助呢？为什么？
2. 您觉得作为一个福利申领者是什么感受呢？
3. 您认为政府应该给予哪类人群何种类型（比如金钱或实物救助）的救助呢？
4. 您怎么看低保和政府的就业救助项目？如果要申请，您更倾向哪种？
5. 您曾经享受过/或当前正在享受哪些政府救助？什么感觉？
6. 您怎么看待低收入人群，比如，低保对象，拥有高价值物品或参加消费性的娱乐活动呢？
7. 在您看来，贫困者或接受社会福利的人会不会被人看不起呢？如果是的话，对于那些看不起福利申领者的人，你会说什么？为什么？
8. 如果您是政策制定者，您会推荐什么样的政策来减少贫困并向大众提供更好的工作？

关于能动性

1. 您有梦想吗？您在什么时候、是什么原因让您不再有梦想（针对答案为“否”的被访者）？
2. 对您的生活，您会做安排或提前做计划吗？为什么？

3. 您的父母会不会帮您做决定？您为什么要听他们的，为什么没有自己的选择（针对答案为“是”的被访者）？
4. 您会不会帮您的孩子做决定？为什么？
5. 您怎么看待“选择”？
6. 您认为谁该为您的生活状况负责呢？
7. 您认为您的成功之处在哪里？
8. 您认为您生活中最大困难是什么？什么时候最困难？
9. 您会把您的生活与别人的生活做比较吗？为什么？
10. 您如何评价您的生活？
11. 回顾您的生活，您有什么想说的？
12. 如果您觉得心里不舒服，您会怎么做？

Appendix 3: Reasoning Process Behind Tentative Basic Capability List and Aggregation Guideline of Capability Deprivation

This appendix outlines the reasoning process behind the basic capabilities list developed as part of this research. It also discusses the aggregation guideline by which capability deprivation was measured.

Ingrid Robeyns (Robeyns, 2005a, 2005b, 2016) discussed two poles of Amartya Sen's unspecific list and Martha Craven Nussbaum's 'particular' list of ten central capabilities, which Robeyns treated as a capability 'framework' and a capability 'theory', respectively. The issue here is to support neither Sen or Nussbaum, nor to discuss to what extent Robeyns's opinion is authoritative. Instead, the job is to operationalise a systematic methodology (Robeyns, 2005b) to identify core capabilities or form basic capabilities for a 'basic life', to evaluate and interpret in-work poverty (basic capability deprivation). 'Poverty' in the research is not only a matter of 'no money', but a pluralistic, multifaceted concept, in which its index must be those 'having reason to value' (Patrón, 2019).

The research drew from Sen's idea of the constitutive and instrumental role of freedom (1999) and his examples of basic capabilities; Nussbaum (2011)'s ten central capabilities; Nicole Rippin (2016)'s integration of Nussbaum's list; Robeyns (2003)'s capability list for gender inequality; Allister McGregor & Andy Sumner (2010)'s three dimensions of human wellbeing; and Björn Halleröd & Daniel Larsson (2008)'s consumption items (material deprivation), to form a tentative capability list used in the fieldwork. The reasons for why and how the capabilities/indicators are integrated and the guideline of evaluating whether or not a person is deprived will be discussed in the following two sections, respectively.

1. Dimensions, capabilities and indicators in the tentative list

The capability approach is a normative framework (Robeyns, 2013, 2016) that unavoidably

involves value judgement about what is good/better and what is bad/worse (Patrón, 2019). The research followed Pepi Patrón (2019)'s idea that the complementarity of Sen and Nussbaum is more complete than splitting them into two opposing camps, as well as Sen (1993, 2004a, 2005)'s idea that a capability list used for a certain context with a certain purpose should be formed, based on public reasoning. However, before the participatory approach to exercise public democracy by forming a list comprised of the participants' ideas, a ready and tentative list integrating the wellbeing indicators best for the research is needed, in case the participants' brainstorming about basic capabilities in the immediate situation is not active enough to reach a comprehensive list.

The purpose is not to 'evaluate' which capability is basic and which is not in Chinese context, but to include as many indicators as possible that might be elementary for a basic life, so that participants can have more 'options' to choose from. Thus, the list does not exclude any capability occurring in the literature, even if, based on the researcher's knowledge (and also confirmed by the field research), some capabilities, such as those about animals, politics and religion, are more irrelevant than others for Chinese people.

The dimensions of the list were inspired by McGregor & Sumner (2010, pp. 105–106), who proposed the interaction of three dimensions of human wellbeing: material, relational and subjective/perceptual, based on people's day-to-day real life (struggles and achievements). Material wellbeing involves the objective, observable ones (for example, nutrition); relational wellbeing requires other people's interactions, including the indicators of social exclusion and interpersonal relationships; and subjective wellbeing involves the meanings people attach to their pursuits (McGregor & Sumner, 2010). In particular, as explained in Chapter 3, the research approved a combination of subjective wellbeing and capabilities (M. Binder, 2014; Graf & Schweiger, 2013, 2014; Graham & Nikolova, 2015; Kingdon & Knight, 2006; Kotan, 2010), although capabilities as indicators of wellbeing may be deemed to be objective and more 'distant and critical' from subjective evaluation (Graf & Schweiger, 2013; Schweiger & Graf, 2014).

As a closely linked dimension of subjective wellbeing, agency was also included as it engages

with people's range of freedom and the process of choosing (Chapter 3). However, its classification as to being merged into one of the above dimensions, or as an independent dimension, is tricky. For example, Andy Sumner & Richard Mallett (2013) included the 'ability to act' worthy life, as well as the relations with others, in the relational wellbeing dimension. This research treated them as two dimensions. The dimension of 'relational wellbeing' must depend on others' actions, while 'autonomy and control' is that one takes actions to achieve a valuable life, and primarily it rests with the person himself/herself. In this research, 'relational wellbeing' was in line with Séverine Deneulin (2008)'s emphasis on the 'structures of living together', which is a social concept and accounts for the (in) tangible opportunities and constraints from others that influence one's life. This does not mean that the 'autonomy and control' dimension is of no relevance to others at all, but 'autonomy and control' mainly depend on whether or not one views some goals as important, so correspondingly they are willing to take actions to achieve those goals. In other words, 'autonomy and control' involves one's own interests, preferences, choices, decisions and actions, despite influences from other dimensions. And thus, although both mental activities, 'autonomy and control' is also different from the subjective wellbeing dimension, which refers to the emotions.

Therefore, the four dimensions of the tentative list are: Material Wellbeing, Relational Wellbeing, Subjective Wellbeing and Autonomy and Control. Under the four dimensions, capabilities are developed, based on the pioneers of capability:

(a) Sen's examples (1983, 1984, 1985b, 1992, 1993, 2005) about basic capabilities for the developed and developing areas: longevity, nourishment, basic health, shelter, basic literacy and numeracy (for poor areas), interacting with others, participating in community life, being in public unashamedly (self-respect), having worthwhile jobs, education (and even the aspiration of literacy, culture and intelligence), leisure (for the rich countries), and the instrumental role of freedom (political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and the protective security instrumental role of freedom) (Sen, 1999).

(b) Nussbaum (2011, pp. 33–34)'s ten central capabilities: Life (normal length of

longevity), Bodily health (health, nourishment and shelter), Bodily integrity (free movement, avoiding violent assault, and choice in reproduction), Senses, imagination and thought (thinking and education), Emotion (attachments, love, justified anger, and no fear or anxiety), Practical reason (perception and critical reflection), Affiliation (social interaction, the freedom of assembly and speech, dignity and non-discrimination), Other species (animals, plants, and the world of nature), Play (laugh, play and recreational activities), and Control over one's environment (political, material goods, and in-work).

And (c) Robeyns (2003)'s capability list for gender inequality for Western countries: Life and physical health (physically healthy and normal length of longevity), Mental wellbeing (mentally healthy), Bodily integrity and safety (avoiding violence), Social relations (social networks and supports), Political empowerment (political participation in influencing decision-making), Education and knowledge, Domestic work and nonmarket care (child offspring and taking care of others), Paid work and other projects, Shelter and environment (living with safe housing and acceptable environment), Mobility (being mobile), Leisure activities, Time-autonomy (autonomously allocating one's time), Respect (dignity), and Religion.

Although there are typological differences, the scholars were basically in line with each other. These elements were combined with the present research's highlights – Sen argued for different lists based on different purposes and contexts (Patrón, 2019) – and the literature review (Chapters 1 and 2) to expand the elements for wellbeing to as many as possible.

Firstly, since the research focused on employment, the tentative list drew on multidimensional poverty from Rippin (2016), who integrated Nussbaum's list based on data availability and enriched the indicator of employment, including: Health (physical and mental), Education (educational attainment and training qualification), Employment (unemployment, in-work poverty and long-hour working), Housing (necessary amenities), Mobility (transportation and neighbourhood environment), and Incomes (household income).

Rippin's work involved the material dimension, which is important for wellbeing, although

Sen saw some resources as means, not ends. Given the impreciseness of freedom as instrumental and constructive (Sen, 1999) (also see Chapter 3), and to prevent excluding the materials that would be meaningful for the participants (for example, livelihood as a source of nutrition and a sense of safety and/or enjoyment), the research did not preclude the materials as means, and has named them as an abstract capability of Livelihood and Property.

Likewise, the research also focused on 'social welfare' and 'family' (including the extended family). The research was about poverty which likely happens at the lowest social class; thus social protection should be included, because it is most relevant to those people, providing a reason to view it as a capability. In fact, while more likely playing the instrumental rather than the constitutive role of freedom, the importance of including social assistance on the capability list comes from Santiago Levy (2019), who argued that our life is inevitably filled with some risks that may be instinctive and influence the achievement of our wellbeing, such as the sudden death of the breadwinner, or an accident that causes severe injury and corresponding loss of finance. As for the family, based on the researcher's knowledge, Chinese people usually value families, so that is a reason to include it on the 'tentative' capability list.

Therefore, the above elements were finally merged into 11 capabilities: Body and Physical Health, Livelihood and Property, Mobility, Other Species, Education, Employment, Social Protection, Family, Social Networks and Activities, Happiness and Satisfaction, and Agency. To make the relatively 'abstract' 'general' capabilities more 'concrete', such that the participants can easily understand the capabilities and the researcher can precisely see the core meaning(s) of capabilities for the participants and where their deprivation(s) occur, the 11 capabilities were transferred into 41 indicators:

- The capability of 'Body and Physical Health' includes three indicators: longevity with normal length, nourishment, and basic physical and mental health.
- The capability of 'Livelihood and Property' includes three indicators: basic incomes, basic housing, and basic clothes and other items. These indicators are based on the consumption

items of Halleröd & Larsson (2008), without ignoring the functions of the items that the capability approach highlights. For example, one function of clothes may be warming, which can't be replaced by other indicators; but a function of car or bike may be mobility, that the indicator of 'mobility' can represent. Therefore, 'clothes' is kept as an indicator, while cars/bikes are integrated into the indicator of mobility.

- The capability of 'Mobility' includes four indicators: moving freely, the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure, protection from violence and violent assault, and not living in a dangerous environment.
- The capability of 'Other Species' includes only one indicator of animals, plants, and the world of nature.
- The capability of 'Education' includes four indicators: basic education, basic literacy and numeracy, intelligence, imagination and thought, and basic breeding (based on feedback from the list tests).
- The capability of 'Employment' includes eight indicators: deserved wages, employer-provided welfare and other statutory income (including social insurances required by the law), normal working time, safe and sanitary working environment, equal employment rights (in accessing a job), equal rights with others in work, career (upward) mobility, good relationships in the workplace, and doing meaningful or interesting work.
- The capability of 'Social Protection' includes only one indicator, that is, the government-provided welfare and assistances for maintaining basic life. The social insurances in China's unit employment system (*danwei*, 单位) are contributory programs, covering pensions (including retirement pension, funeral expenses and pension for the family of the deceased), health, work-related injury (including disability and death), unemployment and maternity. Thus, 'social insurances' were integrated in the capability of 'Employment'. Social welfare and assistance programmes basically include the non-contributory programmes in poverty,

old age, health, employment, housing, education and the pilot programme of infants and young children care.

- The capability of 'Family' includes four indicators: having family members (parents, marriage and children), living and/or interacting with families, doing domestic work and care (raising children and taking care of family members), and participating in family decisions.
- The capability of 'Social Networks and Activities' includes four indicators: social contact and interaction, attending social activities (the collective activities, inspired by Sen's emphasis on 'attending festival and customs'), being respected and treated with dignity, and not being excluded and prejudiced because of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion and so on. The last two overlap, however respect and dignity are involved in self-feelings with behavioural humiliation, while exclusion is a more objective indicator of social inclusion, even without behaviours.
- The capability of 'Happiness and Satisfaction' includes two negative indicators (not feeling fear/anxiety and avoiding the sense of inferiority/shame/stigma) and two positive indicators (love/trust and fulfillment/value). Some might worry that the non-material dimensions and the subjective wellbeing in particular might be beyond the concept of poverty, which has a bottom line of insufficient material, especially food (Narayan et al., 1999). The living standard, based on Sen (1984, 1985c, 1993), is closest to poverty and concentrates on people's functionings, in which the material aspect of wellbeing, basically consistent with but broader than 'economic welfare', is given priority. The subjective states are contained in the notion of wellbeing, but wellbeing may be relevant to 'what people feel for others' – for example, 'sympathy' for other people's misfortune (Brandolini & D'Alessio, 2009, p. 101). Thus, the list limited the number capabilities in the subjective wellbeing dimension as well as the autonomy and control dimension (only one capability in each dimension), so that it can keep the nature of multifaceted wellbeing and simultaneously neutralise the distortion from the mental states and activities.

- The capability of ‘Agency’ includes five indicators: leisure activities, recreational activities and play; making plans and choices about one’s own life (Chapter 3); time-autonomy; political freedom; and faith/religious freedom. Whether it shows the relation with others or the person himself/herself is the criterion for classifying ‘relational wellbeing’ dimension and ‘autonomy and control’ dimension. This is the reason why ‘being able to participate in family decisions’ is included in ‘relational wellbeing’ dimension, rather than ‘autonomy and control’ dimension. A tricky one is ‘political and religious freedom’, which can be categorised into both dimensions, according to the rules of ‘one’s own matter’ or ‘depending on others’, and ‘ends’ or ‘means’. The research sorted it into ‘autonomy and control’ dimension, because political and religious freedom is more linked to one’s agency, that is to profess or not profess a religion, to vote or not vote for a political party, to obey or not obey a political/religious faith and so on.

The formulated tentative list (below) has a problem regarding the impreciseness and ambiguity of constitutive and instrumental roles of capabilities, as well as their indicators. However, as discussed in Chapter 3 and above, some capabilities simultaneously play two roles, and including the means in the list also creates easier understanding for the participants and keeps the comprehensive multidimensional nature of wellbeing.

The tentative basic capability list
(the minimum acceptable life)

Dimensions 维度	Capabilities 能力	Indicators 指标	Weights assigned by participants 权重	Participants’ self- evaluation 个人自评	Evaluation from researcher 研究员评分
Material Wellbeing 物质福利	Body and Physical Health 身体和生理 健康	Being able to have longevity with normal length 能有正常的寿命			
		Being able to be nourished (avoiding starvation and having food for maintaining basic physical efficiency) 能获得基本生理所需的营养（免于饥饿和维 持基本机能的食物）			

		Being able to have basic health (including no physical and mental disability) 能享有基本健康 (包括无身体和精神残疾)				
	Livelihood and Property 生计和财产	Being able to have basic incomes 有基本收入				
		Being able to have basic housing (such as not overcrowding, not in danger of breaking down, and basic functions such as bedroom, bath/shower, clean water, heating and cooling devices, lighting, electricity, cooking, and other household applications) 有基本住房条件 (非过度拥挤, 无垮塌危险, 独立卧室, 洗浴, 干净水, 取暖, 散热, 厨房, 照明, 电, 其他家电)				
		Being able to have basic clothes and other items 衣物及其他用具				
	Mobility 移动性	Being able to move freely 能够自由出行				
		Being able to have freedom from unwarranted search and seizure 不受无理搜查和人身限制				
		Being able to be protected from violence and violent assault 免受暴力和暴力骚扰				
		Being able to not live in dangerous environment 不生活在危险的环境中				
	Other Species 其他物种	Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature 能够关心和亲近动物、植物和自然界				
	Relation Wellbeing (social participation, inclusion and opportunities) 关系维度 (社会参与、融合和机会)	Education 教育	Being able to have basic education 能得到基本教育			
			Being able to have basic literacy and numeracy 能有基本读写和算术能力			
			Being able to have intelligence, imagination and thought 能拥有智力、想象力和思维能力			
			Being able to have basic breeding (such as having acceptable manners, and having access to arts and culture) 能具有基本素质 (行为规范、艺术和文化等)			
Employment 就业		Being able to have wages they deserve (or earnings for self-employers and household peasants, as long as they sell commodity/service and obtain incomes), employer-provided welfare, and other statutory income (statutory social insurances) 能获得应得的劳动报酬(自我雇佣和务农收入)、雇主福利和其他法定收入(法定社会保险)				
		Being able to have normal working time (8 hours/day and 44 hours/week) 能有正常的工作时间 (每日8小时, 每周44小时)				

		Being able to have working environment with safety and sanitation, equipped with personal protective equipment (if necessary) 能有安全、卫生的劳动环境，及劳动保护用品（如有需要）				
		Being able to have equal employment rights 享受平等的就业权利				
		Being able to have equal rights with others at work 同工同酬				
		Being able to have career (upward) mobility 职业流动和晋升				
		Being able to have good relationships with others in the workplace 能有良好的同事关系和工作氛围				
		Being able to do meaningful or interesting work 有做有意义或自己喜欢的工作				
	Social Protection 社会保护	Being able to have government-provided welfare and assistance for maintaining basic life (such as cash/in-kind transfer, health, employment, education, housing and so on) 能享有政府提供的为维持最低生活的救助（如资金/医疗/就业/教育/住房等）				
	Family 家庭	Being able to have family members 能有家庭 (如父母，婚姻和子女)				
		Being able to live and/or interact with family 能与家人住在一起和互动				
		Being able to do domestic work and care (being able to raise children and take care of family members) 能进行家务和家庭照料 (能够养育子女和照料其他家庭成员)				
		Being able to participate in family decisions (such as having access to and control over family money, children's education and housework) 能参与家庭决策 (如能安排钱/子女教育/家务等)				
	Social Networks and Activities 社会网络和活动	Being able to contact and interact with others (such as relatives, friends, neighbours and community) 能够联系并与其他人互动(如亲戚、朋友、邻居、社区)				
		Being able to attend social activities 能够参与社交活动				
		Being able to be respected and treated with dignity 能被他人尊重和有尊严的对待				
		Not being excluded and prejudiced because of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, and so on 不因种族、性别、性取向、民族、收入、社会地位、宗教等被排斥和歧视				
	Subjective Wellbeing 主观福利	Happiness and Satisfaction	Being able to not feel fear and anxiety 无害怕和焦虑感			
			Being able to avoid the sense of			

	幸福感和满意感	inferiority/shame/stigma 无自卑感/耻辱感/污名感			
		Being able to love/be loved and trust/ be trusted 爱和信任			
		Being able to feel fulfilled and valued 满足感和有价值感			
Autonomy and Control 自主和控制	Agency 能动性	Being able to have leisure activities, recreational activities and play 能有休闲、娱乐活动、玩耍			
		Being able to make plans and choices about one's own life 能规划、安排和选择自己的生活			
		Being able to have time-autonomy 能自主时间			
		Being able to have political freedom (such as to vote) 能享有政治权利（选举投票等）			
		Being able to have faith/religious freedom 信仰/宗教自由			

2. Formula for calculating capability deprivation

The logic of Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is to assign equal weight among the three dimensions: health, education and living standard; the weight assigned to each is 3.33 (Alkire & Santos, 2010). There are two indicators in education and health, respectively; each indicator is 1.67 (3.33/2). Living standard has six indicators; each indicator is 0.55 (3.33/6) (Alkire & Santos, 2010). Any deprived weighted indicators which add up to 30 per cent or more can be seen as multidimensionally poor (Alkire & Santos, 2010).

The guideline for identifying the overall wellbeing in this research was as follows: a capability/functioning is identified as deprived if more than 30 per cent of its indicators are deprived; a person is identified as poor if his/her deprivations reach 30 per cent and/or more capabilities/functionings. As discussed in Chapter 3, the deprivation of capability was evaluated by first evaluating the functioning deprivation, and then identifying whether the deprivation has resulted from choice or inability. In other words, if a functioning of a person is deprived because of his/her inability, then his/her corresponding capability is deprived; otherwise, if a functioning of a person is deprived because of his/her choice, then his/her corresponding capability is not deprived.

The research did not adopt a hierarchical weight system, although Sen (2005) pointed out that some capabilities may be more important than other capabilities. The research was designed to ask participants to assign weights to each capability, but the participants eventually voted on a list that dropped some basic elements (such as longevity, clothes (warm) and mobility) that the literature had widely acknowledged. This is likely because of the homogeneity of the group, particularly regarding adaptive preferences, that produces a 'distorted' perception on wellbeing. Thus, the research followed equal weighting.

The research further solved the problem that, like capabilities/functionings, some indicators of the capabilities/functionings (mobility, education and agency) are indeed in a more core position than others by setting a core indicator. If the core indicator is deprived, then the capability/functioning is identified as deprived. Therefore, the evaluation of the capability of mobility is primarily based on the indicators of 'moving freely' and 'avoiding violence', because the remaining indicators are not individually different. That is, living in the same society, local culture, legislation, public security, nature environment and so on, the outcomes of 'freedom from unwarranted search and seizure' and 'not living in dangerous environment' are almost the same for all locals. So, although the capability list includes the two important indicators, in differentiating the deprived and non-deprived and making even minor differences visible when judging individual persons/family's wellbeing, as long as one does not obtain either 'moving freely' or 'avoiding violence', he/she is considered as deprived.

Similarly, the baseline of the capability of education is the indicator of 'have basic education', because the education certificate to a significant extent decides whether or not one can have a job in the market (based on participants' feedback). Thus, if this indicator is not obtained, then the capability of 'education' is regarded as 'not obtained', regardless of whether other indicators are obtained or not. Based on the majority of participants and given the pilot programme of compulsory education of 12 grades in some cities of China, basic education means equal to high school graduates.

For the capability of agency, the evaluation is based on:

- a) the awareness and action about their own life: whether or not he/she has goals, plans and aspirations; whether or not he/she has ever thought about his/her work and life; whether or not one is aware of his/her demands; to what extent this person can 'choose' job and life; and to what extent he/she is aware of his/her own circumstances and environment; and
- b) the awareness and action about their legal right: whether or not they know their right as citizens and employees; whether or not they pay attention to and use their rights; and whether or not they take actions to protect their rights.

Point (a) is basically evaluated for the indicator of 'being able to make plans and choices about one's own life', and this is the core indication of the capability of agency. That is, if this indicator is deprived, the whole capability of agency is deprived, regardless of whether or not other indicators in this capability are deprived.

The list set three properties for each indicator: 'obtained', 'deprived' and 'non-applicable'. The indicators in the two capabilities – education and employment– may not be applicable for some people, such as the student on campus aged 18, the elderly who have already exited the labour market, the peasants/housewives who do not want to enter the labour market, and the self-employed who are not involved in employer-employee relationship. Therefore, the indicator of 'basic education' is only for people within the working age, and retired people are seen as 'obtained' or 'non-applicable'. The capability of employment is still based on choice and ability, whereas the functioning of employment is evaluated according to the applicability.

The list assumed the standard for indicators are at the most basic level and had only the three properties for each indicator, ignoring the degree of deprivation. It is agreed that wellbeing indicator obtainment is not a 'black and white' issue; a more realistic situation is that one indicator is deprived to some degree. For example, if two persons did not obtain the indicator of basic income, then the person with higher income had a better life than the one with lower income. This

deprivation-focused method, that the increment of non-deprived indicators does not influence a person's status of 'poor' and the decrease of deprived indicators do not make a non-poor person poor (Alkire & Foster, 2011), can lead to errors in interpersonal comparison. But with an income threshold set to exclude well-off households and include families in absolute economic poverty (discussed later), the focus on the number of deprivations can visualise the actual and potential multiple disadvantages called by Alkire (2015a). According to the principle of 'letting the data speak for themselves' (Brandolini & D'Alessio, 2009, p. 125), when not even in capability deprivation or in slight capability deprivation, participants' disvalue of some important capability indicators – such as social participation, aspiration, choice and plan, and normal working hours – implies their real sufferings from the absence of these indicators.

Moreover, this guideline contained two problems: the arbitrariness in setting the cut-off at 30 per cent (Dotter & Klasen, 2017); and the dilemma in dealing with the compromise and compensation between individual members' capabilities and between the capabilities. However, using the 30 per cent cut-off (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Alkire & Santos, 2010) was primarily because the aim of the research was neither accurately measuring, for example, the headcount of poverty in a society, nor quantitative research that highlights numerical precision by, for example, the complex mathematical model. Rather, the cut-off of 30 per cent is just a tool to distinguish the working poor and precarious workers for further study, as does the threshold of 2/3 of median income in a society – the relative income poverty approach (Chapter 2). Some used the 'dual cut-off' method (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Alkire & Santos, 2010) to increase the accuracy, that is, the first cut-off is the dimension-specific cut-off that identifies deprivations within each dimension; and the second cut-off is computing the sum of cross dimensions. The first cut-off is set to keep the dimension-specific advantage of the multidimensional concept of poverty, and anyone who is deprived of at least one dimension is regarded as poor.

The research did not place the evaluation focus on dimensions, but on capabilities/functionings and their representing indicators, because the dimension-focus approach

assumes any single dimension can be sufficient for not living in poverty, and excludes the real poor, who are deprived in extensive but not all dimensions (Alkire & Foster, 2011). On the one hand, without considering the overall multidimensional wellbeing, an undernourished rich person may be identified as 'poor' (Dotter & Klasen, 2017). This is particularly the case when there is a large number of dimensions (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Dotter & Klasen, 2017). On the other hand, expanding the list to 11 capabilities and 41 indicators based on four dimensions can reduce erroring identifying the poor and the non-poor based only on a few indicators (Alkire & Santos, 2010).

As to the compromise and compensation issue, the indicators were evaluated together, like the household and its individual members. The functionings are objective, not involved in the problem of compromise between functionings; but indeed, one capability deprivation can be compensated by another capability achievement (especially wealth). For example, higher incomes may remedy some degree of health loss, because people can use money to see a doctor and get treatment. The solution was to assess whether the deprivation (for example, health) is because of one's choice (one's income is enough for keeping healthy, but one still lives an unhealthy lifestyle), or one's inability (one's income is insufficient for medicine or one's illness is untreatable, even with enough income). And for the compromise between individual household members, the aim of the research was to unveil the muffled individual person's deprivations within the traditional analysis unit (family). Thus, the indicators were still judged based on an individual person's condition.

But this risks 'mismatching'. For example, one case includes the non-vulnerable family: the interviewed member is deprived (due to his/her disability that leads to unemployment and thus suffers from exclusion, feeling unhappy) but lives in a rich family. The second case excludes the vulnerable family: the interviewed member's household lives under the extreme poverty line, but reaches any of another 70 per cent indicators. The solution was to set a household income threshold.

Therefore, in the capability/functioning of 'livelihood and property':

- a) a family whose household incomes and assets are below the official low-income family standard (family member's average income is below double *dibao* standards, no cars

valued more than 80,000 CNY and no more than one housing ownership) is regarded as 'poor' (overall capability deprivation), no matter whether other capabilities are reached or not;

- b) a family with average family incomes above 60 per cent of local average wage is regarded as 'non-poor' (overall no capability deprivation), regardless of whether other capabilities are reached or not, and
- c) a family with incomes between low-income family standard and 60 per cent of average wage will be considered combined with the obtainment of other capabilities, in evaluating vulnerable (capability deprived) or non-vulnerable.

This was also where the situation of both individual members and the household are considered.