

# **Jaz Low: Can sports education break the cycle of poverty for China's left-behind children?**

## **Introduction**

China's economic transformation has resulted in unprecedented growth, but it has also revealed significant social inequities, particularly in rural areas (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018). Among these issues is the hardship of left-behind children, estimated at 67 million, who dwell in rural villages while their parents go to urban areas for employment (Wang, 2023). While this move increases parents' disposable income, which might help them enhance their children's quality of life, it is frequently offset to some extent by the effect of less parental care (Stanford Center on China's Economy & Institutions, n.d.).

Youngsters who are left behind have a higher prevalence of emotional and behavioral issues, which impair social functioning and raise family stress (Zhou et al., 2020). Negative educational outcomes such as higher dropout rates and worse academic performance are also commonly reported among these children (Chiquiar & Hanson, 2005; Cortes, 2008; Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Jampaklay, 2006; Kandel & Kao, 2001; McKenzie & Rapoport, 2011; Nobles, 2013). According to Kandel (2003), their low motivation to engage in education could be explained by the alternative route to economic mobility offered by migration, combined with the relatively low returns offered by local higher education. Furthermore, the absence of individuals who may serve as strong role models in the hometown community further narrows the children's horizons (Naw, 2007). This exclusion frequently traps individuals in cycles of poverty, posing enormous challenges to China's aim of shared prosperity (Tan, 2020).

One promising avenue to address these challenges is sports education. Physical activity programmes combined with mentorship and life skills training provide a unique answer to the developmental impairments experienced by left-behind youngsters (UEFA Foundation for Children, 2024). This blog post investigates the research question: Can sports education break the cycle of poverty for China's left-behind children? This question is crucial not just for meeting the urgent needs of these disadvantaged young people, but also for ensuring China's long-term goals of equitable growth and rural rejuvenation (Geng et al., 2023). Using Xu Huijing's documentary *Tough Out* (棒!少年) as a case study, I explore the potential for sports education to improve lives, as well as its limitations and policy consequences.

## **Summary of *Tough Out***

*Tough Out* follows the story of a junior baseball club in suburban Beijing made up of left-behind and impoverished children. The children are recruited by Zhang Jinxin, a former professional baseball player and the founder of a charity baseball school, to participate in a

programme intended at popularising the sport in China and rehabilitating the lives of young athletes scarred by hardship and neglect (Barbieri, 2021).

The film centers on two main characters: Ma Hu, an 11-year-old Hui boy who lives with his grandfather in a secluded village, and Liang Zhenshuang, an orphan who was abandoned at birth. Ma Hu's rebellious and volatile personality frequently causes conflicts with teammates, whereas Liang, who is sensitive and introspective, struggles with depression. The grueling training routine requires perseverance, teamwork, and discipline, pushing the children to their limits under the tutelage of Zhang and China's baseball legend, Sun Linfeng (Barbieri, 2021).

However, the team's troubles extend beyond the baseball diamond. The programme's survival is jeopardised by eviction when the training facility is sold to developers, highlighting the larger issue of economic considerations trumping social initiatives. Yet, the children's resilience shines through during their participation in an American championship (Barbieri, 2021).

*Tough Out* is a profound examination of the challenges confronting contemporary China. It sheds light on the conflicts between rapid progress and persisting inequality, while also highlighting the power of opportunity and reform. By confronting topics like child neglect and poverty honestly and without sentimentality, the film inspires audiences to believe in the potential of a better future for its young protagonists and the nation as a whole (Barbieri, 2021).

### **Personal Reactions**

*Tough Out* evoked a multitude of emotions in me. On the one hand, it was gratifying to see youth find hope and purpose via baseball. On the other hand, it was disheartening to observe how systemic issues like low socio-economic status and family separation occasionally hampered these efforts. The film spoke to me personally because it reminded me of the power of extracurricular activities to shape young people's lives. However, it also made me wonder if such interventions can achieve long-term change without addressing underlying structural inequities (Shu, 2022).

### **Connecting *Tough Out* to the Research Question**

*Tough Out's* relevance to the research question arises from its vivid depiction of how sports education intersects with poverty reality. The programme is valuable in offering young people a glimpse of a brighter future. However, its impact is limited by the greater context of rural neglect and the emotional toll of family separation (Zhang & Li, 2022). This highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation, which includes educational innovation and structural reforms (Shu, 2022).

### **Answering the Research Question**

#### The Role of Sports Education in Uplifting Youth

Sports education is widely regarded as a technique for encouraging personal and social development. A UNICEF Office Of Research-Innocenti report from 2021 underlines the benefits of athletics for children's mental health, academic performance, and social skills. These positive outcomes are especially important for left-behind children, who frequently lack stable home circumstances and access to a good education (Stanford Center on China's Economy & Institutions, n.d.). In *Tough Out*, we see youngsters channeling their frustrations into productive goals, learning to work with classmates, and envisioning futures beyond their current situations (Barbieri, 2021).

International examples highlight the beneficial effects of sports education. In the United States, the Harlem RBI (now DREAM) programme uses baseball to teach at-risk adolescents life skills and improve low literacy and high school graduation rates. The result? Two-thirds of DREAM youth in grades K-12 experienced growth in socio-emotional learning competencies over the course of the school year and students regularly outperform district, city, and state peers' test results (DREAM, n.d.).

Similarly, the Grassroot Soccer South Africa project leverages the power of soccer to equip young people with the life-saving information, services, and mentorship they need to live healthier lives (SaferSpaces, n.d.). The programme has resulted in considerable improvements in community well-being, cutting the number of participants with depression nearly in half (Grassroot Soccer, n.d.). Beyond mental health, the organisation has also made strides in the space of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Participants are more likely to test for HIV, begin treatment, and remain on treatment, leading to three times fewer new HIV infections. Meanwhile, rates of unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and maternal death have dipped by half among young girls, who are now made aware of modern contraception (Grassroot Soccer, n.d.).

### Challenges and Limitations

However, the challenges that Chinese sports education projects face cannot be ignored. Institutional barriers that perpetuate inequality include inadequate rural infrastructure (Qin et al., 2022), disparities in school funding (Guo & Li, 2024), and the emotional burden of family separation (Zhang & Li, 2022). These obstacles are obvious in *Tough Out*, where some students drop out due to financial restraints or unsafe living conditions. Others struggle to put their newly discovered abilities into real opportunities, since rural children continue to have limited access to higher education and permanent employment (Lyu et al., 2024).

Scalability is another concern. Baseball, as depicted in *Tough Out*, is a somewhat unpopular sport in China (He, 2024). Extending comparable activities to reach more children will need significant effort and cultural adaptation. Sports having a wider appeal, such as basketball or soccer, may provide greater opportunity to expand such programmes (Yaakop & Koh, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a risk of over-reliance on sports programmes to address structural difficulties. While sports education can benefit individual children, it cannot replace long-term advances in education, healthcare, and social policies (Mudd et al., 2024). Without

addressing these systemic gaps, sports education may only have an impact on isolated success stories rather than generating widespread change.

### **Policy Recommendations**

To fully realise the promise of sports education, China should adopt a comprehensive approach that includes these programmes into bigger poverty-reduction strategies. First, expanding access to sports in distant schools is crucial. The government may collaborate with private organisations to establish initiatives that include physical training, mentoring, and academic support (United Kingdom Department for Education, 2024). Second, investing in infrastructure such as sports fields, gyms, and community centers would provide the necessary resources for these programmes to flourish (Nagy & Tobak, 2015).

Third, extensive support systems must be built to address the emotional and financial challenges that left-behind children face (Zhang & Li, 2022). Counseling programmes, family engagement activities, and scholarships could all help children get the support they need to succeed. Fourth, highlighting the cultural significance of athletics as a tool for personal and social development may persuade more families to encourage their children to participate in these activities (UNICEF Office Of Research – Innocenti, 2021). Finally, thorough monitoring and evaluation are required to assess the impact of these programmes and determine the best methods for scaling them (Linn, 2021).

### **Implications for China's Future**

Addressing the issues of left-behind children is essential for China's future. As the country moves from a manufacturing-focused economy to one based on innovation and human capital, it is critical that all children have access to a high-quality education and career prospects (Boland et al., 2024).

### **Conclusion**

My research topic, “Can sports education break the cycle of poverty for China’s left-behind children?? lacks a straightforward answer, and the consequences of this topic go beyond China. As governments around the world grapple with inequality and social mobility, sports education may serve as a model for empowering marginalised youngsters (UNICEF Office Of Research-Innocenti, 2021). However, the viability of these programmes is contingent on their incorporation into wider systemic reform measures (Shu, 2022). Investing in the potential of China's most vulnerable citizens is more than a moral imperative. It is a strategic requirement for establishing a more equal and prosperous society.

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