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## **China's Demographic Challenges of the 21st Century: Analyzing policy responses and gender perceptions surrounding China's decline in birth rate**

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# **China's Demographic Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Analyzing policy responses and gender perceptions  
surrounding China's decline in birth rates**

Master Thesis

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## Abbreviations

ACWF	All China Women Federation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSY	China Statistical Yearbook
DINK	Double Income No Kids
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IUD	Intrauterine Device
LPRIW	Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NHC	National Health Commission
NPC	National People's Congress
ODCW	Outline for the Development of Chinese Women
PRC	People's Republic of China
SDT	Second Demographic Transition
SMF	Social Maintenance Fee
SRB	Sex Rate at Birth
TFR	Total Fertility Rate
WEF	World Economic Forum

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

China's politburo announced on May 31, 2021, that every couple would be allowed to have up to three children. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) considers this a duty to "help improve the country's population structure and help implement a national strategy to actively respond to the ageing population".<sup>1</sup> The regulation was enacted at the National People's Congress (NPC) meeting on August 20, 2021.<sup>2</sup> With the three-child policy, the CCP introduced several resolutions to boost the birth rate. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has faced a continuous decline in birth rates for decades. According to the China Statistical Yearbook (CSY) of 2021, the birth rate in 2020 fell to 8.52 births per 1000 people, the lowest rate in 43 years.<sup>3</sup>

China's birth policies (birth control, family planning, or population policy) are closely tied to the government's population goals.<sup>4</sup> From 1979 on, the one-child policy forced women to undergo abortion to slow population growth.<sup>5</sup> In impeding the declining birth rate, China reversed its policy approach. It now encourages births rather than restricting them. China allowed all couples to have two children in 2016. Despite attempts at providing a solution, the birth rate has declined. Even as the three-child policy has been implemented, it remains to be seen how China can tackle the challenges that the 2016 change could not.

Throughout history, the female body has become a 'tool' by the state for population control. The two-child and three-child policies manifest a more subtle pressure suggesting that women must increase their fertility. The government may regard women as a 'baby machine' but loosening birth policies does not necessarily affect women's attitudes toward bearing more children. If the government wants women to be willing to have more children; and enable them to do so, they must provide more supportive measures. The three-child policy support is only one of many factors to be considered.

The gendered division of housework chores and the care of children falls particularly on women's shoulders. The traditional patriarchal ideology in China sees women as caretakers of the family and men as breadwinners. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)

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<sup>1</sup> National Health Commission 2021.

<sup>2</sup> People's Congress 2021.

<sup>3</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2021a.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949-2000: Population Policy and Demographic Development* (Routledge Curzon; London and New York: 2003), 29-80.

<sup>5</sup> Eina Hemminki, Zhuochun Wu, Guiying Cao, and Krisi Viisainen, "Illegal births and legal abortions--the case of China," *Reproductive Health* 2(5), (2005): 1-8.

reports that women spend 1,5 extra hours per day on household chores compared with their husbands.<sup>6</sup> Women's unpaid care work for children interferes with their career development. They face discrimination in the work environment and worry about treatment during pregnancy or motherhood. A recent survey found that "about 86.1% of people surveyed said that giving birth to and raising a child could affect a women's career development".<sup>7</sup> Without state support to harmonize work with family life, women, opt for a job rather than a child. For this reason, the Chinese government introduced supportive measures that help women balance their careers, family, and self-development.<sup>8</sup> Local governments are lowering barriers to childbearing by offering opportunities for leave, financial compensation, and accessible childcare infrastructure. So, the core of the problem is gender inequality in the family and at work.

This thesis explores the following research question: How has the Chinese Communist Party approached its declining birth rate, and what do their policies reveal about the CCP's perception of gender? The motivation of this thesis is that there is little scholarly work on the link between the government's birth policies and gender perceptions. This study attempts to fill this gap. Instead of examining how effective the Chinese government is at addressing their demographic problems, this thesis will examine how the CCP responds to the decline in birth rate and what gendered messaging their policies have.

The following sub-questions are also addressed: What is the primary problem the CCP needs to solve? What solution does the CCP provide? And how has the CCP envisioned the role of men and women? This thesis will contribute to the literature about gender roles and birth policies in China. It will analyse policies and measures that the Chinese government has taken that will make it desirable to bear more children and how this has possibly changed the CCP's perception of gender.

This thesis proceeds as follows. The literature review will explore the most important academic research that has already been established on the topic. It focuses on China's birth policies and how these target women. Besides addressing the existing literature on gender issues, especially those representing the role of women in contemporary China. Chapter three focuses on the research methodology. Firstly, bringing in the context of China's policymaking. Second, explaining the decisions made in choosing the source material. Last, describing the process of the analytical research. Chapter four divides the analysis of the

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<sup>6</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2018.

<sup>7</sup> China daily 2019b.

<sup>8</sup> National Health Commission 2021.

CCP's policy response into four sections. The first section focuses on birth policies, the following traces work-family policies, and the third addresses financial policies. The last section focuses on the perception that the government constructs on gender. The conclusion summarizes the results, followed by the answer to the proposed research question. Concluded by reviewing the analysis's shortcomings and suggesting further research areas.

This thesis will try to answer the research question by conducting a discourse analysis of policies on supportive measures for childbearing. By checking official documents and databases, it found that since 2016 various laws and supportive measures have been extended to alleviate childbearing and childrearing burdens. The research suggests that the Chinese government's supportive measures reflect a progressive view on gender roles. It found that the Chinese government focused on gender parity. Initially, they created equal opportunities in the labour force and then provided time support (maternity, paternity, child, elderly care leave), financial support (birth and house subsidies), and service support (childcare infrastructure) to help men and women balance their work and family life.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

Demographic challenges are a hot topic worldwide, with most developed countries experiencing little or no growth or even a population decline.<sup>9</sup> For China, this means reasons to change its birth policies. Over the years, the PRC has written, implemented, and revised various birth policies. In academia, it has been widely debated how the one-child policy caused the fertility decline.<sup>10</sup> As the three-child policy is relatively new, there has been a limited amount of academic research on it. This literature review will offer an overview of the dynamics of China's birth policies from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to today. It will mainly focus on the role of Chinese women. This will help contextualize the gender perceptions on birth policies of the Chinese government. Then, it will use scholars' discussions on gender (in)equality to help describe the role of men and women in meeting this demographic challenge.

### 2.1 Birth Control Policies

Birth policy refers to a set of comprehensive regulations that restrict people's fertility choices and bodily autonomy. Most of China's birth policies encompass contraception policies, abortion policies, and financial penalties. While "both husband and wife have the duty to practice family planning", wives primarily undertake this duty.<sup>11</sup> As it is biologically impossible for a man to become pregnant, women are the ones that are kept under strict birth control regulations.<sup>12</sup> For decades, the female body has been used for population goals. Women need to bear more children in a labour shortage, but when in an abundance of mouths to feed, women need to lower their fertility.

For instance, Chairman Mao Zedong encouraged population growth during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>13</sup> To drive economic growth, Mao advocated for 'strength in numbers'.<sup>14</sup> To create a large population, women were prohibited from accessing abortion and contraception. Women with more than ten children were rewarded as 'Glorious Mother'.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Mao promoted gender equality between the sexes, as women were actively seen as a resource to

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<sup>9</sup> Alex C. Ezech, and John Bongaarts, "Global population trends and policy options," *The Lancet* 380:9837, (2012): 143.

<sup>10</sup> Wei Chen, "Declining number of births in China: a decomposition analysis," *China Population and Development Studies* 5(3), (2021): 217-227.

<sup>11</sup> People's Republic of China's Constitution 2018, art 49.

<sup>12</sup> Hemminki, "Illegal births," 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Scharping, "Birth Control," 29-32.

<sup>14</sup> Peiyun Peng, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu* (Beijing: China Population Press, 1997), 289.

<sup>15</sup> Peng, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu*, 1997.



take on ‘masculine’ work. The government’s gendered messaging proclaimed, ‘women holding up half the sky’, ‘iron girls’, and ‘heroine workers’.<sup>16</sup>

In the early 1970s, the Chinese government started to promote policies of limiting fertility, to reduce rapid population growth. In 1972, China’s government promoted the ‘later’ (first marriage and first birth), ‘longer’ (spacing of birth interval), and ‘fewer’ (births) campaign.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese government propagated the policy by showing people its benefits. A low fertility rate, for instance, provided mothers with paid work, thereby promoting gender equality.<sup>18</sup> Much of China’s fertility decline was realized in this period, before the launch of the one-child policy. During the 1970s, China’s birth rate declined from 6 to about 2.7.<sup>19</sup>

Since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping began its reform, women’s control over life choices were even further restricted.<sup>20</sup> The one-child policy introduced in 1979, was believed to be an essential precondition for China’s modernization.<sup>21</sup> In 1982, birth control became a part of the constitution “The State promotes family planning so that population growth may fit the plans for economic and social development”.<sup>22</sup> According to population specialist Greenhalgh “women’s bodies became mere objects of state contraceptive control, vehicles for the achievement of urgent demographic targets”.<sup>23</sup> Abortion was imposed by the state, along with contraception and sterilization (primarily on women).<sup>24</sup> Instructed by the central government, reducing population growth became the province's responsibility. Wang explains that: “Four approaches were adopted by local governments to achieve population targets: 1) intrauterine device (IUD) insertion, 2) tubectomy, 3) vasectomy and 4) induced abortion”.<sup>25</sup> Couples were severely restricted to having no more than one child. If couples transgressed the birth quota they would be penalized with steep fines (in the form of the Social Maintenance Fee (SMF)).

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<sup>16</sup> Emily Honig, “Iron girls revisited: Gender and the politics of work in the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76,” in *Redrawing boundaries: Work, households, and gender in China*, ed. Barbara Entwisle and Gail Henderson (Berkeley: California Press 2000), 97–110.; Susan E. Short, Feinian Chen, Barbara Entwisle, and Fenying Zhai, “Maternal work and childcare in China: A multi-method analysis,” *Population and Development Review*, 28(1), (2000): 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> Tien, H. Yuan, “Wan, Xi, Shao: How China Meets Its Population Problem,” *International Family Planning Perspectives* 6(2), (1980): 65–70.

<sup>18</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, “China’s One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters,” *American Anthropologist* 104(4), (2002): 1101.

<sup>19</sup> Martin K. Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” *The China Journal* (Canberra, A.C.T.), 74(1), (2015): 152.

<sup>20</sup> Cuntong Wang, “The Impact of the State's Abortion Policy on Induced Abortion Among Married Women in China: A Mixed Methods Study,” *Chinese Sociological Review* 49(4), (2017): 316–319.

<sup>21</sup> Scharping, “*Birth Control*,” 50.

<sup>22</sup> People’s Republic of China 2018, art 25.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, “Fresh Winds in Beijing: Chinese Feminists Speak Out on the One-Child Policy and Women's Lives,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26(3), (2001): 854.

<sup>24</sup> Susan E. Short, Ma Linmao, and Yu Wentao, “Birth planning and sterilization in China,” *Population Studies* 54(3), (2000): 279–291.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, “The Impact of,” 318.

In 1983 alone, China experienced 21 million births, 14.4 million abortions, 20.7 million female sterilizations, and 17.8 million IUD insertions.<sup>26</sup> The four approaches contributed to a decline in Total Fertility Rate (TFR) from 2.92 to 2.42 in 1979 to 1983, respectively.<sup>27</sup>

### 2.1.1 Change in Birth Policies

To date, China's draconian one-child policy attracted and continues to attract much attention. Many international and Chinese scholars have examined its implications, outcomes, and effects.<sup>28</sup> The consensus was that the Chinese government enforced abusive and coercive birth policies that particularly harmed women for decades. Most scholars have criticized China's birth control policy for its reliance on abortion.<sup>29</sup> Considerable research has been done on the causal link between the strictness of the abortion policy and the quota on the number of induced abortion.<sup>30</sup> According to Wang, birth policy change contributes to the decline in induced abortions.<sup>31</sup> During the tightened policy period of 1980-1994, the rate of abortion was 41.37, while during the loosened policy period of 1995-2006, the rate of abortion was 20.09.<sup>32</sup>

The widespread practice of abortion contributed to China's imbalance in human Sex-Ratio at Birth (SRB - the number of males per 100 females in a population). The Chinese saying 'regard men as superior to women' (*zhongnan qingnü*) embodies the essence of China's strong preference for sons.<sup>33</sup> It resulted in gendered adverse effects; female children are more likely be aborted, abandoned, trafficked, adopted, or even killed due to sex selective abortion.<sup>34</sup> During the one-child policy, the number of males per females increased from 108.5 to 117 by 1981 to 2000.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Fong have highlighted the positive effects of this gendered objectification. Singleton urban daughters born as the one

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<sup>26</sup> Whyte, "Challenging Myths," 154.

<sup>27</sup> Wang, "The Impact of," 319.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Goodkind, "The Astonishing Population Averted by China's Birth Restrictions: Estimates, Nightmares, and Reprogrammed Ambitions," *Demography* 54(4), (2017):1375–1400.; Wang Feng, Yong Cai, and Baocheng Gu, "Population, Policy, and Politics: How Will History Judge China's One-Child Policy?" *Population and Development Review* 38(s1), (2017): 115–129.

<sup>29</sup> Hemminki et al., "Illegal births," 1-8.; Jie-Bing Nie, "Non-medical sex-selective abortion in China: ethical and public policy issues in the context of 40 million missing females," *British Medical Bulletin* 98(1), 7, 20 (2011).

<sup>30</sup> Shuzhuo Li, and Marcus W. Feldman, "Son Preference and Induced Abortion in Rural China: Findings from the 2001 National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Survey," *Rural sociology* (2007).

<sup>31</sup> Wang, "The Impact of," 326-334.

<sup>32</sup> Wang, "The Impact of," 320.

<sup>33</sup> Fred Arnold, and Zhaoxiang Liu, "Sex Preference, Fertility, and Family Planning in China," *Population and Development Review* 12(2), (1986): 221–246.

<sup>34</sup> Nie, "Non-medical sex-selective abortion,".; Kay Ann Johnson, *China's hidden children: Abandonment, adoption, and the human costs of the one-child policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Isabel Attané, "China's Family Planning Policy: An overview of Its Past and Future," *Studies in Family Planning* 33(1), (2002): 108.

child of the family benefitted from parental investment as they did not have to compete with other siblings.<sup>36</sup>

The argument goes that because of the one-child reproductive decision, the demographic context was no longer feasible.<sup>37</sup> From the 1990s, the CCP began to recognize the importance of the role of women in making reproductive decisions. The Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (LPRIW) stipulated in 1992 that women have the right to give birth and the freedom not to give birth. Moreover, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, regarded Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) as intrinsically linked to human rights.<sup>38</sup> Following these programs, the CCP started to incorporate the idea of reproductive choice and good service to women in their policies.

Women's reproductive health is stated in the Outlines for the Development of Chinese Women (ODCW), issued over the last decade from 1995 onwards. The first program adopted action to 'protect' women's reproductive health.<sup>39</sup> The second program in 2001 put stress on 'centering on' women's reproductive health by popularizing health care knowledge "to prevent pregnancies and reduce abortions".<sup>40</sup> The third program in 2011 said to 'standardize' reproductive health of women by improving services level "to prevent and control unintended pregnancies and abortions" this is the first indication of how the CCP plans to enforce the new three-child policy.<sup>41</sup>

In 2016, the Chinese government reversed its approach to childbirth with the two-child policy. However, it did not trigger the expected baby boom. China's TFR dropped from 1.8 in 2016 to 1.3 in 2020.<sup>42</sup> A total of 17.23, 15.23, and 14.65 million babies were born in 2017, 2018, and 2019, respectively.<sup>43</sup> In 2021, the three-child policy came into effect. The last ODCW (2021-2030) calls attention to 'popularize knowledge on prevention' of women's reproductive health. The CCP's announcement strengthens this goal that it will "reduce the rate of abortions performed for non-medical reasons".<sup>44</sup> While the CCP did not provide detail

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<sup>36</sup> Fong, "China's One-Child Policy," 1102-1105.

<sup>37</sup> Isabelle Attané, "The end of one child per family in China?" *Population et Sociétés* 535(7), (2016): 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> Qiqi Shen, "China: Taking up the reproductive health and rights agenda," *Development Society for International Development* 46(2), (2003): 81.

<sup>39</sup> State Council 1995.

<sup>40</sup> State Council 2001.

<sup>41</sup> State Council 2011.

<sup>42</sup> National Bureau of Statistics. "China Statistical Yearbook 2021."

<sup>43</sup> Shucui Yang, Quanbao Jiang, and Jésus J. Sánchez-Barricarte, "China's fertility change: an analysis with multiple measures," *Population Health Metrics* 20, 12 (2022): 2.

<sup>44</sup> State Council 2021c.

on what constitutes a ‘non-medical’ abortion, the new guideline is imposed to control women’s fertility.

### 2.1.2 Decline in Birth Rate

The one-child policy changed the fertility rate and people’s minds about the number of desired children. Scholars are increasingly looking to the continuing drop-in birth rate from the mid-1980s to the present.<sup>45</sup> According to the CSY of 2021, the birth rate was 7.52 in 2021, while 18.25 in 1978, respectively. Scholars as Merli, and Nie argue that loosening the birth policies will not change the low birth rate trend.<sup>46</sup> Preference for low fertility is observed in various surveys, for example, the research by Wang found that upon enacting the two-child policy, 72.29% of the reproductive-aged couples did not desire to have more children.<sup>47</sup> Important contributing factors to the decline in birth rate can be divided into three sections: general modernization of society, struggles in people’s work-life balance, and financial circumstances.

First, modernization of society has come with individualization and change in norms regarding the role of partnerships. Migration from rural to urban areas plays a significant role in fertility choice. For rural women, the desired family size on average is 2.0 children, while it’s 1.3 children in China’s big cities.<sup>48</sup> Besides, Wei Chen has examined how marriage patterns have changed over the past decades. Marriage is relevant because only a tiny percentage of children are born outside marriage in China. According to research by Yang et al. the TFR decline is caused by changing norms of marriage.<sup>49</sup> In a similar vein, Chen concludes that the TFR decline is caused by a higher number of women of childbearing age delaying marriage.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the declining numbers of birth rate have a connection to the postponement of marriage.<sup>51</sup> Based on official data, around 8.1 million couples registered for marriage in 2020, a 12% drop from the previous year.<sup>52</sup> Trends of changes in family behavior, fertility decline, and marriage delay have been described as the Second Demographic

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<sup>45</sup> Chen, “Declining number,” 215–228.

<sup>46</sup> Giovanna M. Merli, and Philip S. Morgan, “Below Replacement Fertility Preferences in Shanghai,” *Population (English Ed: 2002)*, 66(3/4), (2011): 533-534; Yilin Nie, and Robert J. Wyman, “The One-Child Policy in Shanghai: Acceptance and Internalization,” *Population and Development Review* 31(2), (2005): 325.

<sup>47</sup> Penggang Wang, Heying J. Zhan, Jing Liu, and Patricia M. Barrett, P. M, “Does the one-child generation want more than one child at their fertility age?” *Family Relations* 71(2), (2022): 500.

<sup>48</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Yang, “China’s fertility change,” 10.

<sup>50</sup> Chen, “Declining number,” 222.

<sup>51</sup> Yi Zeng, “Marriage Patterns in Contemporary China,” in *The Changing Population of China*, by Peng Xizhe and Guo Zhigang, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000): 91-100.

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Civil Affairs 2021.

Transition (SDT).<sup>53</sup> Lesthaeghe calls the SDT “a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, the disconnection between marriage and procreation, and no stationary population”.<sup>54</sup> In other words, a society that would undergo an SDT would lead to low birth rates and high cohabitation. Thus, when Chinese people don’t want to fall in love and get married, an increase in childbirth is less likely.

The second issue behind low fertility is the question of work-life balance. In recent years, women spent longer in education, seeking personal development and independence. Highly educated women participate in the labour force and outperform men in the workplace.<sup>55</sup> In China, around 41% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is contributed by women, a higher percentage than most countries.<sup>56</sup> Increased labour force participation is crucial because upholding a healthy balance in modern times is challenging while being an employee, wife, and mother.<sup>57</sup> Due to discriminatory practises against women in the labour market, women are the ones that bear the cost. Especially for working mothers, having children can reduce job opportunities. Moreover, there are around 600 thousand Double Income No Kids (DINK) couples.<sup>58</sup> DINK couples’ decision to stay childless is, for many people, unacceptable. However, it may be that some DINK couples remain childless because of practical concerns. Therefore, promoting a healthy balance between work and family life can help childbearing.

Finances are the third aspect behind low fertility because child-rearing costs make raising children prohibitive for ordinary people. For instance, marketization caused a decline in state-funded childcare support.<sup>59</sup> Besides, fewer married couples are living with their parents, who could have helped them look after their children. Wang notes that grandparental childcare has a positive effect on boosting the birth of a second child.<sup>60</sup> According to an official survey, nearly 80% of infants and young children are looked after by their

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<sup>53</sup> Ron Lesthaeghe, “The unfolding story of the second demographic transition,” *Population and Development Review* 36(2), (2010): 211–251.

<sup>54</sup> Lesthaeghe, “The unfolding story,” 211.

<sup>55</sup> Zhou Zhong, and Fei Guo, “Women in Chinese higher education: Educational opportunities and employability challenges,” in *The changing role of women in higher education*, ed. Heggins (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 53–73.

<sup>56</sup> The World Economic Forum 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Yun Zhou, “The Dual Demands: Gender Equity and Fertility Intentions after the One-Child Policy,” *The Journal of Contemporary China* 28(117), (2019): 376–381.

<sup>58</sup> Bowen Shu, “The Dink, Public Judgement and Stigma: The Childbearing Issue in the Chinese Context,” *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* volume 615, (2021): 1091.

<sup>59</sup> Du Fenglian, and Xiao-Yuan Dong, “Women’s employment and childcare choices in urban China during the economic transition,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 62(1), (2013): 135-136.

<sup>60</sup> Ye Wang, and Xindong Zhao, “Grandparental childcare, maternal labor force participation, and the birth of a second child: Further knowledge from empirical analysis,” *Journal of Business Research* 139, (2022): 763.

grandparents.<sup>61</sup> In addition, society heavily relies on unpaid care responsibilities (both for elderly parents and children) on women. Chen et al. found that when married women take care of their elderly parents for more than 15 hours a week, they are less likely to be employed.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, tackling workplace discrimination against mothers is necessary, giving them certainty that it won't impact their careers and salary. It is financial support and affordable childcare that can encourage childbearing.

China's decline in birth rate causes two problems of national circumstances.<sup>63</sup> First, it leads to a shrinking of the working-age population.<sup>64</sup> Second, it leads to rapid population aging. The coherence between the two problems is evident. China's ageing population will further slow the economy's growth as fewer workers and consumers contribute to economic development. Mainly, China's concept of 'Not rich, First old' has concerned many policymakers.<sup>65</sup> The aging population strains the government's finances, living standards, and saving patterns. Besides, aging puts pressure on young Chinese to support four grandparents, two parents, and the number of children they bear. In 2020 the elderly dependency ratio was 19.7 per 1000 people, instead of 8.0 per 1000 people in 1982.<sup>66</sup> This '4-2-1' upside-down pyramid is one of the reasons that young Chinese are reluctant to have more children.

## **2.2 Gender in Contemporary China**

Men and women are biologically different, but mostly women encounter challenges due to gender differences. This section will discuss how gender (in)equality relates to childbirth and how these factors all interact with accounting for the declining birth rate.

### **2.2.1 Gender and Representations**

Gender theorists perceive gender not as a biological difference but as "a performative accomplishment, which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief".<sup>67</sup> In other words, gender is a social construct,

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<sup>61</sup> Finance China 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Lu Chen, Na Zhao, Hongli Fan, and Peter C. Coyte, "Informal Care and Labor Market Outcomes: Evidence from Chinese Married Women," *Research on Aging* 39(2), (2015): 364.

<sup>63</sup> People's Daily 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Anyone between 15-64 years old belongs to the working-age population.

<sup>65</sup> Lauren A. Johnston, "The Economic Demography Transition: Is China's 'Not Rich, First Old' Circumstance a Barrier to Growth?" *Australian Economic Review* 52(4), (2019): 407-408.

<sup>66</sup> Elderly dependency ratio: ratio of the elderly population (aged 65 and over) to the working-age population (aged 15-64) expressed in %.; National Bureau of Statistics 2021a.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* Vol.40 (4), (1988): 520.

prescribed by specific discourses within and between male and female roles. Evans adds that “whether or not individual persons consciously acknowledge the dominant gender categories of these discourses, they also participate in reproducing them by making representations and self-representations – both consciously and unconsciously – with reference to them”.<sup>68</sup> Gender, thus, reinforces men and women gender roles, both reflecting the conventional meaning of what are male and female duties, properties, and behaviour. Findings from Tong and Liu support that gender role attitudes impact the gendered division of household chores.<sup>69</sup> For example, the idea of ‘Good wife, Wise mother’ (*xianqi liangmu*) is the dominant gender role a Chinese woman would fulfil, showing her devotion to the nation and family. Patriarchal ideas about the role of men and women, women as a housewife and the man as breadwinner, have continued to exist. Many people adhere to gender norms, afraid of being punished by society. Feldshuh describes the many words, including ‘sissy’, ‘tomboy’, and ‘leftover women’ created for those not conforming to gender roles.<sup>70</sup> Besides, stereotyped men or women are more likely to qualify as a suitable partner.

At the beginning of the PRC, the discourse on gender is shaped and holds “the assumption that gender characteristics of women are inseparable from women’s reproductive function”.<sup>71</sup> This view excludes sexual exceptions such as female celibacy and homosexuality. It indicates that women only exist for reproduction in a heterosexual relationship. Connecting sexuality and reproduction, feminists challenged the assumption that gender and sexuality are fixed categories.<sup>72</sup> Gender representations are reflected in surrounding prejudices and discrimination in society. Since recent years, the media is increasingly involved in the representation of gender.<sup>73</sup> Many scholars adhere to Lauretis’ ‘technologies of gender’, the idea that media constructs gender stereotypes.<sup>74</sup> Transforming patriarchal ideas about gender roles is a long and challenging process.

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<sup>68</sup> Harriet Evans, *Women and sexuality in China: dominant discourses of female sexuality and gender since 1949* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 18-19.

<sup>69</sup> Xin Tong, and Aiyu Liu, “A Model of Conjugal Cooperation in Housework for Urban Dual-career Couples – Based on the Third Survey of Women’s Status in China (2010),” *Social Sciences in China* 6, (2015): 96–111.

<sup>70</sup> Hannah Feldshuh, “Gender, media, and myth-making: constructing China's leftover women,” *Asian Journal of Communication* 28(1), (2018): 40.

<sup>71</sup> Harriet Evans, “Defining Difference: The “Scientific” Construction of Sexuality and Gender in the People's Republic of China,” *Signs* 20, no. 2 (1995): 360.

<sup>72</sup> Harriet Evans, “*Women and sexuality*,” 18-19.

<sup>73</sup> Yunjuan Luo, and Xiaoming Hao, “Media Portrayal of Women and Social Change: A case study of Women of China,” *Feminist Media Studies* Vol.7(3) (2007): 283.

<sup>74</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: essays on theory, film, and fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 10.

### 2.2.2 Gender (in)Equality

Usually, gender inequality arises from differences in social gender roles. Gender inequality is often associated with high fertility because women are confined to the ‘private sphere’ and are primarily mothers and housewives. Ji et al. have examined gender inequality and focused on the sexual segregation between ‘private’ (family) and ‘public’ (market).<sup>75</sup> Gender inequality appears in different forms and can be measured by “comparing outcomes for men and women in areas such as education, employment, wages, participation, health, and so on”.<sup>76</sup> It is said that economic development increased gender inequality in the fields of power, income, and status.<sup>77</sup> Marketization hindered women’s participation in labour, as they had to choose between work and family life, which is not expected of men. Building on this point, Fincher outlines how women are discriminated by their parents and the lack of property rights has lagged women behind men.<sup>78</sup> These arguments suggest that traditional gender roles have continued to exist, calling women home and leaving the workplace to men. Goldscheider suggest a solution for this problem and argues that a ‘Gender Revolution’ does happen in two stages.<sup>79</sup> First, by increasing the participation of women in the labour force. And second, by increasing the participation of men in the private life of home and family.

Since 1949, the CCP has primarily promoted gender equality through legislative measures. They enabled women to have an education and enter the labour market and the political arena. The CCP has started promoting women’s equal rights since the late 1980s.<sup>80</sup> Angeloff explains how the gender concept in China transformed from ‘social difference between the sexes’ (*shehui xingbie*) to ‘difference between the sexes’ (*xingbie*) to reflect “the desire to break with the pre-reform period”.<sup>81</sup> The LPRIW contributed to eliminating discrimination based on gender. The law spread the creation of the ‘four selves’: self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-strengthening.<sup>82</sup> In 1994 the State Council

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<sup>75</sup> Yingchun Ji, Xiaogang Wu, Shengwei Sun, and Guanye He, “Unequal Care, Unequal Work: Toward a more Comprehensive Understanding of Gender Inequality in Post-Reform Urban China,” *Sex Roles* 77(11-12), (2017): 766.

<sup>76</sup> Peter McDonald, “Societal foundations for explaining fertility: Gender equity,” *Demographic Research* 28, (2013): 982.

<sup>77</sup> Chunling Li, and Shi Li, “Rising Gender Income Gap and Its Dynamics in China: Market competition or sex discrimination?” *Sociological Studies* 2, (2008): 94–117.

<sup>78</sup> Leta H. Fincher, *Leftover women: the resurgence of gender inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 77-78.

<sup>79</sup> Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt, and Trude Lappegård, “The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior,” *Population and Development Review* 41(2), (2015): 210-211.

<sup>80</sup> Tania Angeloff, and Marylène Lieber, “Equality, Did You Say?” *China Perspectives* (2012): 18.

<sup>81</sup> Angelhoff, “Equality,” 21.

<sup>82</sup> Angelhoff, “Equality,” 18.; People’s Congress 2018a, art. 5.



reemphasized Mao Zedong's proclamation, 'women hold up half the sky', to encourage women to join the labour force. Besides, the four successive ODCW has played a crucial role in implementing the fundamental policy of gender equality.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, since 1995, the state-run organization, All China Women Federation (ACWF), has promoted women's rights and interests.<sup>84</sup> However, equality in legislation does not necessarily erase gender inequality at the societal level.

### 2.2.3 Employment and Gender Wage Gap

The Chinese government has presented the idea of working women as an ideal of gender equality.<sup>85</sup> However, women find it challenging to comply with traditional values and pursue careers simultaneously. Many academic studies have focused on gender (in)equality in the work environment.<sup>86</sup> According to the Gender Equity Theory of McDonald, fertility is likely to remain low if gender equity in the private sphere lacks that in the public sphere.<sup>87</sup> Gender discrimination, particularly against women, in the work environment is one of the significant problems in the public sphere. Employers fear that women could take maternity leave at least twice because of the three-child policy. Findings support that over 85% of respondents believed that having children would affect a woman's ability to advance in her career.<sup>88</sup> In other words, the decision to bear children will hurt a mothers' employment. Besides, Jia and Dong have found that the market is giving Chinese women a 'motherhood penalty', which means that working mothers earn less than childless women.<sup>89</sup>

In addition, according to the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2021, China has ranked 107 out of 156 countries.<sup>90</sup> Results show that the gender gap in Labour Force Participation between men and women has doubled over the last two decades and has risen from 9% in the 1990s to almost 15% in the 2020s.<sup>91</sup> This indicates that gender inequality has widened despite economic growth. Despite women's high contribution to China's GDP, women are still highly underrepresented in leadership positions. Due to the biased sex ratio at birth, there are fewer women and even lesser women in important political

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<sup>83</sup> Angeloff, "Equality," 19-21.

<sup>84</sup> Women's Institute of China 2021.

<sup>85</sup> State Council 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Yunping Zhang, and Emily Hannum, "Diverging fortunes: The evolution of gender wage gaps for singles, couples, and parents in China, 1989–2009," *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 1(1), (2015): 17-19.

<sup>87</sup> McDonald, "Societal foundations," 986-987.

<sup>88</sup> China Daily 2019b.

<sup>89</sup> Nan Jia, and Xiao-Yuan Dong, "Economic transition and the motherhood wage penalty in urban China: Investigation using panel data.," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 37(4), (2013): 820.

<sup>90</sup> World Economic Forum 2021.

<sup>91</sup> International Labor Organization

positions.<sup>92</sup> The WEF found that in 2021, women made only up 11.40% of board directors from listed companies.<sup>93</sup> Besides, the language used in job advertisements is often based on gendered stereotypes. A requirement or preference for male candidates was listed in 19% of 2018 civil service job postings.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, as of 2019, women earn 84% of what men make for a similar job.<sup>95</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to create a more gender-balanced workforce. Studies have shown that high-income countries like Sweden are also very good at achieving gender equality.<sup>96</sup> Gender equality and economic leveling would benefit both Chinese women and the economy.

#### 2.2.4 Gender Imbalance

China lists on the WEF report as the 156<sup>th</sup> on health and survival which is the lowest-ranked country on this sub-index.<sup>97</sup> The distorted sex-selective abortion and female infanticide account for the low ranking in health and survival. According to statistics of May 2021, China's sex ratio is 105.07 males per 100 females.<sup>98</sup> Nowadays, there are 34.9 million more males than females, and the decrease in the birth ratio will continue because fewer men will find spouses. Therefore, there is an urgent need to ease the gender imbalance of marriageable singles.

The Chinese state represents 'leftover women' (*shengnü*) as single, urban, highly educated, and aged 27 or older.<sup>99</sup> More and more well-educated leftover women are among the greatest contributors to China's economic growth, but they stay single and childless. The consensus is that traditional marriage and relationship practices were the primary barriers for leftover women. Traditional wisdom directs women to marry up, marry young, and best marry someone wealthier, better educated, and more accomplished. Most academics indicate that this represents women's 'inferior' compared to men's 'superior' status.<sup>100</sup> However, the

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<sup>92</sup> South China Morning Post 2020.

<sup>93</sup> World Economic Forum 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Human Rights Watch 2018.

<sup>95</sup> The Beijinger 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt, and Maria Brandén, "Domestic gender equality and childbearing in Sweden," *Demographic Research* 29(40), (2013): 10.

<sup>97</sup> World Economic Forum 2021.

<sup>98</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2021b.

<sup>99</sup> In 2007 the term 'Leftover women' was established by the ACWF and defined as 'single women older than 27'. At the same year the Ministry of Education announced that the term was officially a Chinese word.

<sup>100</sup> Yuvcetta Yip Lo Kam, "The demands for a 'normal' life: marriage and its discontents in contemporary China," in *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*, ed. Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (London: Routledge, 2014), 78.

average men in cities are less educated and less wealthy, overqualified leftover women cannot find a suitable partner.

Scholars debated leftover women's stance toward marriage from different standpoints. According to Shen, leftover women are part of the development in China which "opened possibilities but also shut them down".<sup>101</sup> The market economy has enlightened leftover women to enhance their education, labour participation, and personal development. Gaetano and Kam argue that independent leftover women challenge the traditional marriage and family system and represent a profound change in gender representations.<sup>102</sup> A contrasting argument is that the term leftover women is in itself denigrating and reinforces the rigid concepts of gender.<sup>103</sup> Gaetano notes that leftover women still feel the pressure to get married.<sup>104</sup> Most academics urge leftover women to lower their standards, stop working so hard, and stop delaying marriage.<sup>105</sup>

Leftover women's education and economic independence make them picky when looking for a partner. Due to the imbalance in sex ratio, women can afford to be more selective in marital choices.<sup>106</sup> In 2010, on the prominent dating show *If You Are The One* (*Fei Cheng Wu Rao*) a woman said: "I would rather cry in a BMW, than smile on a bicycle".<sup>107</sup> By now, it has become a famous quote showing how the expectations of women have changed. Women have high standards for men and value 'a house, a car, and cash'.<sup>108</sup> In the end, leftover women is a socially constructed image of Chinese women, and they are social complexity. On the one hand, misallocating leftover women's talent comes at a high economic cost for China's economic growth. On the other hand, China needs to pressure leftover women to marry and have children to readjust the demographic future.

In turn, there is a rising cohort of single, 'leftover men' (*shengnan*). The term leftover men was created after its female counterpart but has never been an official term. According to To, the term originated from *guanggun*.<sup>109</sup> *Guanggun* means 'bare branches' and refers to

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<sup>101</sup> Anqi Shen, *Offending Women in Contemporary China: Gender and Pathways into Crime*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5-11.

<sup>102</sup> Arianne Gaetano, "Leftover Women: Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4(2), (2014):129.; Kam, "The demands for," 82.

<sup>103</sup> Feldshuh, "Gender media," 38-42, 50-52, 40.

<sup>104</sup> Gaetano, "Leftover women," 135.

<sup>105</sup> Fincher, *Leftover Women*, 15; Luzhou Li, "If you are the one: dating shows and feminist politics in contemporary China," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18(5), (2015): 525.

<sup>106</sup> Sixth Tone 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Original text: "Wo ningyuan zuo zai baomache li ku, ye bu yuanyi zuo zai zixingche shang xiao."

<sup>108</sup> Li, "If you are the one," 531.

<sup>109</sup> Sandy To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and Its Consequences* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 199.

“poor, single men with no marriage prospects”.<sup>110</sup> Leftover men are seen by the Chinese government as ‘a threat to national security’ because they need to get married as soon as possible.<sup>111</sup> However, finding a partner in a country with a growing gender gap is very hard. Zhou hypothesized that leftover men suffer more from depression, aggression, and suicidal thoughts than married men.<sup>112</sup> Leftover men are, in contrast to leftover women, poor and uneducated. Besides, leftover women are single by choice; leftover men are single because they are unwanted due to their low economic status.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, raising leftover men’s educational attainment can help their place in the marriage market.

### 2.3 Summary of Literature Review

This literature review discussed the primary academic debates around China’s birth policies and the issue of China’s decline in the birth rate. China’s birth policies were a strategic tool by the state to impose control over women’s fertility. For decades, China enforced a one-child policy and forced women to undergo abortions to control its growing population. The one-child policy had adverse gendered impacts, from harming women’s control over life choices to missing baby girls. The decline in births resulted in a labour shortage and an elder population surplus. Moreover, it caused a high imbalance at SRB, leaving millions of single men and women ‘leftover’.

Against this backdrop, China has implemented the two and three-child policy aimed at increasing fertility. Now it has reversed its approach as it discourages abortions for ‘non-medical’ reasons. However, stand-alone birth policy support often does not work. Decades of strict birth control combined with modernization have led to a change in attitudes toward parenting (Fig. 1). As a result, Chinese people prefer fewer children. The government must also find a way to make it more desirable for people to have more children. For instance, by providing financial support, time support, and service support, as well as introducing measures aimed at achieving higher levels of gender equality.

Traditional prejudices against women remain evident in contemporary Chinese society. Media discourse stigmatizes (leftover) women and (leftover) men. Closing the gaps

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<sup>110</sup> Britt L. Crow, “Bare-sticks and rebellion: The drivers and implications of China’s reemerging sex imbalance,” *Technology in Society* Vol. 32(2), (2010): 72.

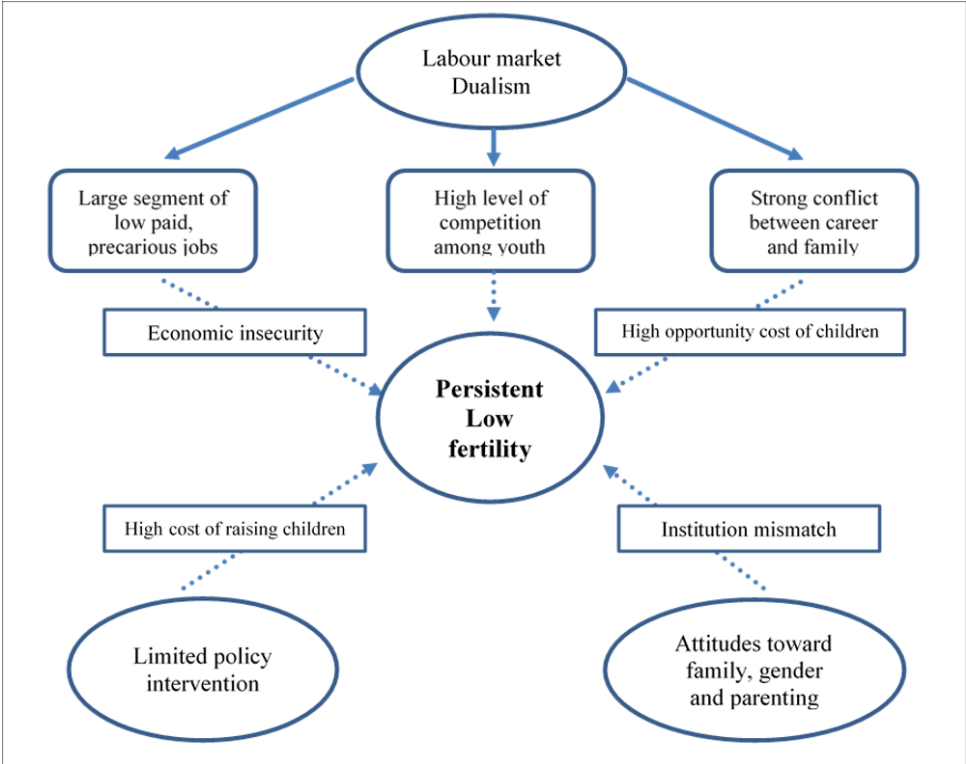
<sup>111</sup> Crow, “Bare-sticks and rebellion,” 72.

<sup>112</sup> Xudong Zhou, Zheng Yan, and Hesketh Therese, “Depression and aggression in never married men in China: a growing problem,” *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol* Vol. 48, (2013): 1087-1090.

<sup>113</sup> To, *China’s Leftover Women*, 199.

between men and women is conducive to all spheres of development. Misallocating women’s talent comes at high economic and demographic costs. Therefore, people’s attitudes towards gender roles need to be changed. Until leftover women can easily marry down, and women can easily combine marriage with work, China will not reach its demographic balance.

**Figure 1:** Factors contributing to the persistence of low fertility.



Source: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

## Chapter 3. Methods

This chapter will describe the selection of primary materials and the research method of the analytic procedure. This research seeks to uncover how the declining birth rate reshaped the Chinese government's policy's response character. Discourse analysis of policy measures will answer the question. The next session discusses the field of China's policymaking.

### 3.1 China's Policymaking

China's legal system only emerged after the reform policies of Deng Xiaoping in 1978.<sup>114</sup> The legal system is often characterized as a top-down process with a piece-meal approach.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, the separation of Party and State governs the PRC. The Party (CCP) is the invisible ruler who makes ultimate decisions, while the State (government) is responsible for its daily operations.

Law and legislation are a creature of the state; it is a tool by which the state carries out its policy. China's policymaking is a multi-layered process based on affirmed decisions between many horizontal and vertical actors.<sup>116</sup> Policies follow a hierarchical structure, from national plans to local-level implementations. Since March 2018, the PRC's National Health Commission (NHC), responsible for raising national health policies, controls the Department of Population Surveillance and Family Development. The State Council controls the NHC, which means that any draft or revision of the PRC's National Population and Family Planning Law must first pass the NPC, which often takes several months.

Besides, the CCP is a Marxist Party and believes in implementing a scientific governance project. The so-called 'Guerrilla' style of governance allows experiments and competing ideas on local levels.<sup>117</sup> Provinces can enact local rules, however, these regulations may only exist if they follow higher legislation.<sup>118</sup> Because provincial or municipal Population and Family Planning regulations enact incentives for childbirth, sharp differentials between provinces exist.

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<sup>114</sup> Jiangfu Chen, *Chinese Law: Towards an Understanding of Chinese Law, Its Nature and Development* (The Hague [etc.]: Kluwer Law International, 1999), 40.

<sup>115</sup> Benjamin van Rooij, *Regulating Land and Pollution in China Lawmaking, Compliance, and Enforcement: Theory and Case*. (Leiden University Press, 2006), chapter 2.

<sup>116</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>117</sup> Sebastian Heilmann, and Elizabeth J. Perry, "Embracing Uncertainty: Guerilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China," in *Mao's Invisible Hand* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), chapter 1.

<sup>118</sup> People's Republic of China 2018, art 100.

### 3.2 Selection of Primary Materials

Materials published in 2016 up until June 1, 2022, were selected to analyse policymaking and regulations surrounding China's declining birth rate. A time during which China's birth policy moved from a two to a three-child policy.

Primary materials, such as laws, and regulations from official sources that affect supportive measures for childbearing, were chosen to get accurate information and feasible research scope. Government websites, such as gov.cn. provided the primary materials for analysis. The main official sources include the national, provincial, and municipal amendments to the Population and Family Planning Law. For this thesis, the scope of local level administrative divisions, including 22 provinces, four autonomous regions, and four municipalities, were researched to be representative. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau were left out, to focus on 'mainland' China mainly. Journalistic sources, such as *China Daily*, were selected to supplement these official materials. Moreover, statistical data from Chinese and international reports were used.

The thesis' main component is the analysis of primary documents that outline to alleviate the burden of childrearing. As mentioned above, there is a hierarchy in policymaking in China. Provincial interpretations of national plans were examined and linked to the themes discussed in the literature review. How does the Chinese government deal with the decrease in birth rates, and what impact does it have on the gender perspective.

### 3.3 Process of Analyzing

This thesis will try to answer the research question through a discourse analysis of textual sources. Discourse analysis looks at language structure and attempts to understand how language constructs meaning.<sup>119</sup> I focus on the indirect political language the laws and policies have in reshaping Chinese thought on gender perceptions.<sup>120</sup> I will conduct a language-based legal analysis of the CCP's policy moves to combat the declining birth rate. I will interpret the findings, and I hope it helps to understand the function of language and how to use discourse to locate shifts in gender framing. The research argues that the Chinese government's policy response regarding the declining birth rate did show a shift in its gender ideology over time.

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<sup>119</sup> Norman Fairclough, and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in Teun A. van Dijk, eds, *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (London: Sage,1997), 258-284.; Paul Chilton, *Analyzing Political Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>120</sup> Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese politics Five Studies* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian studies, University of California,1992).

Through discourse analysis methods, I conducted a qualitative research analysis of the selected primary material. I first focused on terms that describe birth policy moves, and other concepts, such as supportive measures for childbearing. In collecting the data, I reviewed the materials and saved the research data. Second, I listed all concepts which needed to be structured to be logical. These concepts were mainly discourse fragments. According to Jäger, a discourse fragment is part of a text that deals with a specific theme.<sup>121</sup> Third, I organized the list based on coding categories. I distinguished three themes within the main topic - declining birth rate – in relation to childbearing: fertility, work-family, and finances. Having identified the main themes, I have coded all primary materials based on the following questions:

1. How is the CCP encouraging fertility?
2. How do these policies make balancing work and family life more manageable?
3. Which policies help to reduce the financial burden?

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<sup>121</sup> Siegfried Jäger, “Discourse and knowledge: Theoretical and methodological aspects of a critical discourse and dispositive analysis,” in *Discourse and knowledge*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (Sage Publications, 2001), 47.



## Chapter 4. Analysis

With the 2021 amendment to the Population and Family Planning Law, the CCP aims to increase the fertility rate.<sup>122</sup> Chapter 2.1.2 identified what has been seen as the important drivers behind low fertility: general modernization of society, struggles in people’s work-life balance, and financial circumstances. What the research wishes to do here is to examine how these have affected and continue to affect the Chinese government’s policy responses as countermeasures to the declining birth rate. This chapter presents the findings of the analysis based on legislation and regulations. The following analysis sections are organized thematically. Firstly, overviewing the policies encouraging births. Second, discussing policies that promote time support to have a balance between work and family life. Third, discussing the financial burden of childrearing in the low fertility discourse. Last, examining how these policies, in turn, have reflected a change in the view on gender of the Chinese government.

### 4.1 Birth Policies

According to the CSY of 2021, China’s birth rate in 2020 was 8.52 per 1000 people.<sup>123</sup> 14 provinces have released provincial birth data of 2020. As shown in Table 1, only seven provinces had a birth rate above the national standard. Even Henan province, the most populous province of China, fell for the first time below 1 million newborns. Besides, the difference in birth rates persists between rural and urban areas. For instance, less urbanized western and central parts of China (Gansu, Guizhou) have high birth rates. Northeast and Easter regions have low birth rates. Jiangsu, Beijing, and Tianjin saw rates of 6.66, 6.98, and 5.99 per 1000 people, respectively. These regions have a relatively high level of modernization and autonomy. As a result, this affects their fertility willingness, choice, and thus the fertility level.

**Table 1:** Birth rates

Province	Newborns per 10.000 people	Birth rate in %
Beijing	15.28	6.98
Chongqing *	28.7	8.41

<sup>122</sup> National Health Commission 2021.

<sup>123</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2021a.

Fujian	38.21	9.21 +
Gansu	26.43	10.55 +
Guangxi	57	11.36 +
Guizhou	52.79	13.7 +
Hainan	10.4	10.36 +
Henan	92	9.24 +
Hubei	48.32	8.28
Hunan	56.64	8.53 +
Inner Mongolia	20	8.3
Jiangsu	56.43	6.66
Shanxi	28.8	8.26
Tianjin	8.3	5.99

\* Chongqing data are household registered population data.

Modernization of society has been a considerable factor contributing to the declining birth rate, which has led to changes in family size preferences and marriage patterns. One of the efforts the Chinese government has made in response to this issue has been the policy move from the one-child policy to the two-child policy and then to the three-child policy. Throughout China's history, family planning 'in accordance with the law' has always been a legal requirement.<sup>124</sup> The 2015 amendment of the Population and Family Planning Law, discharged three major barriers to an increase in infertility: the limit of one child, the support for the delay of marriage and procreation, and the requirement that couples of reproductive age use contraception.<sup>125</sup>

A pronatalist approach marks the current Population and Family Planning Law. 'Pronatalist policies' are policies that are designed to increase the birth rate of an area using incentives. Couples that comply with the new regulations will be rewarded, albeit the nature of the reward is not specified.<sup>126</sup> Following the 2015 amendment, the 2021 amendment notes that birth control is not mandatory and emphasizes that an individual may choose contraceptive methods for preventing unintended pregnancies.<sup>127</sup> Further, ultrasounds should not be used to determine the gender of a fetus.<sup>128</sup> The 2021 amendment marks three major

<sup>124</sup> People's Congress 2021, art. 17.

<sup>125</sup> National Health Commission 2016, art. 18 and 20.

<sup>126</sup> People's Congress 2021, art 23.

<sup>127</sup> People's Congress 2021, art 20.

<sup>128</sup> People's Congress 2021, art 39.

changes. First, all couples can have three children regardless of where they live.<sup>129</sup> Second, the age at which people marry or give birth should be ‘appropriate’.<sup>130</sup> Third, the government allows reproductive services for infertility management.<sup>131</sup> The issue of reproductive services, especially regarding reproductive health, is important to the CCP, given the significant decrease in the fertility rate. Other measures for encouraging births are implemented, to name but a few:

First, Communist Party members must personally lead the way to population growth. In November 2021, the China Reports Network published, “No party member should use any excuse, objective or personal, to not marry or have children, nor can they use any excuse to have only one or two children”.<sup>132</sup> The implication is that Party members are obliged to have three kids. This was met with an inadequate response due to a lack of incentives. The article went viral, but the Network quickly removed the original article.

Another widely discussed topic on Chinese social media is that single women are banned from freezing their egg cells.<sup>133</sup> This measure makes it difficult for single women to become mothers if they choose to remain unmarried. Besides, China limits vasectomies for unmarried men.<sup>134</sup> Although it is no formal policy, hospitals are turning away men seeking vasectomies. According to official data from the Health Statistical Yearbooks, the number of vasectomies performed was reduced from 149.432 in 2015 to 4.742 in 2019.<sup>135</sup> For couples, however, alternatives to childbearing are embraced in particular because of their ability to enhance fertility. Beijing provides state-subsidized in-vitro-fertilization programs for infertile couples.<sup>136</sup> The result, ideally, is the transformation of China’s decline in the birth rate.

Second, the central government is actively making getting rid of your partner harder. From January 2021, the Marriage and Family legislation requires couples who mutually seek divorce to wait for 30 days and have a mandatory ‘cooling off’ period.<sup>137</sup> Consequently, this ambiguous law to postpone the divorce met a historically low number of divorces in the first quarter of 2021. According to official data, only 296.000 couples received a divorce, a drop of 72% compared to the fourth quarter of the previous year.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 18.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 37.

<sup>132</sup> South China Morning Post 2021b.

<sup>133</sup> Weibo 2021.

<sup>134</sup> The Washington Post 2021.

<sup>135</sup> Health Statistical Yearbook 2016 and 2020.

<sup>136</sup> Xinhua net 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Civil Code 2020, art 1077.

<sup>138</sup> Ministry of Civil Affairs 2021.

Third, in impeding an SDT, local authorities are actively engaging in pressuring singles into marriage. Many people, regardless of gender, do not want to return to stereotypical gender roles. However, most provinces provide dating sessions for young people to find a partner. For example, Zhejiang province introduced the ‘Marriage and Dating Division’ to help young people find life partners.<sup>139</sup> Yihuang county in Jiangxi province encourages leftover women to marry ‘down’ in return for preferential housing, employment, and birth subsidies for both sexes.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, Xiangyin county published a document about leftover men telling women not to move to the city. The proposal had been debated online as ‘operation bed warming’ with women questioning why it is a problem not to marry.<sup>141</sup>

At the same time, several provincial governments tried to make it more attractive to get married by extending marriage leave days. If the marriage is registered in the office of the regional authorities, a Chinese employee is entitled to at least three days of paid wedding leave. As illustrated in Table 2, regulations on marriage leave vary from province to province. Some provinces have abolished the additional incentive leave for late marriage (Guangdong, Guangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Ningxia, Shandong, Sichuan, Zhejiang), leaving only the three days of marriage leave. Other provinces have extended marriage leave provisions ranging between 10 and 30 days, and Gansu and Shanxi provinces are by far the most generous, with 30 days.

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<sup>139</sup> South China Morning Post 2021d.

<sup>140</sup> South China Morning Post 2022b.

<sup>141</sup> South China Morning Post 2021a.

**Table 2:** Marriage leave in number of days per year

Province	Marriage leave	Original marriage leave (not effective)	Province	Marriage leave	Original marriage leave (not effective)
Beijing	10	7	Hunan	3	3
Shanghai	10	7	Inner Mongolia	18	18
Chongqing	15	15	Jiangsu	13	13
Tianjin	3	7	Jiangxi	3	3
Anhui	3	20	Jilin	15	15
Fujian	15	15	Liaoning	10	10
Gansu	30	30	Ningxia	3	3
Guangdong	3	3	Qinghai	15	15
Guangxi	3	3	Shaanxi	3/13*	13
Guizhou	13	13	Shandong	3	3
Hainan	13	13	Shanxi	30	30
Hebei	18	18	Sichuan	3	3
Heilongjiang	15/25*	15	Xinjiang	23	3
Henan	21/28*	21	Yunnan	18	18
Hubei	3	3	Zhejiang	3	3

\* Heilongjiang, Henan, and Shaanxi: additional marriage leave to those who undergo health check-ups that can affect childbirth.

## **4.2 Work-Family Policies**

The imbalance between work and family life is an important barrier to childbearing. The traditional values and gender roles persist in society and tremendously burden women when they have children. Therefore, various policies regarding work, family, elders, and children have been implemented to help balance work and family life.

### **Work**

The LPRIW contains legal amendments to protect women's legitimate rights and interests in employment. It clarifies that the provincial governments shall promote fair engagement of women, prevent gender discrimination in employment, and provide public employment services for women whose employment is affected by childbirth.<sup>142</sup> Besides, the draft amendments of April 2022 grossly match the LPRIW in terms of gender equality at the workplace, however it focuses more on the job hiring process. The revisions include prohibiting discrimination against women in the hiring process, prohibiting inquiries about a prospective employee's marital or childbearing status, prohibiting prioritizing male candidates or offering only male positions, and prohibiting pregnancy tests in pre-employment medical examinations.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, the Population and Family Planning regulation will seek to improve the protection of pregnant women in the labour market.<sup>144</sup>

### **Family**

The Population and Family Planning regulation stipulates that people will benefit from parental leave entitlements.<sup>145</sup> The provincial governments oversee implementing these new family planning measures. Table 3 outlines the revised entitlements made by the Chinese government on the opportunities for leave days. Family support amendments include maternity, paternity, and childcare leave. Besides, there has been progressing in childbirth subsidies and childcare services. Some of the supported leave days have already been granted in the former regulation of 2015 before the new 2021 regulation came effective.

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<sup>142</sup> People's Congress 2018.

<sup>143</sup> People's Congress 2022.

<sup>144</sup> People's Congress 2021, art 26.

<sup>145</sup> People's Congress 2021, art 25.

**Table 3:** Leave entitlements in number of days per year

Province	Maternity Leave	Original Maternity Leave (not effective)	Paternity Leave	Original Paternity Leave (not effective)	Childcare Leave	Effective date
Beijing	158	128	15	15	5	26/11/2021
Shanghai	158	128	10	10	5	25/11/2021
Chongqing	178	128	20	15	**	25/11/2021
Tianjin	158	128	15	7	10	29/11/2021
Anhui	158	158	10	10	10	01/01/2022
Fujian	158-180	158-180	15	15	10	30/03/2022
Gansu	180	180	30	30	15	26/11/2021
Guangdong	178	128	15	15	10	01/12/2021
Guangxi	158-188	148	25	25	10	01/23/2021
Guizhou	158	158	15	15	10	01/10/2021
Hainan	190	188	20	15	10	30/12/2021
Hebei	158-188	158	15	15	10	23/11/2021
Heilongjiang	180	180	15	15	10	01/11/2021
Henan	190	188	30	30	10	27/11/2021
Hubei	158	128	15	15	10	23/11/2021
Hunan	158	158	20	20	10	03/12/2021
Inner Mongolia	158-188	158	25	25	10	10/01/2022
Jiangsu	128	128	15	15	10	29/09/2021
Jiangxi	188	158	30	15	10	29/07/2021
Jilin	180	158	25	15	20	28/09/2021
Liaoning	158	158	20	15	10	26/11/2021
Ningxia	158	158	25	15	10	30/11/2021
Qinghai	190	158	15	15	15	24/11/2021
Shaanxi	158	158	20	15	**	25/05/2022
Shandong	158	158	15	7	10	Draft
Shanxi	158	158	15	15	15	29/09/2021

<b>Sichuan</b>	<b>158</b>	158	<b>20</b>	20	<b>10</b>	29/09/2021
<b>Xinjiang</b>	<b>158</b>	128	<b>20</b>	15	<b>15</b>	04/06/2022
<b>Yunnan</b>	<b>158</b>	158	<b>30</b>	30	****	17/01/2022
<b>Zhejiang</b>	<b>158-188</b>	128	<b>15</b>	15	<b>10</b>	25/11/2021

\*\* Chongqing: 5-10 days per year for each parent until the child reaches 6 years old or one parent takes childcare leave until the child reaches 1 year old after the maternity leave or paternity leave expires.

\*\*\* Shaanxi: 30 days per year or 1 hour per day for each parent until the child reaches 1 year old.

\*\*\*\* Yunnan: 10 days per year for each parent until the child reaches 3 years old, and an additional 5 days per year for each parent if they have 2 or more children under the age of 3.

Maternity leave refers to paid or unpaid leave for employees to care for their children under a certain age. Many provinces have generous maternity leave and changed local regulations to comply with the national amendments. The State Council grants a statutory maternity leave of 98 days (14 weeks), including weekends and statutory holidays. However, many provinces have changed this baseline by extending the maternity leave duration. Most provinces have raised at least 60 days of extra maternity leave to 158 days (15 out of 30 provinces). Province-specific provisions for maternity leave range between 128 and 190 days. Jiangsu province has 128 days, the shortest maternity leave in the country. While Hainan, Henan, and Qinghai provinces extended the existing maternity leave by three months, they have 190 days, the most extended maternity leave in the country. Other provinces followed to a variety of extents. Fujian, Guangxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Zhejiang provinces provided maternity leave according to births. They start from 158 days for the firstborn to 188 days for the thirdborn. According to the data, 16 provinces did not change the original maternity leave days.

Besides, in many provinces, fathers can also apply for paternity leave. 8 out of 30 provinces have extended the paternity leave entitlements. Nowadays, most provisions range between 15 days (13 out of 30 provinces) and one month. With ten days, Anhui is the province with the shortest paternity leave. With 30 days, Jiangxi, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces have the most extended paternity leave in the country. Both husband and wife may use maternity and paternity leave with the consent of their respective employer. If a woman voluntarily refuses the extended maternity leave, it is possible to increase the number of paternity leave enjoyed by the man accordingly. This suggests a modern change in gender roles. Women can join the marketplace while men increasingly take on important roles in the family- household.



Furthermore, provincial and municipal governments have created, and proposed employer-paid childcare leave entitlements. On May 9, 2019, the State Council issued the ‘Guidelines on Improving Care Services for Infants and Children Under Three Years Old’ to provide more support for home-based childcare services.<sup>146</sup> Some regions began to explore the implementation of childcare leave. However, they did not need to do so. Only with the 2021 amendment of the Population and Family Planning Law stipulated that “the state supports the establishment of childcare leave where conditions permit”.<sup>147</sup> Hence, local governments changed their policies to offer parents of children under the age of three employer-paid leave entitlements. Leave entitlements are per child and per parent. Most provinces have a duration of 10 workdays (20 out of 30 provinces). Beijing and Shanghai are the only two provinces that grant each couple five days of childcare leave. A few provinces established fuller entitlements up to 15 (Gansu, Qinghai, Shanxi, Xinjiang) or 20 (Jilin) workdays.

### **Elders**

Some local regulations also provide elderly care leave to help working people care for their parents without financially being setback. Elderly care leave is available for the employee who is the only child of their parents and needs to take care of parents who are at least 60 years of age. The employee shall provide evidence showing that the parent requires care (diagnosis, hospitalization, medical certificate from relevant authorities).

For now, as shown in Table 4, 25 out of 30 provinces have implemented elderly care leave provisions. An elderly care leave of 15 working days yearly is standard for most provinces (12 out of 25). Still, depending on the province, it can range between 5 (Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang) and 20 (Tianjin, Heilongjiang, Henan, Inner Mongolia, Shandong, Xinjiang) days of leave. Some provinces have set different conditions if the employee has a sibling or in case of hospitalization. For instance, Guangdong typically provides five days of elderly care leave but no more than 15 days in case of hospitalization. Ningxia generally provides 15 days of elderly care leave, but only seven days in case the employee has a sibling. Moreover, the elderly dependency ratio differs between provinces.<sup>148</sup> The average elderly dependency ratio was 19.7 in 2020. 14 out of 30 provinces have an elderly dependency ratio above average. Sichuan and Chongqing provinces have the largest

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<sup>146</sup> State Council 2019b.

<sup>147</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 25.

<sup>148</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2021a.

ratio of 25.28 and 25.48, respectively. Nevertheless, neither province has not been extensively generous in elderly care leave days. Surprisingly, Xinjiang province offers 20 days of leave with having the lowest elderly dependency ratio of 11.12 of all provinces.

**Table 4:** Elderly care leave entitlements in number of days per year

Province	Only child	Otherwise (non-only child or hospitalization)	Effective	Elderly dependency ratio (2020 N=19.7)
Beijing	10		26/11/2021	17.77
Shanghai				22.02
Chongqing	10		01/03/2018	25.48
Tianjin	20	10 for an employee who has a sibling	30/11/2021	20.56
Anhui				22.83
Fujian	10		01/03/2017	15.95
Gansu	15		26/12/2021	18.50
Guangdong	5	No more than 15 days in case of hospitalization	01/12/2021	11.82
Guangxi	15		1/09//2017	19.01
Guizhou	15		01/02/2018	17.92
Hainan	15		01/09/2017	14.99
Hebei				21.14
Heilongjiang	20	10 for an employee who has a sibling	01/01/2018	21.08
Henan	20		27/05/2016	21.28
Hubei	15	10 for an employee who has a sibling	01/12/2017	21.11
Hunan	15		03/12/2021	22.56
Inner Mongolia	20		01/01/2019	17.9
Jiangsu	5		06/08/2020	23.61
Jiangxi	10		11/2017	17.97
Jilin				21.47

Liaoning	15		26/11/2021	24.37
Ningxia	15	7 for an employee who has a sibling	01/01/2019	13.74
Qinghai				12.31
Shaanxi	15		14/09/2018	19.21
Shandong	20		20/08/2021	22.90
Shanxi	15		01/01/2019	18.24
Sichuan	15	7 for an employee who has a sibling	01/10/2018	25.28
Xinjiang	20		07/08/2020	11.12
Yunnan	15		01/10/2019	15.42
Zhejiang	5	Leave accrues each year starting from when a parent reaches 60	25/11/2021	18.10

**Children**

Lastly, China hopes for more childcare services.<sup>149</sup> Providing accessible and affordable daycare services will help balance work and family life. The Population and Family Planning regulation passed the development of childcare services within institutions, communities, and companies.<sup>150</sup> According to the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-year plan, the goal is to establish an inclusive nursery service system and to increase childcare services by 150%.<sup>151</sup> Besides, the state encouraged institution and employers to provide welfare childcare services for employees in the workplace or nearby, which resulted in inventive solutions.<sup>152</sup> To illustrate, the company Trip.com helps women by offering flexible work schedules, free taxi rides for pregnant women, paying female employees to freeze their eggs, and subsidizes education cost.<sup>153</sup> Besides, in Liaoning province, the company Genpact Dalian provides childcare for employees’ kids from 3 to 12 years old in the Dalian High-Tech zone.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Sixth Tone 2021.

<sup>150</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 18.

<sup>151</sup> State Council 2021a.

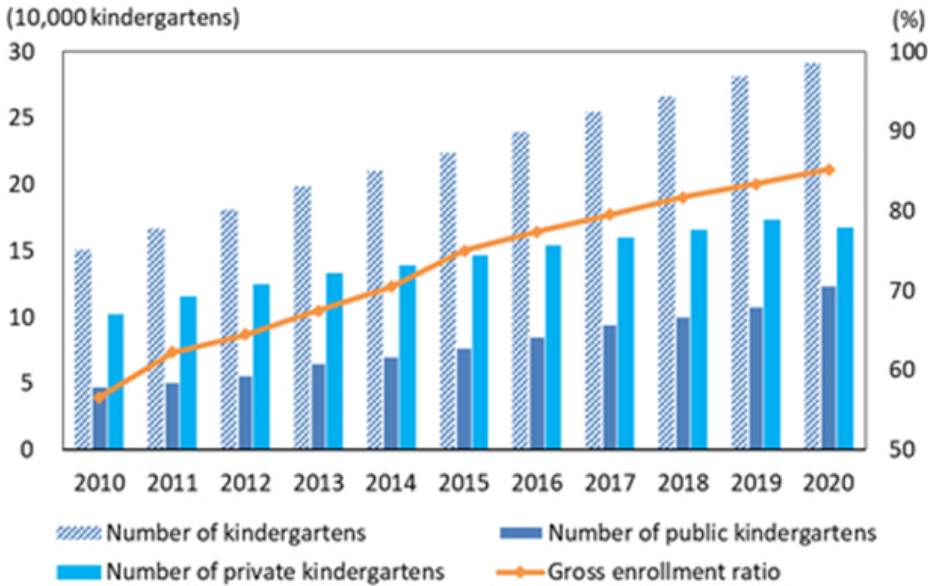
<sup>152</sup> Yuchun Xiao, and Fang Lee Cooke, “Work–life balance in China? Social policy, employer strategy and individual coping mechanisms,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 50(1), (2012): 6–22.

<sup>153</sup> South China Morning Post 2018.

<sup>154</sup> China Daily 2017.

Aside from childcare, preschool has also been developed over the years, according to the National Program for Child Development (2011-2020).<sup>155</sup> Figure 2 indicates the number of preschool educations for private and public kindergartens separately. Both numbers resemble an increase compared to ten years ago. In 2020, the total number of kindergartens nationwide was 292 thousand, 1.9 times that of 2010.<sup>156</sup> Besides, 2.91 million full-time kindergarten teachers staffed the nation's schools in 2020, 2.5 times as many as in 2010.<sup>157</sup> According to a jointly issued document by the State Council and Central Committee, preschool education will be available to all children between the ages of 3 and 6 by 2035, and an enrolment ratio over 90% is envisioned.<sup>158</sup> The CCP's investment in daycare infrastructure indicates the focus on providing family support. Adequate care services can influence DINK couples' decision to have more children and women's stand on childbearing and childrearing.

**Figure 2:** Number of Kindergartens and Gross Enrollment Ratio in Pre-primary Education, 2010-2020.



Source: NBS 2021c.

<sup>155</sup> National Bureau of Statistics 2021c.  
<sup>156</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>157</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>158</sup> China Daily 2019a.

### 4.3 Financial Policies

Childrearing is a financial burden for many Chinese families. However, raisings and educating children are the shared responsibility of families, the state, and society. The 2021 amendment brought about an attempt to reduce the financial burden connected with the birth of a child. To begin with, there are no fines for couples violating birth policies. The measures to deal with violations of the birth policy, such as SMF, administrative sanctions, and disciplinary sanctions, were deleted. Besides, there are several ways to get preferential treatment. First, couples who comply with the law can increase their income by receiving increased pay and tax benefits.<sup>159</sup> Second, the costs for caring for dependents (children and elderly relatives) will be lowered. Lastly, measures are being taken for taxation, insurance, education, housing, and employment to reduce the burden of childbirth and childrearing.<sup>160</sup> For example, housing grants are provided to couples in Zhejiang who have more than one child.<sup>161</sup> Families with three children can apply for house subsidies of 400 yuan<sup>162</sup> per square meter in Nantong. Moreover, the CCP introduced the ‘double reduction’ policy to ban out-of-school tutoring, ease parents’ finances, and ease after-schooling practices.<sup>163</sup>

Regarding childbirth subsidies, Panzihua in Sichuan province was the first city that encouraged such childbirth measurement in august 2021. Panzihua gives cash handouts of 500 yuan per baby per month until three years old.<sup>164</sup> In Linze city in Gansu province, the maximum subsidy for childbirth is 100.000 yuan.<sup>165</sup> According to the birth policy of Linze County, residential mothers who give birth to one, two, and three children receive a one-time maternity allowance of 2.000 yuan, 3.000 yuan, and 5.000 yuan, respectively. Besides, a childcare subsidy is given of 5.000 yuan per year for the second child and 10.000 yuan for the third child until the child is three years old. Couples planning to have a child in Jilin can borrow up to 200.000 yuan.<sup>166</sup> Most provinces have given up on cash incentives because of a lack of resources and instead focused on extending parental leave. Furthermore, the company Dabeinong Group Beijing gives 30.000 yuan gift cards to couples giving birth to their first baby, doubling for the second and tripling for the third.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 25.

<sup>160</sup> People’s Congress 2021, art 27.

<sup>161</sup> China Daily 2021b.

<sup>162</sup> Yuan: ¥ 10 is approximately €1,40.

<sup>163</sup> Ministry of Education 2021.

<sup>164</sup> Sichuan Health Commission 2022.

<sup>165</sup> National Working Committee 2021.

<sup>166</sup> South China Morning Post 2021c.

<sup>167</sup> South China Morning Post 2022a.

A report released in February 2022 by Chinese demographers ranked 13 other countries to see how financially challenging it is to raise a child.<sup>168</sup> According to the data determined by the relationship between the GDP per capita and childrearing costs in a country, South Korea places first and China, in turn, ranks second in this category. Raising a child in an urban area from birth to age 18 costs parents an average of 630.000 yuan. The costs are based on various childrearing expenses such as housing, education, food, transportation, and healthcare. Understandably, costs differ between urban and rural areas of the country. Childrearing costs are higher in provinces with high employment, high income, and high urbanization rates. As shown in Table 5, the highest cost of raising a child to adulthood is paid by parents in Shanghai, at 1.26 million yuan. This is followed by Beijing, the country's capital, with 969.000 yuan. Parents pay the lowest cost of raising a child in Guizhou. In this less developed area of the country, parents are to spend 332.000 yuan. Interestingly, the provinces that have provided childbirth subsidies, as mentioned above, rank relatively low in childrearing costs. Sichuan, Gansu, Jilin, and Shandong provinces rank 15, 27, 19, and 13<sup>th</sup>, respectively.

**Table 5:** Average costs of raising children from 0-17 years old

Ranking	Province	Childrearing costs in yuan
2	Beijing	968.642
1	Shanghai	1.026.412
10	Chongqing	467.548
4	Tianjin	716914
16	Anhui	430.716
7	Fujian	569.737
27	Gansu	357.383
5	Guangdong	652.570
15	Guangxi	369.519
30	Guizhou	332.646
14	Hainan	440.113
20	Hebei	404.829
18	Heilongjiang	407.627
26	Henan	367.572

<sup>168</sup> Finance China 2022.

9	Hubei	485.398
12	Hunan	460.909
11	Inner Mongolia	466.862
6	Jiangsu	600.863
21	Jiangxi	397.251
19	Jilin	406.814
8	Liaoning	499.708
17	Ningxia	411.797
22	Qinghai	394.872
23	Shaanxi	393.074
13	Shandong	459.752
28	Shanxi	357.012
15	Sichuan	435.238
24	Xinjiang	391.537
29	Yunnan	355.148
3	Zhejiang	720.789

Source: Finance China 2022.

#### 4.4 Gender Perceptions

The previous chapters examined the Chinese government’s policy responses to the declining birth rate. This chapter will analyze in greater detail what gendered messaging the policies have.

First, the government put men and women at the heart of issues related to fertility, birth control, and marriage matters. Single women are not allowed to freeze their egg cells, and single men cannot perform vasectomies. Besides, the infertility problem is taken seriously by delivering reproductive health services. However, the ban on non-medical abortions indicates that China needs childbirths. The Chinese government is actively pairing up ‘leftover’ singles (providing dating sessions) and handling breakups (30-day cooling-off period).

Second, since the creation of the ‘four selves’ in the 1990s, women’s inferiority to and dependency on men in Chinese society have vastly decreased. There has been an improvement of the position of women in the workplace. Both the Population and Family

Planning Law and the LPRIW protect women's legitimate rights and interests in employment. Several entitlements have enhanced the judicial position of women by prohibiting discrimination against women during the recruitment process.

However, the gender-neutral response of the state in providing equal opportunities (preventing gender discrimination) in the work environment sets gendered consequences. At least within the family household because women still bear the cost of parenting. The CCP recognized that the birth rate would continue to drop when women put their careers above marriage or childbirth. Therefore, gender inequality with regard to work and family life was the major problem that influenced people's fertility choices.

Consequently, the policy response changed from gender equality in the workplace to a gender-equal work-life balance for both men and women. The state provided more family-support measures parents can rely on for help with childrearing. Many of the government's measures are primarily time support (maternity, paternity, child, elderly care leave), financial support (birth and education subsidies), and service support (childcare infrastructure), to alleviate the pressures of having a child for both men and women. To reach a 'Gender revolution', the government enabled women to focus on their career development and engaged men to become more involved in family life.

As a result, the CCP's response has been solving the rigid gender norms and the division of labour within the household for both sexes to harmonize family and work life. The extension of paternity leave immediately suggests a focus on gender parity. More importantly, childcare leave and daycare can increase women's labour participation. The many regulations that support mothers' employment indicate progress in understanding mothers' work-family issues. The Chinese government has changed its view toward the role of women in birth policies. Instead of treating women as a 'tool' or 'baby machine', China is protecting its greatest economic asset. Ultimately hoping it will reach its full potential in offspring.



## Conclusion

This thesis aims to provide an overview of the Chinese government's policy response in light of the declining birth rate. The following research question has been answered: How has the Chinese Communist Party approached its declining birth rate, and what do their policies reveal about the CCP's perception of gender? National and provincial laws, policies, and supportive measures covering regulations to alleviate childbearing and childrearing were researched. The findings show that the CCP's policy response is not gender role confirming.

In traditional Chinese society, gendered stereotypes channel men and women into different occupations. A woman's life course was to be a mother, while a man's life course was to be a worker. In the 1980s, the CCP started to develop women's equal rights. A decade later, the term *xingbie* came into practice to undo the naturalness of the social differences between the sexes. Economic development and modernization of society all liberated women to become more independent. While traditional gender stratification is deeply embedded in society, more and more young people, (leftover) women especially, choose to work and make money instead of having children. The CCP's focus on gender parity in the workplace, was followed by measures for the period of childbirth and childrearing in the form of time support (maternity, paternity, child, elderly care leave), financial support (birth and education subsidies), and service support (childcare infrastructure). Besides offering a variety of policies to make it possible for people to have more children, the CCP also encouraged single and 'leftover' people to enhance their fertility.

The analysis revealed new ways of understanding the relationship between China's decline in birth rate and the Chinese government's policy response and how these relate to the CCP's perception of gender. The outcomes of this research can be used for further research that is interested in the future of China's demography and the role of men and women in China. However, reviewing policy responses does not consider whether the government should intervene in such personal choices. Perhaps the government should not incentivize women to have more babies to achieve modernization for China. The question remains: How can extrinsic incentives influence intrinsically motivated reproductive behavior?

There are many questions here that the research did not answer. The first limitation emerged due to the aspects of the material itself. Policies from official state sources were analyzed; this does not tell how the policies are delivered to China's general population. The policy's supportive measures are more likely to succeed if promoted throughout society. An

analysis of promoting materials such as advertisements, posters, flyers, billboards, websites, and social media will complement official state sources. Thus, including the role of the CCP's propaganda system is suggested for further research.

The second limitation stems from the research objective. The analysis cannot tell how people react to policy measures; therefore, we do not know how effective the CCP's policies are. Do people take advantage of maternity, paternity, or childcare leave? Moreover, what if people's primary barrier in deciding whether to have children is not financial? In the end, people always make up their minds. Having one, two, or three children is a family decision. Focus on the motivational underpinnings of childbearing and reproductive behavior, in general, will complement the outcome of this thesis. Moreover, the research can be more case study based. Since most policies and supportive measures are implemented provincially, zooming in per province would show the implications of the CCP's policies on a more local level. For example, perhaps scholars can find the relation between the male citizens per province ratio and the number of paternity leave days.

Furthermore, future studies can situate China's policy response to the decline in the birth rate in a global context. China is not the only country to face demographic challenges. The reduction in the birth rate has emerged throughout the world. When concepts of economization, marketization, and urbanization were introduced, developed countries responded with significantly lower fertility rates. Cross-cultural research can show differences between country governments' policy responses. Compared to other countries, China boosted economic development and controlled population growth. China's policy to limit birth numbers led to a massive imbalance in the male and female populations. Therefore, now more than ever, children need to be born in China, to have a stable population. For the CCP, it is much easier to enforce a ban (people shall not have more than one child) than to impose a commandment (people shall have three children). The supportive measures will determine the CCP's policy responses' success in tackling the birthrate decline.

All in all, the Chinese government is tackling the major issues contributing to the decline in the birth rate - the issue of low fertility, the issue of work-family imbalance, and the issue of financial burden - and is not extensively favoring either over the other. Besides, the CCP's policy response is designed with a gender lens. The government holds a progressive attitude towards gender roles, and policies about fertility, birth control, marriage, and family center around men and women. Moreover, the CCP has recognized the importance of greater gender equality in society by opening the workforce for women and enabling men to get more involved in childrearing. Due to time, financial, and service support, the preference for the

desired number of children may change. Whether the three-child policy and the supportive measures that have been implemented will successfully tackle the declining birth rate with the full and equal participation of men and women remains to be seen.

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## Appendices

### I) Primary Materials

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