



# THE THREE-CHILD POLICY AND GENDER EQUALITY IN CHINA

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Klassieke masterproef: 20660 woorden

“Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit”

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29/05/2023

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## Abstract

### English

This research explores the implications of China's three-child policy on gender equality and women's empowerment, recognizing the previous advancements achieved through the one-child policy.

However, the study argues that the shift towards the three-child policy undermines these gains by examining social narratives and considering intersectionality, highlights the challenges faced by Chinese women in asserting their autonomy and agency in the context of political influences and cultural dominance.

Contextualization on China and Chinese women without the lens of tragedy brought up practical issues surrounding childcare, education, and work-life balance are neglected, hindering couples' ability to have larger families. Contrary to the perception of the three-child policy as a step towards women's empowerment, the study reveals it as possible infringement on reproductive freedom. The research expresses concern over potential measures that impede women's empowerment and stresses the need for policy interventions that consider diverse experiences and promote women's rights and autonomy.

### Nederlands

Dit onderzoek verkent de implicaties van het drie-kind beleid van China voor gendergelijkheid en vrouwenemancipatie, waarbij de vorige vooruitgang die is geboekt met het één-kind beleid wordt erkend.

Het onderzoek betoogt echter dat de overgang naar het drie-kind beleid deze vooruitgang ondermijnt. Door sociale verhalen te onderzoeken en rekening te houden met intersectionaliteit, worden de uitdagingen belicht waarmee Chinese vrouwen worden geconfronteerd bij het uitoefenen van hun autonomie in de context van politieke invloeden en culturele dominantie.

Conceptualisatie van China en Chinese vrouwen zonder de tragedielens brengt praktische kwesties met betrekking tot kinderopvang, onderwijs en werk-privébalans aan het licht. In tegenstelling tot de perceptie van het drie-kind beleid als een stap richting vrouwenemancipatie, onthult het onderzoek het als een mogelijke inbreuk op reproductieve vrijheid. Het onderzoek uit bezorgdheid over mogelijke maatregelen die vrouwenemancipatie belemmeren en benadrukt de noodzaak van beleidsinterventies die diverse ervaringen overwegen en vrouwenrechten en de autonomie van vrouwen bevorderen.

## Acknowledgement

I want to dedicate this preface to the incredible individuals who have shaped my journey and made this moment possible.

First and foremost, this work is dedicated to my mother, whose strength and resilience have been an inspiration to me. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices she made, hiding in that small room for months during her pregnancy and bringing me into this world as a secret.

To my father, who has always encouraged me to be strong and independent. His words of wisdom and unwavering belief in my abilities have fueled my determination to pursue this path of knowledge. I wish to overcome any obstacle and become the empowered woman he has always envisioned.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my family in Belgium who made my journey here possible.

To my professors and promotors, I express my deepest gratitude for their guidance and mentorship. They have challenged me to delve deeper, explore new horizons, and push the boundaries of my understanding.

I want to dedicate this work to the millions of women who have been wronged, belittled, and hurt simply for being women. It is for them that I have chosen to delve into the study of Gender and Diversity. By amplifying my voice through this research, I hope to contribute to a world where every woman's voice is heard, respected, and celebrated.

When I arrived in Belgium in the late summer of 2021, I joined a horrifyingly intensive Dutch language program. I dedicated myself to learning the language from scratch, for the sole purpose of enrolling in the master's program of Gender and Diversity.

With this work, I hope to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding women's empowerment, shedding light on the struggles faced by women and marginalized communities. It is my humble attempt to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Thank you all for your unwavering support and for granting me the opportunity to amplify my voice. This thesis marks the beginning of a new chapter in my life—a chapter dedicated to advocating for gender equality, social justice, and positive change.

What's the greatest lesson a woman should learn?

That since day one, she's already had everything she needs within herself. it's the world that convinced her she did not.

- **Rupi Kaur**

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

*There is no such thing as freedom of choice unless there is freedom to refuse.*

- **David Hume**

In May 2021, the People's Republic of China announced its most recent national birth control policy- the three-child policy.

As a geographically ginormous country with the largest population in the world since the United Nation first started keeping records of the national population per country in 1950, the Chinese government has been navigating its way to manage, control as well as utilize its population resources.

Throughout this process, the most well-known, notorious policies that were brought out was the one-child policy which was implemented from the 1979 to 2015 in mainland China. The seemingly innocent intention to delay population growth in exchange for economic advancement was quickly out of control due to the harsh implementation methods local governments took after failing to receive voluntary responses from the citizens. Common methods such as financial punishments, forced abortion, and forced sterilization were taken in many areas across mainland China, leaving millions of citizens powerless over their own reproductive rights (Scharping, 2005, p21).

Words cannot simply describe the harm and severity of these practices- for example, 'forced abortion' cannot be interpreted as "forcing women who are at the early stages of their pregnancy to go through medical or surgical abortion". The emphasis of this practice is on its final goal of eliminating the existence of "illegal children"- which includes any child born as the second-born or without a birth permit, therefore, the terms of pregnancy and the health condition of the mothers were not the priority.

Practice such as 'partial birth abortion' was created and performed on pregnant women who were already on their final trimester when the regular medical or surgical abortion practice would not be effective in terminating their pregnancies, thus a new procedure was introduced as a last-minute solution to ensure the effectiveness of the one-child policy.

During a partial birth abortion, the woman would be giving birth just like any other expecting mothers, welcoming the babies, but in this case, the new-born child would still be 'aborted' even if they were born alive, by being murdered immediately on the hospital bed right after they have left their mother's body, which makes this birth a partial process compared with a full-term pregnancy- the woman would have experienced the entire process of carrying the pregnancy to term and giving birth, in addition to the heartbreak of witnessing her child being taken from the world (Mosher, 1993).

But even under such horrific condition, the citizens' determination to have bigger families exceeded the expectations of the local authorities (Poston, 2002; Gupta et al., 2003; Wang, 2005):

Countless women who were pregnant with their "illegal children" would run to another area and go under a fake name to give birth to the baby without authorities noticing, these families had a new name, 超生游击队<sup>1</sup>, meaning the guerrilla troops to have more than one child.

The name "guerrilla troops" uses a sarcastic humor to mask the dark reality many Chinese women experienced; the name perfectly described their willingness to sacrifice a stable life to avoid being caught with an illegal pregnant- they would rather change their names, move to a distanced unknown area to avoid any risks. Some women even chose to immigrate to another country, often illegally, just so that they could escape from forced abortion. Many of them who had the privilege to access foreign embassies even applied for political asylum status; the inhuman practices during the one-child policy touched many people's hearts around the world, at one point, it raised the discussion of extending political asylum in the United States for unmarried partners of those who were fleeing China due to the one-child policy (Nortick, 2006).

The resistance from both domestic and international forces towards the one-child policy never stopped since its implementation, around late 1990s, the harsh implementation methods were officially called off in most places in mainland China, however, financial punishment or unemployment was still used as a common tactic for people to follow the policy guidelines until the three-child policy was introduced in May 2021. The ending of the one-child policy did not mark the end of Chinese national birth control planning, instead, the two-child policy took its place with fewer records of harsh enforcement in 2015 (ABC News, 2015).

Even though the name of the newest birth control policy indicates the preference for at most three children per family, in July 2021, just two months after the announcement of the three-child policy, the central government removed previous punishments such as financial fines for families that have exceeded the number of births. Therefore, in an unannounced way, the beginning of the three-child policy marked the ending of the decades-long strict birth control policy.

This change did not come as a surprise to those who are familiar with the recent development of China; and this change in attitude towards birth planning and birth control, did not fully emerge from the standpoint of human right. China has been facing another set of demographic problems compared with

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<sup>1</sup> 超生游击队 was first publicly used in a comedy show on Chinese National Television in 1990. This phrase was later widely used to describe pregnant couples who would leave their hometown to avoid governmental control when they want more than one child.

the time when the one-child policy was first introduced- the aging society since the early 2000s, the skewed sex ratio, declining birth rate and low marriage rate (Ma, 2021)- all of which marking the downfall of a prosperous country.

Since many families did follow the one-child policy, both willingly and coerced, they have created a rather unique Chinese family structure: 4-2-1.

These three numbers stand for three different generations of Chinese families: four grandparents, two parents, and one child. Within this family structure, the one child from the youngest generation would be experiencing the most love from their parents, and the most generous resources that are available within the family, since there are no other children whom the family could invest in. This family structure has created several generations of single child in China, who have been reported to experience more loneliness and stress due to the all the expectations that were impose on their future (Dong& Ding, 2009). Single children are also facing unprecedented amounts of pressure to take care of their parents and grandparents without sufficient help and resources provided by governmental health care. This is only a glimpse of the issues created by the aging population in mainland China; it was estimated by researchers that the aging population would create a societal crisis around 2050. The urgency to prevent an aging society from further developing served as one of the strongest incentives for the implementation of the three-child policy. Local governments as well as the central government have also sent out messages to support bigger families. Bigger families with multiple children started to be featured on national television, even though their family structure was illegal just a few months ago.

In the midst of the global pandemic, the arrival of the new three-child policy did not spark a huge reaction from the rest of the world. The main discussion in the media was regarding the practicality of the incentives this policy offers (Tatum,2021). By the superficial outlook of the official removal of restrictions on birth planning, it seems like the three-child policy is giving body autonomy and reproductive freedom back to Chinese women, and therefore, it would be an improvement in Chinese women's rights.

Given China's recent history with topics related to birth control, it is only logical for us to question the feasibility of the policy: under the three-child policy, could the women in China exercise their reproductive right freely without governmental intervention? Or would this policy hinder the current process of Chinese women's emancipation? Equality is not easily quantifiable- and it is often an intersectional issue that differs to women from different socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, regional cultures, educational backgrounds, and the specific industry they work in. Therefore, we need to investigate the multiple factors before drawing conclusions.



In this research, I would use an intersectional aspect to analyze the three-child policy, through the lens of feminism and women empowerment, to see how this policy would influence gender equality in the current Chinese context, whether it's negative or positive, by looking into the recent research, data, and discourse.

I suspect that the recent adjustment to this policy is going to impact Chinese women in areas such as social pressure, career choice, and family dynamic. For example, women in East Asia are already facing barriers when it comes to becoming a career woman due to the traditional idea that women should contribute more to the domestic affair. The Post-Mao market reform in China since 1978 has already contributed to the trend where urban women are taking on more domestic roles (Zuo, 2014). I believe a policy, such as the three-child policy, that came with clear propaganda for women to actively take on a maternal role, would further magnify this issue. Consequently, it would limit Chinese women's life and career choices. This is only one of the many gendered aspects that could be impacted by this policy.

Even though there is plenty of literature that has studied work-life conflicts in different cultural contexts, as well as the previous Chinese family planning policies such as the one-child and two-child policy, the existing research and discourse related to the three-child policy is focused on its practicality as a solution for the on-going demographic crisis (Ma, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Attané, 2022) or the moral aspect of the policy and whether it is still a violation of Chinese women's reproductive right (Y. Wang, 2023).

These current academic discussions are rather general for its androcentric focus on how this policy would influence individual families, without acknowledging the fundamental difference in the power dynamic between biological men and biological women in the context of China, while the unique cultural values such as (neo)familism and social political context such as post-Mao market reform, previous birthing policies would potentially impact the result of the three-child policy. Besides that, the existing knowledge of birth planning policies in China is often given through the framing of Western societal standards. The Western mass media is used to looking at Chinese women through the lens of tragedy to fit them into the existing stereotypes.

To avoid over-generalizing on this topic and to provide an intersectional prospect from a feminist viewpoint, I believe further research on this topic is necessary to achieve a rational understanding of the policy. Therefore, I hope this research could work on the existing literature gap and bring in another perspective on this topic.

In this research, I would like to conduct a throughout literature study under the guideline of feminist analysis, to examine the three-child policy in China for its current impact on gender equality as well as predicting it's the long-term potential impact if the policy were to be continued in the future. The main research question is thus as follows: What are the gendered implications of the third-child policy in China, and how do they affect women's reproductive rights and gender equality?

This dissertation would be structured as follows:

In the first part of this research, I plan to provide a theoretical overview of important concepts such as intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and gendered power relations under patriarchy. This framework recognizes that individuals have multiple and intersecting identities and experiences, and that gender identity and experience are closely related to other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. This chapter aims to lead the readers to have a grounded understanding of the theoretical concepts such as postcolonial feminism and how the notion of equality could differ in different social context. Although the western human and women's right standards might be applied in the process of analysis, I aim to contextualize the gender relationship under the framework of intersectional and postcolonial feminism, to examine how gender relation has been shaped by multiple elements, and in extension, how certain policy within social context could further impact gender related issues.

Chapter three could focus on the historical background of the three-child policy and contextualize this unique issue within the social-cultural-economic background of China. I plan to provide a concise analysis of the impact of previous family planning policies in China from a feminist perspective. Building on the previous research done on its social impacts on Chinese women (Bian, 1996; Short, 2001; Fong, 2002; Xiao& Hong, 2010), I aim to break down common myths regarding the one-child policy to present a realistic understanding of that part of the history and the unique gender conflicts it created in different parts of China.

In Chapter four, I will discuss the changes made by the three-child policy and its relevant recent social background that might have been ignored by Western media. Publications surrounding phenomena such as 'leftover women in China' (Fincher, 2014), gave readers a very impactful analysis of the gender dynamic in China without following the stereotypical image of Chinese women in popular media. I would like to build on their arguments, bring in the most updated context of the three-child policy and additional social changes after the pandemic to provide an up-to-date feminist analysis of the issue from social, economic, and political aspects.

In this paper, it is essential to clarify the distinction between two terms that will be frequently used: "birth-planning" and "birth-control." While these terms have often been used interchangeably in previous research, it is important to recognize a clear difference between the severity and level of urgency associated with each approach.

It is crucial to acknowledge that birth-planning and birth-control represent distinct methodologies, despite occasional bureaucratic overlaps. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that birth-planning policies have faced criticism due to the mistakes made under previous birth-control policies.

For instance, the one-child policy can be categorized as a birth-control measure due to its explicit aim of curbing population growth and exerting control over citizens. Simultaneously, there are other birth-planning methods and policies, such as national campaigns promoting awareness of the importance of providing adequate resources for children, which encourage more conscientious decision-making regarding child-rearing.

By making such distinctions, this paper seeks to offer an alternative perspective on the three-child policy. This approach aims to facilitate a meaningful discussion regarding its impact on Chinese women without assuming their position before examining the specific details and implications of the policy.

Clarifying the difference between birth-planning and birth-control serves to create a framework for analyzing the three-child policy from a feminist standpoint, taking into account the broader context of reproductive decision-making and the potential consequences for women's autonomy, agency, and well-being.

In this way, I believe this research would be significant in many aspects besides contributing to the existing academic literature regarding gender equality and reproductive rights in China in several ways:

First of all, this research would fill in the existing literature gap for the gendered effects of the three-child policy that has been ignored by mainstream academia and media discussion.

Furthermore, I expect this research to raise public awareness to take an intersectional and gendered approach while examining certain policies and discourses, and to also provide a dynamic analysis on the life conditions of Chinese women- to get rid of the rigid image of their victimhood. Only when enough information has been given can we make a fair judgement of the situation. Eventually, hopefully the missing gender discussion could provide more insights for future policy formation and advocacy aiming to promote gender equality.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Intersectionality

*"Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects."*

**- Kimberlé Crenshaw**

In her 2000 publication *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins defines intersectionality as the specific forms of intersecting oppressions that work together to produce injustice (p.18).

It is also defined as the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination (Davis, 2008); or an analytical framework for understanding how a person's various social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege through identifying multiple factors of advantages and disadvantages (Runyan, 2018).

Many scholars have provided their interpretations of intersectionality, but as a terminology it was originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*", where she used the metaphor of an intersection for readers to understand how several forms of inequality, discrimination, and prejudice could interact and compound themselves, therefore creating unique obstacles that are often overlooked.

However, the idea behind intersectionality could be traced back to the nineteenth century, as it originated from the struggles of black women and other women of color in the United States, whose lived experience could not be simplified into the common experience of their racial group without taking other categories of their social identities into consideration.

Nineteenth-century activists such as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper have emphasized the overlooked experience of black women in their pursuit of social justice: black women experience sexism from black men, marginalization from white feminists, on top of the disenfranchisement under white male privilege (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Alexander-Floyd, 2012).

These instances of intersectional oppression are not uncommon in other communities or contexts, therefore, intersectionality quickly gained remarkable success as a theoretical concept: it has been widely used in today's academic research and treated as the "orienting framework that potentially generates new questions, avenues of investigation, and interpretations of existing and new knowledge" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Outside of academia, intersectionality has also provided people with a form of critical praxis that includes grassroots work in order to generate solutions for a variety of social issues (Collins, 2015).

Intersectionality has been regarded as the most important contribution that women's studies have made so far (McCall, 2005). However, there are some critical reflections on its implementation: some believe that it is merely a theory, while others regard it as a concept or a reading strategy for doing feminist analysis (K. Davis, 2008).

The main criticism towards intersectionality points to its lack of coherent framework and methodology as a scientific guideline for analyzing complex realities, consequently, leaving intersectionality to be abused as "a buzzword" (K. Davis, 2008), or an idealistic tool against any other feminist theory (Tomlinson, 2013). Several scholars have attempted to distinguish methodological approaches under intersectionality: the intra-categorical, anti-categorical, and inter-categorical structure (McCall, 2005); unitary, multiple, and intersectional approaches (Hancock, 2007); group-centered, process-centered, and system-centered approaches (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Despite the criticism, some scholars believe that, paradoxically, intersectionality is a crucial theory for its lack of bounds which urges people to elaborate and test the theory in different social contexts.

In her 2018 publication "Intersectionality as Buzzword", Kathy Davis followed the works done by Murray S. Davis- "That's Interesting!" (1971) and "That's Classic!", argued that why intersectionality is a successful social theory for its four characteristics: the relevance with the primary audience's concern; the introduction of a new twist on an old problem; the appeal to a broad academic audience and the inherent ambiguities that could leave researchers space for their own interpretation.

In this research, I wish not to follow a rigid theoretical structure but to explore the open-endedness under intersectionality. I fear that the emphasis on certain categories of difference would result in obscuring other potential factors in the research process, especially when the research subject is close to my personal experience as a Chinese woman, who was once deemed to be an 'illegal child' without an official identity.

To minimize the bias or overgeneralization from my personal standpoint and to provide a holistic yet comprehensive view of the impact of the three-child policy on Chinese women from different intersections of their other social identities, I believe the quest for intersectional perspectives within the scope of this research is necessary.

Moreover, the main stakeholders in this research, the Chinese women who have been or could potentially be influenced by the three-child policy, are from different socio-cultural-economic backgrounds within the context of mainland China. Under the guidance of intersectionality, I would explore the different dimensions of their social identity, such as age, class, ethnicity, urban/rural residence, and educational backgrounds, and analyze how these factors impact and interact with their experiences as women under the three-child policy.

Some of the key concepts under intersectionality that would be used as a theoretical reference in this research include the matrix of domination, the interlocking systems of oppression, power relations, and the resistance or challenges to power relations.

The intersection and interaction of different social categories create a “Matrix of Domination” which explains the ways in which different systems of oppression intersect and reinforce each other (Collins, 1990). Under the Matrix of Domination, there are three main concepts: the interlocking systems of oppression which refer to the interconnected forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism that reinforce each other, creating the system of hierarchy; the power relations that highlight the privileges that are created by the difference in social identities; and the resistance or challenges to the power relations in which individuals and groups fight against the systems of oppression in forms of activism and advocacy.

Within this research, I would focus on the diverse power relations created or amplified by the three-child policy: for example, within each Chinese family, even though both men and women are impacted by the policy as their choices as a family are limited under the guideline of the national policies; yet, the three-child policy has also intensified the difference in their other social identity, forming a different gendered power relation within their household as well as in a larger societal setting that needs to be investigated.

## 2.2 Postcolonial Feminism

*“Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter.”*

— **J. Nozipo Maraire**

In chapter two of *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and You-me Park introduced postcolonial feminism as neither a simple subset of postcolonial studies nor a variety of feminism, instead, it is the exploration of colonialism and neocolonialism standing at the intersection of multiple social identities (Park & Rajan, 2005, p. 53). In other words, postcolonial feminism could be described as the analytical framework under intersectionality, focusing on the previously colonized nations, cultural groups, values, or common practices.

The fundamental drive for many scholars and activists from once-colonized territories to explore feminism through the postcolonial perspective is the lack of representation of Third World feminism and the overpowering utter eurocentrism amongst Western feminism which is dominated by the experience of West European and North American women (Mishra, 2013). Decolonizing a colonized land is not a simple matter of changing the existing political structure, postcolonialism is concerned with multiple societal aspects and discourses that need to be investigated- the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination, these are all the formal discourse that was once used to support the colonizers' agenda which need its new discussion (Boehmer, 2006).

One of the most common tactics that was used by Western colonizers was to inculcate inferiority in the colonized land, under the name of 'civilizing mission' (Fischer-Tiné & Mann, 2004). During this process, the indigenous culture, traditions, and values were marked as backward and meaningless, while the women who are associated with this background are often ignored or victimized to fit the narrative (Mishra, 2013).

What needs to be noted is that postcolonial feminism did originate from the gendered history of colonialism. Then this raises the question: how would postcolonialism or postcolonial feminism be an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of a policy within the context of mainland China when it was never politically colonized by any Western countries, especially when the formation of the birth control policies was largely related to domestic economic development while being independent of obvious external forces?

Before diving into the important components of the postcolonial feminist theories, I would like to clarify that within this research, postcolonial feminism framework would not be used as a guideline to analyze the formation and implementation process of existing Chinese birth planning, birth control policies.

Instead, it would be followed as a principle while inspecting the popular public sentiment towards the said policies both in the world of academia and on mass media, and to explore the notion of gender equality in China and the experience of Chinese women without using exclusively Western-centric standards.

Postcolonial feminism, in my opinion, should be more universally applied to any discussions involving feminist values or gender ideologies as a critical thinking standpoint while facing the prevalent dominance of Western feminism.

### 2.2.1 'Whitestream' Feminism and Ludic Feminism

It has been pointed out and criticized by many scholars from different cultural backgrounds that the current popular feminism theory that we know of, is largely dominated by a selected group of Western feminists whose experience are equally valuable on a personal level, but not as representative as it should be when used as a default scenario.

Building on the feminist notion of 'malestream' from Canadian sociologist Claude Denis, Grande has described mainstream feminism as 'whitestream' feminism for its basis of white, middle-class experience and its purpose to serve ethnopolitical interests and capital investments (Grande, 2003).

The overpowering position of 'whitestream' feminism is not only concerning on a global level- even within the discussion of Western feminism, but we could also see criticism for its dominant approach and narrative that has overly simplified the complex perspective of Western feminism, overlooking the experience of women from a less privileged social background (Hemmings, 2005).

This phenomenon could exist, partially because the "mainstream" or "whitestream" Western feminism assumed the stable structure of universal sisterhood, where the description of a woman, her upbringings and her issues could represent the common concern of many (Grande, 2003). This assumption has been criticized by many feminists of color such as Jacqui Alexander, Gloria Anzaldua, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Trinh Minh-ha, Bell hooks, etc.

This trend of feminism in the late capitalism period is also described as becoming increasingly ludic- this branch of feminism focuses on linguistic and textual practice. The ludic feminism understands power as diffuse, asystematic, contingent, and "aleatory", marked by chance and arbitrariness rather than historically determined by production practices (Ebert, 1996). Under such a framework, politics is redefined as a purely academic exercise, therefore, the theories are separated from real-life feminist struggle and practice.



Whether it is called “whitestream” or “ludic”, this popular trend of Western feminism is being criticized for its lack of attention and understanding of the real-life struggles of many women from different social-economic background. The distance between their theoretical narrative on the “first world” issue which further enabled the “high status feminists” to build on their lucrative understanding of the “other” women- creating a relationship similar to the colonizer and the colonized (Grande, 2003).

### 2.2.2 Stereotyping and Othering

Under such dominant discourse of Western feminism, many marginalized communities have lost their voice- their women and girls are being given the title of “victim” and “other”, for their experience being different than what the Western “mainstream” feminism, and therefore being seen as less valid (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010).

This is without a doubt, a prevalent challenge that many people share in the global community as their lifestyle and value are pre-branded as ‘regressive’ without having a chance to tell their side of the story.

The image of a stereotypical Asian woman has been limited to a singular understanding of shared cultural values in Asia- even though Asia is an extremely big continent with diverse ethnicities and cultural groups. Obedient, shy, family-oriented, small, weak, and gentle... These are the common tags that are given to Asian women, both in mass media and interpersonal relationships.

While negative stereotypes are often easily noticeable and therefore could be refuted, many Asian stereotypes are seemingly innocent or even positive- such as the stereotype of “Model Minority”, which has been criticized to be harmful for both members of the Asian community and other minority groups who are being targeting as competitors with this unrealistic stereotype (Ford & Lee, 1996).

Subsequentially, Chinese women have been given similar positive stereotype of being virtuous and traditional; due to its positive indication, the stereotypes surrounding Chinese women are not often challenged (Shu et al., 2022).

Some of these descriptions are not fully negative, but the overgeneralization of Asian women as a whole has led to many misunderstandings that should not be continued. The impression of Chinese women, out of all the Asian stereotypes, was worsened by the horrible reputation of the one-child policy- they are seen as powerless beings without agency, being the pawn of patriarchy, whose only job was to listen and follow, whether it’s the order from their father, husband or the government. The media coverage of the one-child policy was also not the best depiction of having a holistic understanding of Chinese women and Chinese feminism. While these stereotypes do not exclusively exist in the Western discourse, the lens of tragedy does hinder the discussion of Chinese women and their experience with gender equality.

Following the framework of postcolonial feminism, to challenge these stereotypes and to re-negotiate the value and structure to judge gender equality, I believe it is crucial to look at the history and development of common Chinese moral values, the state-regulated gender norms (Barlow, 2004)- which could not be discussed without investigating the impact of modernity, which is a relatively Westernized idea given the background of its formation. Building on this basis, I plan to critically reflect on the existing discourse on the images of Chinese women under the birthing policies, and whether the standards that have been used to assess their life experience are appropriate given the intersectional, diverse context.

I wish to enter this discussion without the assumption that Chinese women are total victims under the one-child policy, and to provide a different analysis of the image of Chinese women under the communist then socialist government; within the discussion of reproductive rights, I would like to highlight the element of individual deciding power and the different standings of Chinese women that have led to the different responses towards the birth-control policies.

Although the criteria to judge the level of happiness and equality Chinese women receive might differ from the Western idea of an empowered woman, the importance of individual decisions would be respected and discussed in this research.

### 2.2.3 Postcolonial Discourse in China

Under the current discussion of postcolonial feminism, the countries that are qualified for the using this framework are rather limited -other forms of colonization, such as concessions and semi-colonization, under which a government would be heavily influenced by Western countries and therefore serves the interests of Western countries (Mandel, 2005), do still play as an influential factor to the development of those seemingly independent nations.

Mainland China was indeed not fully politically colonized by any Western countries, yet, throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century, there were 27 settlements and concessions- land that was governed and occupied by foreign powers, where imperialistic systems were established (Quigley, 1928; Go, 1939; Marinelli, 2009). Since the Opium Wars in the 1840s, Western colonial power found their way to insert themselves into the life of Chinese people through religious missionary groups and education reform such as the establishment of modern colleges that mainly offered courses such as foreign languages and modern sciences with the aim of “learning from the West” (Wu, 2011).

This part of the history is closely connected to the introduction of Western value in mainland China- many scholars have discussed the colonial influence in China and how the definition of modernity is still being deeply impacted by colonialism (Meinhof, 2017; Zhu, 2017). Within the discourse of Chinese academia, postcolonialism could be found in popular nationalist literature such as “China Can Say No” (Zang et al., 1997) which explored postcolonialism within China with strong emotional elements, calling for reflections on the awareness of colonial power that was still impacting the development of China. However, a large part of these discussions was ignored by the popular postcolonial discourse for insufficient translation.

I do, however, need to clarify that following the postcolonial feminist framework and having a critical mindset when looking through the principle and structure of equality, does not equal the total abolishment of any Western value. Even though the modern idea of human rights emerged throughout Western democratic development (Moyn, 2010), many of the essential conditions and basic human rights, such as reproductive rights, would be respected but reasonably challenged within the scope of this research.

The International Conference on Population and Development, Programme of Action, has given the following definition of reproductive rights (para 7.3):

“[R]eproductive rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international laws and international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health.

It also includes the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.”

## 2.3 Additional Clarifications

Before embarking on the analysis, it is important to address a potential source of confusion and establish a contextual framework regarding the timeframe and societal values being discussed. While this research aims to explore the intersection of different identities within the context of Chinese birth planning and birth control policies, the primary focus will not be on the spectrum of gender identity.

It is essential to acknowledge that the currently popular gender ideology predominantly stems from discussions within Western values and scholarly research. Previous studies have examined and compared Western gender theories with gender ideologies in other regions, such as Africa and South Asia (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Fennell & Arnot, 2008; Ojsadmin, 2017). Similarly, the application of Western gender theories and their imposition on traditional Chinese beliefs is subject to criticism, particularly when examining the birth planning and birth control policies.

For instance, in the discussion of the one-child policy, the research will review various studies and interviews exploring the lived experiences of Chinese women whose lives and reproductive choices were impacted by the policy. In this context, the term "Chinese women" refers to biological women, as the issue directly relates to their biological capacity for conception and childbirth. This approach does not aim to exclude the Chinese queer community, whose members were also affected by birth control policies. However, as their identity was not the primary target of these policies, the primary focus of the discussion will be within the framework of the traditional gender binary.

By delineating the scope of the discussion in this manner, this research aims to provide a nuanced analysis of the specific context of Chinese birth planning and birth control policies, while recognizing the limitations and potential criticisms associated with the application of Western gender theories within this particular cultural context.

## Chapter 3 Historical Background on China's Birth-planning Policies

*If you want to understand today you have to search yesterday."*

- **Pearl S. Buck**

### 3.1 Unveiling the Chinese Cultural Context

The Chinese cultural context is quite unique for its rich history, diverse traditions, and the various philosophical systems that helped shaped the collective community value. Several cultural concepts are crucial to understand the experience of Chinese citizens, especially women, under the birth planning and birth control policies.

Equality is a complex notion that defies easy quantification. While certain universal conditions can be assessed to gauge the degree of equality experienced by minority groups, there exist more nuanced interpersonal and intercultural factors that resist broad generalizations. The advancement of women's empowerment, for instance, is a multifaceted discourse that takes into account both the persistent gender disparities and the historical dynamics of power.

Culture is a multifaceted concept that defies a unified definition capable of encapsulating all its dimensions. However, it is commonly understood that culture encompasses the shared values, activities, and behaviors exhibited by individuals within a particular community.

It is essential to emphasize that the prevalence of a specific cultural norm does not justify or rationalize its adoption. Cultural practices should not serve as a pretext for the imposition of harmful behaviors upon members of the cultural community; simultaneously, cultural values that are not familiar to the readers eyes also should not be penalized without further investigation. Therefore, this section of the research is examining the cultural norms and values, not promoting, nor justifying its existence- the intention is to provide a comprehensive perspective on various incidents and social phenomena, while critically reflecting upon their implications for Chinese society, particularly for Chinese women.

Such an analysis enables a deeper understanding of how cultural norms may intersect with feminist principles, gender equality, and women's empowerment in the context of family planning and reproductive rights in China. Through this lens, it becomes possible to examine the potential impact and consequences of the policy from a feminist perspective.

In this context, it is important to note that when referring to "China," it is not merely a shortened form of the "People's Republic of China" as a specific political entity. Instead, it represents a collective term encompassing diverse communities that have existed across various Chinese dynasties throughout history, sharing a common cultural identity.

### 3.1.1 Familism

Familism is one of the most fundamental social organizations in China (Barlow, 2004).

In the 1944 publication *Familism the Foundation of Chinese Social Organization*, Cheng explained familism as the social structure that has taught people to value family relationships; to follow the morals of filial piety, care for cooperation; praise courtesy, patience, and self-control. The consciousness towards honoring their families has also caused many Chinese people to put a great value on their family names- they want to do everything they could to bring glory to their family names, and they are eager to fight for the protection of the graveyards of their ancestors.

Cheng believes that the principles of familism are to follow filial piety, which could be exemplified by the show of devotedness of the younger brother to his elder brother and the proper attitude of a wife to her husband and her parents-in-law.

Although familism is not exclusive to the Eastern world, Chinese familism is rather unique in its size and complexity: it was common to have a family of forty people who are distant relatives living with each other; it was also accepted for men, both men in power and civilians, to have multiple concubines under the strict hierarchical structure within each individual family (Watson & Ebrey, 1992). In the *Book of Rites*, there were clear rules stating the distinctions between the wife and the concubines and the rules of their lives (Confucius et al., 1967).

Each of the concubines would be at a different position based on the sequence of them “entering the house” to become an official member of the family; all the concubines would be at a lower position compared with the wife; the concubines were expected to carry down the family line by giving the family more offspring.

From a modern perspective, the thought of having an exclusively male-oriented polygamy system that was built upon the exploitation of women is neither fair nor ethical, but the concubinage system in China was seen as a natural social phenomenon and was justified for its practicality: this practice could lower the chances of families not having male offspring to carry down the family name, especially when the fatality rate was quite high due to the lack of medical resources.

The debate and legal reform surrounding concubinage were significant issues in the early twentieth century. Even though the system of concubinage was eventually delegitimized after numerous debates and feminist protests, the preference for having a bigger family which is rooted in the worship of familism is not as easily altered (Nagatomi, 2020).

However, in recent years, researchers have found that there has been a decreasing amount of intergenerational intimacy and a reduced significance of familism due to the fast-paced lifestyle and urbanization (Yan, 2016), which has led to the creation of Chinese neo-familism. Regardless of the growing influence of individualism, both familism and neo-familism are built on the idea that ‘the interests of the family take precedence over the interests of individual family members’ (Yan, 2018), which is created based on one fundamental condition: there needs to be the structure of a ‘family’ that exist before individuals, and the common understanding of ‘family’ involves at least one child.

The modern display of (neo)familism could be found at different levels in different areas, most of the time it is more prevalent in rural areas where people have more connections with other community members therefore had a better preservation of their traditional practices such as celebratory events at the ancestral hall, keeping a genealogy book that has all the family members on records.

And it has been reported that residents in areas where forms of familism are still followed as a community value are more likely to follow the traditional values and lifestyle, which also led to more resistance towards the birth-control policies.

One example is the Chao Shan area in Guangdong Province, where there is a reputation of people insisting on having bigger families, most importantly more sons, so that during the celebratory rituals that are hosted every year until today, the families could appear to be prosperous. It is not uncommon for families to have around seven to eight children even during the most strongly implemented period of the one-child policy, and many of the women from this area have reported that their families use different standards in the upbringings of male and female children: women in their communities were given fewer resources, attention, and ambitious futures- their identities are still tightly related to the social roles that were given to their biological natures, and the difference between men and women were given as an unquestionable rule that should have been followed regardless of the circumstances. Men were allowed to perform celebratory rituals, and in some circumstances, women are not even allowed to be present as a viewer: because they would bring bad luck to the community.

News about this practice is still sparking debates and discussions within mainland China, while some argue that this was a simple matter of respecting regional culture, others cannot help but question the misogynistic nature of these practices. Yet, without a doubt, the familism value and the strong son preference have been and still are influencing a large part of China- and this cultural context needs to be considered when looking at the mass responses towards birth-planning, birth-control policies.

### 3.1.2 The Son Preference

In addition to familism, the prevalence of son preference in China has played a significant role in generating collective resistance towards birth control policies. Son preference refers to the societal preference for male children over female children, leading to a gender imbalance and influencing reproductive decision-making within families.

Son preference was once a common occurrence in most societies for both cultural and economic reasons (Williamson, 1976). Under the patrilineal structure in most communities, the absolute decision power was held by men whether it was on the national level or within individual families. This resulted in the limitation of women's rights for even the most fundamental societal functions (Kuang et al., 2015).

The cultural-political structure that has historically perpetuated unfair judgments towards women has had detrimental effects, particularly in deepening prejudice and discrimination against them. One significant consequence has been the emergence and persistence of son preference, leading parents to favor their male offspring. This preference has contributed to a vicious cycle that feminist activists continue to strive to break.

The existence of the son preference and its negative impact on our society is not a groundless assumption that is purely built on emotional elements, one method to prove the sex balance is to look at the sex ratio at birth (SRB).

According to the United Nations report, the more natural sex ratio at birth should be 101 males to 100 females (Tong, 2022). Yet, in countries where there is a prevalent son preference, the sex ratio at birth is heavily intervened by manmade choices that resulted in severely skewed unnatural sex ratio. Based on an analysis of 2000 to 2020 birth data from the UN, China and Azerbaijan had the most skewed sex ratios at birth, which is an annual average of around 115 boys per 100 girls (Tong, 2022).

Many researchers have utilized the highly skewed sex ratio in China as evidence to demonstrate the negative influence of the one-child policy. However, I aim to challenge this notion by adopting a broader temporal framework and examining the sex ratio in a historical context. It is important to acknowledge that son preference in China possesses a much longer history than the one-child policy itself or even the existence of the Communist Party of China.

According to the traditional Chinese filial law, having a son is seen as bringing more sons to carry down the family name is an important mission (Yi, 2020). This idea is also deeply rooted in the thousand years of agricultural habits when young men were seen as the primary labor force. Son preference is especially common in countries that have been influenced by Confucian traditions (Hesketh et al., 2011).



Due to the prevailing desire among families to have male offspring, coupled with limited financial capabilities, many resorted to engaging in sex-selective practices. It is important to note that these practices took place before modern medical advancements provided non-invasive means of determining the biological sex of a fetus. Consequently, various unreliable methods gained popularity among the population. Examples of such methods included observing the shape of the pregnant woman's belly, feeling her pulse, analyzing her dreams or paying attention to her dietary preferences (Ye, 2012). It was commonly believed that if a pregnant woman craved sour food, she was carrying a male child, while a craving for spicy food indicated the expectation of a female child.

Furthermore, some individuals even attempted to manipulate the sex of their unborn children through the use of herbal medicine that contains methyltestosterone combined with superstitious rituals, resulting in multiple cases of intersex children needing surgical aids (Guo & Yan, 2020). These practices reflect the extent to which the desire for male offspring influenced societal attitudes and actions, resulting in the adoption of unscientific and potentially harmful methods in pursuit of fulfilling son preference.

If all other efforts to achieve sex selection were unsuccessful, infanticide became the most straightforward and efficient yet abhorrent method to fulfill the parents' desired biological sex of their newborn child. Tragically, records of this practice during the one-child policy era have been documented in multiple publications (For example, Mosher, 1993; Scharping, 2005; Watts, 2005).

However, it is crucial to emphasize that this practice was not a direct outcome of the one-child policy itself; subsequently, by abolishing the birth control policy, the toxic obsession for sons over daughters within certain Chinese communities would not automatically disappear.

To prove that sex-selective practice already existed before the one-child policy, we need to look back at the available filed notes and interviews since scientific data that could provide us with a strong relevance before the 1950s could be hard to gather, considering a lot of the fatality rate could be a result of the lack of medical care, warfare, and poverty.

The earliest existing records about infanticide were created by the Chinese Legalist<sup>2</sup> philosopher Han Fei (280 B.C. – 233 B.C.), in his article Liu Fan, where he criticized six types of people and their behaviors, one of which is “people who host banquets to celebrate when they have a baby boy and murder their baby if the baby was a girl.” The fact that this was included in a societal critique from two thousand years ago could prove the existence of such practice and its common occurrence amongst the common citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> Legalism, also known as Fajia, is one of the six classical schools of thought in Chinese philosophy. This school represents several branches of "men of methods" which is similar to the Western term of "realist" statesmen.

In the famous publication *On a Chinese Screen* (1922), Maugham gave us a vivid picture of old China, this is how modern Chinese citizens describe China before the current political party took over the country, even though it could apply to the ancient monarchy, most commonly, this phrase refers to the period between the end of the Qing dynasty and 1949. In this book, Maugham described a rural establishment called 婴儿塔, which could translate into “the baby tower”.

This tower is closely related to the Chinese folk culture and religious beliefs such as Buddhism, but it was used for parents to bury their children, mostly infants who were just a few hours old, but did not make it alive into the world due to many reasons such as the lacking medical conditions, the high mortality rate at birth and poverty. But Maugham noted that he could still hear the crying of some infants, not all of the babies were already gone when they were dropped at this spot: the baby tower was described to be where people drop off ‘dying baby boys and healthy but unwanted baby girls.’

What is interesting is that, in the original script, Maugham did not specify the biological sex of these abandoned infants, but in the translated Chinese version, the many Chinese translators who have discussed this book, both in academic papers or on popular Chinese social media Weibo, decided to use the feminine pronoun ‘she’, to address the healthy but unwanted babies- as if it is already a consensus acknowledgment that baby girls are less desirable.

As a consolation, after visiting the baby tower, Maugham was then invited into a chapel by two nuns who showed the facility where they help raise the abandoned children- they would pay twenty cents to the parents who would bring them unwanted babies instead of dropping them in the baby tower, waiting for death. The unwanted babies were bathed and fed by the nuns, living there happily with a smile on their faces, not knowing that they were almost in an extremely dangerous situation without a chance to experience the world.

Maugham’s publication on China was under a lot of debate, his description revealed the bureaucratic, irresponsible government and the horrible condition the citizens had to face; but many famous literature scholars have commented on his way of telling the story about China with criticism on him forcing his Western values on common Chinese customs- but none of them have denied the existence of the baby tower, nor the fact that infanticide targeting biological female infants existed, just that ‘It was exaggerated by this foreign writer.’

The baby towers did not disappear overnight when the People's Republic of China was founded, in fact, in many grey literatures and discussions amongst elder citizens, many of them recalled seeing local Baby Towers when they were younger, around the 1960s, and that it still served its horrifying purpose until the local governments issued an official order to ban people from abandoning, which is essentially murdering their new-born babies.

In the publication *Drowning Girls in China: female infanticide since 1650*, we could read from the disturbing title that it was not an unknown practice for parents to 'give up' on their new-born daughter, to save more resources for their sons (Mungello, 2008). Many personal records were made by Christian missionaries who lived in China since the seventeenth century. In the journal of Matteo Ricci, he noticed the difference in attitude towards the birth of a new life in Christian culture and the Chinese society. He noted that many parents decided to murder their newborn daughter because of poverty, and another justification that these parents used is related to the notion of Buddhist transmigration- the parents believed that the children would be born into a better life.

Even after the downfall of the Chinese monarchy, the practice of infanticide was still rather common (Coale & Banister, 1994):

In the 1981 publication *Marriage and Adoption in China, 1845-1945*, we could see stories of a missionary observer in the late nineteenth century who interviewed 40 Chinese women who have given birth. These 40 women gave birth to 183 sons and 175 daughters in total, and the interviewed women admitted that 78 of the daughters were murdered to perform sex selection.

Based on the above historical records, it is not hard to substantiate the presence of strong son preference in China long before the implementation of stricter birth planning or birth control policies. However, it is crucial to delve deeper into subsequent chapters to explore how these policies have exacerbated son preference and introduced new incentives that lead to the abandonment of daughters in favor of attempting to conceive a son. This phenomenon has contributed to an even more skewed sex ratio and has had far-reaching demographic consequences that adversely affect the lives of numerous Chinese citizens.

### 3.1.3 Unequal Chinese Standpoint of Marriage

One commonly cited justification for the prevalent son preference in China relates to the cultural significance of marriage and the differing meanings attached to it for men and women. Within this context, women are often perceived as temporary additions to their natal families who will eventually leave to join their husband's family upon marriage, therefore just the “spilt water that would never come back” (W. Zhang, 2009). In contrast, sons are regarded as permanent and valuable members of the family due to their ability to carry on the family lineage and name.

According to social conventions in patrilineal societies, children are expected to inherit their father's family name, emphasizing the importance placed on their patrilineal bloodline. As a result, sons are often perceived as the primary means of ensuring the continuation of the family line and preserving ancestral heritage, through marriage and the creation of more children who would carry down their father's family name.

A notable distinction in the Chinese language that deserves attention is the gendered terminology used to describe marriage. Specifically, the terms “Jià” and “Qǔ” are employed to represent the act of getting married for women and men, respectively. The character “Jià” (嫁) is composed of the characters for “woman” (女) and “home” (家), signifying that the woman is entering a new home or family upon marriage. On the other hand, the term “Qǔ” (娶) depicts a woman (女) being picked up or fetched (取), implying her transition to her husband's family.

These two characters represent the basic assumption people held towards marriage in a gendered way—woman would be joining the family of their husband; while the husband would be getting a bride who would join his family that is already there: consisting of his parents, siblings, and other blood relatives.

This unequal understanding of marriage was later reinforced by folk customs that restricted married women's contact with their natal family, practically cutting off her connection with her natal community (Andors, 1983).

### 3.2 The Implementation of the One-child Policy

The three-child policy represents the latest iteration of China's long-standing birth planning policies. While there are notable differences in the extent of human rights infringement, the three-child policy is essentially an evolution of previous policies, with modifications and adaptations aimed at mitigating the negative impacts and addressing demographic concerns that arose from prior measures.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the context and implications of the three-child policy, it is imperative to revisit its precursor, the one-child policy, while maintaining a critical perspective. This approach allows for a reexamination of existing interpretations of the policy, an exploration of its formulation process, an analysis of the specific demographic challenges it was intended to address, and an assessment of its lasting impact on Chinese society.

The People's Republic of China was officially established in 1949, led by the Communist Party of China (CPC). As a new country was founded right after decades of warfare and internal revolutions, the newest Chinese government was confronted by the arduous, unsettling social and economic condition that was left in the war-torn country.

During the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the global community confronted numerous shared challenges, among them the burgeoning population and the consequent increased demand for resources. A significant struggle emerged in attempting to establish a distribution system that was both equitable and efficient.

Unprecedented population growth in the second half of the twentieth century hit the global community without a warning, which was closely related to the medical advancement that has improved life expectancy (F. Wang et al., 2013) but also highly relevant with the end of the two World Wars which has given common citizens a lot of hope for a prosperous future with more peace and stability.

To welcome more new lives into the world is a beautiful thing, especially after the frightful loss many families have suffered during the wars, but the sudden growth in population also came with destructive long-lasting impacts which has sparked the concern of many political bodies. The gap between national resources and the citizens' demands caught the attention of many demographers, and as they predicted, the booming population did create a tightening situation for education, health care, and mobility issues (Bouk, 2018; DeGood, 2011). This collective concern has led to the creation of many birth-planning/birth-control initiatives around the world: the International Planned Parenthood Federation was established in 1952; United Nations Population Fund was founded in 1969.

During this period, numerous governments were grappling with the challenges posed by population growth and seeking balanced solutions. However, the People's Republic of China confronted an even more pressing variation of this issue. With an already densely populated country, China had an estimated population of approximately 540 million citizens during the time of its establishment. Moreover, since the decline of the Qing Dynasty, China had been experiencing economic decline. Within a mere three decades, its population had surpassed 800 million, sparking global concerns about the possibility of a Malthusian collapse<sup>3</sup> caused by China's rapid population growth.

The apprehension regarding China's population growth was not based on unfounded speculation. The country was confronted with the intricate interplay between overpopulation and a multitude of societal challenges. These challenges included constraints in terms of limited land availability, housing shortages, inadequate healthcare facilities, and insufficient educational resources. Additionally, less developed regions experienced waves of unemployment, indicating the potential emergence of broader social issues that were yet to be fully realized.

### 3.2.1 Political Resistance for Chinese Birth-planning

Even though the one-child policy was not officially announced until 1980, the intention to promote birth control was suggested within the CPC even before the official establishment of the country in 1949. The development of such policy was not an easy linear process; instead, it was originally intended as a birth-planning policy to call on spontaneous responses from the citizens that later escalated into an urgent solution for the societal issues that were mingled with ideological challenges and political power struggles.

Chinese politicians and scientists have attempted to take up the notion of optimum population (Scharping, 2005, p.47). Members of the government have expressed their concern with the growing population in China in multiple occasions and introduced ideas of bringing in a population limit by a certain year. Many of the suggestions took multiple dimensions into consideration: land reclamation potential, job creation production, etc. Even though many in-party members have claimed that having a huge population would be hard for a new country such as the PRC to manage; with little resources available, the development of the younger generation was also limited by the scarce opportunities. Planned parenthood and birth-planning were an undeniable trend for many global communities at that time, but the process to carry out such a policy in China was suppressed for almost three decades by the then national leader, Chairman Mao Zedong (Scharping, 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> Malthusian collapse is the theory that describes the unchecked population growth would eventually outstrip growth in the food supply and results in massive famine.

As the ultimate authority of China at that time, Mao himself had a pro-natalist mindset. In one of his works, Bankruptcy of the Idealist Conception of History<sup>4</sup>, Mao provided many arguments to refute the belief that having a big population is very disadvantageous for China:

*It is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China's population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production.*

Following the Marxist revolution theory, Mao believed that when production and revolution went hand in hand, which could lead to the redistribution of wealth, can solve the economic issues. During his public speeches, he openly expressed his strong stance against the birth control policy as he believed it would be murdering Chinese people without shedding blood- and ultimately it would ruin China (Scharping, 2005).

Being the authority figure of then China, Mao's doubtful attitude toward birth control policies made it extremely difficult for the advocators to receive enough support to carry out a scientific discussion about the possible solutions that could be used for this issue.

But this was far more complicated than the overarching dictating power of one person stopping the implementation of new policies- Mao was not the only one who had strong objections to having a strict birth control policy. On the contrary, for this issue, Mao's sentiment could represent most of the Chinese citizens from that generation- the traditional Chinese value surrounding family hugely hindered the implementation of a nationwide birth-planning policy that is aimed at controlling population growth.

However, due to significant resistance, the implementation of a birth planning policy in China was delayed for several decades. This delay ultimately contributed to an escalation in the urgency for effective population control measures.

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<sup>4</sup> Bankruptcy of the Idealist Conception of History is published on September 16, 1949. In this work, Mao engaged with many claims made by U.S. spokesman Dean Acheson.

### 3.2.2 The Chaotic Birth Planning Attempts

Given Mao's political influence, the anti-natalist politicians did not get a chance to further elaborate their vision for a national birth control policy- however, they were clear about their feeling: they saw the Chinese population at that time as a liability, not an asset (Scharping, 2005).

Fast-forward to the 1950s, the issues that come with huge population started to magnify in crucial areas such as labor production, education resources and land resources. Given the circumstances, Mao finally recognized the issue that came with overpopulation and in his speech in October 1957, he expressed his positive support for a birth planning, which was delayed for 20 years since it was first suggested. But the birth planning was again interrupted by the Great Leap Forward in 1958, which relayed on the huge population of China to achieve economic growth.

During the 1960s, birth-planning campaigns were conducted as a response to the national crisis following the Great Leap Forward with health-related arguments. Even though the campaign was able to reach the general public, the birth-planning supporters faced much resistance within the party. Without clear policy support or enough channels to communicate with the public, the effect of these birth-planning campaigns was not able to reach a satisfying result.

In the 1970s, the policy makers moved beyond the previous soft approaches with campaigns trying to appeal to voluntary support, instead, the slogan of *wan, xi, shao* was created and popularized in 1973, aiming to create late marriage and childbearing, birth spacing and fertility limitation (Banister, 1991; Attané, 2002). To follow these slogans, supporting policies were created to ensure its effectiveness- different in urban and rural areas, the legal age for marriage was delayed to 23 to 25 years old for women, 25 to 28 years old for men; a mandatory birth- spacing rule of four to five years between the first and the second child was also implemented for couples to abide (Attané, 2002).

However, the aforementioned policies primarily fell within the realm of birth planning attempts, with limited success in effectively slowing down population growth. It was only after the passing of Mao in 1976, when the strong political resistance against implementing a nationwide birth planning policy subsided, that his successors reintroduced birth planning as a prominent national agenda.

The economic crisis and food shortage at the end of the 1970s served as the last straw for the forming of the one-child policy. In 1979, the tightened birth-planning policy was carried out to 'correct the hard mistake of not implementing birth control policy earlier' with the new system of birth control incentives and sanctions- in both urban and rural areas, there could only be one child per family.



It is important to acknowledge that when discussing the one-child policy, scholars and researchers have often characterized it as a legalized national policy. However, in reality, the central government never officially declared the one-child policy as a direct government order. In 1980, the announcement of the one-child policy took the form of an Open Letter addressed to the members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Communist Youth League. The purpose of this letter was to "advocate" for the policy (F. Wang et al., 2013). Within the Open Letter, concerns about potential demographic changes resulting from a sudden shift in family size were also expressed.

Although the central government aimed to encourage voluntary compliance from citizens, individual local governments were instructed to take action in accordance with this voluntary suggestion. Consequently, different local governments assumed varying levels of authority to ensure the success of the one-child policy, leading to the implementation of distinct and, at times, stringent regulations.

As a result of that, the resistance force from the citizens forced the government to give up on simple policy planning. The data collection for this period is rather hard to gather for many reasons, but according to the field research done by Steven Mosher, there are evidence to show that coercive measures for implementing the birth-control directives were taken in 1979 and 1980. Yet the records for the party following people's wishes also existed: the new marriage law in 1980 successfully lowered the legal age of marriage to 20 years old for women and 22 years old for men. This change has helped to increase the number of marriages by nearly 50 percent in 1981, which has in a way neutralized the negative influence of the tightening birth-control policies. At the same time, the implementation of birth-control policies was rather chaotic and unstable; the government was forced to recognize the difference in condition for different areas in China, and in 1984, rural couples were allowed to have a second child (Merli and Raftery 2000).

### 3.3 Localized Variations of the One-child Policy

It is important to note that while the central government had the overarching goal of population control, the implementation and monitoring of the policy were primarily carried out at the local level. This decentralized approach was seen as a more practical way to manage the vast population and enforce the policy effectively.

However, despite the efforts made, it is crucial to recognize that monitoring the behavior of every single family in a country as large as China remains a challenging task. The sheer size of the population and the diversity of local contexts make it difficult to achieve complete and uniform monitoring. As a result, variations and inconsistencies in policy enforcement and compliance levels across different regions were observed.

The Chinese Hukou system, the Household Registration System, played a crucial role in facilitating the enforcement of the one-child policy by local governments.

The Hukou system in China, similar to residence systems in other East Asian countries, was established to regulate voluntary migration and aid local governments in managing their respective populations (Gul & Lu, 2011).

However, the Hukou system also gave rise to numerous inequalities. The most notable distinction between the Chinese Hukou system and similar systems in other countries lies in the clear differentiation between urban and rural residence, which subsequently results in differential access to benefits and resources such as education, healthcare, and mobility that citizens are entitled to enjoy.

Under the one-child policy, local governments utilized the Hukou system to withhold citizenship from "illegal children." Even if parents managed to deceive the local government and raise their "illegal children" to an age when enforcement measures could no longer be carried out, these children would not be officially registered under the Hukou system. Consequently, they would be deemed ineligible for basic citizen rights, including the right to education and healthcare. In other words, these children did not have legal documentation of their existence until their families voluntarily reported themselves to the appropriate authorities, acknowledged their mistake, and accepted punishment.

The most common form of punishment in such cases involved a significant financial penalty imposed on the parents, payable to the local authorities, in order to register their child legally. As an example, I, myself, was one of these children. My legal identity carried a price tag of five hundred dollars in the late 1990s, a relatively large sum considering that the average annual salary for workers in state-owned companies was only one thousand dollars per year.

### 3.3.1 Softening Adjustments

In the surveys on Family-size Preference 1980-97, only under 25 percent of the respondents who lived in rural areas desired a one-child family. The diverse responses amongst the citizens inspired each local government to adjust their local policies to better suit the goal of population control within a reasonable range.

To counter the negative sentiment amongst the people, multiple policies were created in different areas for the diverse situation the local government in some areas allow a second child for special hardship cases; some areas permit a second child for rural residences with only one daughter as the first-born so that they could have the chance to try again for a son.

Many areas also created a law to allow families to have a second child if the first born was a daughter after a couple of years- this type of birth control policies were called 1.5 child policy: the 0.5 represents the first-born daughter, as it was a consensus amongst these communities with strong son preference that the daughters do not count as a whole child compared with sons.

### 3.3.2 Extreme Local Measures

The devolution of decision-making power to local governments regarding the implementation of the one-child policy, coupled with the absence of a clear legal framework outlining limits and approved methods, resulted in varying approaches and measures across different regions. While some areas adopted lax enforcement measures for birth control policies, others, fueled by a sense of authority, went to extreme lengths. Consequently, numerous horrific cases emerged under the one-child policy. Although these cases may be considered exceptional, their significance cannot be disregarded when assessing the overall impact of the policy.

#### *3.3.2.1 Childless Hundred Days in Shandong, 1991*

Shandong, the Chinese province with the second largest population in China, is known for its adherence to traditional social values, including filial piety, due to its historical association with Confucianism.

In early 2023, news reports about Shandong's strong attachment to the traditional kneeling new year ritual garnered attention on Chinese media. Many viewers from other regions expressed disagreement with Shandong's uncritical adherence to cultural ceremonies and raised concerns about the exclusion of women's participation in these rituals.

The preservation of traditional cultural values could be one factor that contributed to Shandong's large population, which made it a target for local governments during the implementation of the one-child policy.

Unfortunately, Shandong also witnessed some of the most horrific adaptations of the one-child policy by local government officials. Between May 1st and August 10th, 1991, in Shen Xian and Guan Xian, Shandong province, a mass forced abortion campaign was conducted by two local officials, Zeng Zhaoqi (曾昭起) and Bai Zhigang (白志刚).

These officials initiated the Childless Hundred Days movement as a brutal means to control population growth within the city. Pregnant women during this period were forcibly subjected to abortions, regardless of whether the child they carried was their legally permitted first-born or not. Any child born during this time was also killed. A slogan used during this period encapsulated the extreme approach: "宁愿血流成河，不愿多生一个" (Rather have a river of blood than one more child be born) (Dai & Zheng, 2018). Many women who underwent forced abortions suffered severe psychological trauma. Local residents reported that the number of aborted babies exceeded the capacity of local hospitals, leading the responsible officials to dispose of their bodies in abandoned corners or wells.

Zeng and Bai were temporarily promoted for their role in enforcing the one-child policy and achieving remarkable results in population reduction.

Official reports regarding this movement were later removed, but records indicate that tens of thousands of children were killed during this campaign. Their lifeless bodies were found piled up at the bottom of abandoned wells, where they were left exposed. The sight of wild dogs carrying the corpses of these babies became distressingly common.

This movement instilled widespread panic among the local population, resulting in a significant decrease in the birth rate in Shandong province during the 1990s. This decline served as evidence of the existence of the Childless Hundred Days movement.

### *3.3.2.2 Further Brutal Enforcement in Linyi, Shandong, 2005*

In 2005, another distressing case of brutal enforcement of the one-child policy emerged in Linyi, a city within Shandong Province. It was reported that at least 7,000 individuals underwent forced sterilization, and the methods employed were shockingly extreme, including police kidnapping and the use of toxic substances to poison the fetus (Watts, 2005).

The local government in Linyi was determined to control the local birth rate and resorted to hostage-taking, targeting family members of potentially "illegally pregnant" couples. These hostages were coerced into contacting their families who had fled the city, compelling them to return to Linyi to face punishment. There were multiple accounts of citizens who failed to meet the government's demands being subjected to violence, with some losing their lives in the process. Many citizens reported being forced to attend mandatory educational programs that emphasized the importance of adhering to the one-child policy. However, these programs were not free, and each participant had to pay 100 RMB per day for the lectures. Failure to provide this amount of money to the authorities was seen as a refusal to acknowledge the violation of the birth control policy, resulting in even harsher punishment.

The case eventually gained attention in Beijing through the efforts of renowned human rights activist Chen Guangcheng and other victims of the unjust treatment. According to Chinese law, the punishment for exceeding the allowed number of children under the one-child policy should have been a financial penalty, not the loss of reproductive function or compromising health through poisoning. The Beijing Central government launched an investigation into the incident, but the outcome was not publicly announced. The only official information provided by the central government was that the responsible officials had been appropriately punished (Asianews, 2005). Some argue that the seemingly silent reaction and lack of public response from the central government were attempts to deescalate the situation, while others contend that it could be interpreted as silent approval of the harsh implementation of the one-child policy.

Without credible records, it is difficult to determine the true intentions behind the central government's inaction. However, it is evident that the authority granted to local governments to create localized adaptations of the one-child policy can be easily abused, leaving powerless citizens defenseless and voiceless.

### *3.3.2.3 The Orphans of Shao*

The case of the Shao orphans in Hunan province sheds light on a distressing reality surrounding the adoption process and the exploitation of financial gains by local governments under the one-child policy.

These children, given the surname Shao, were waiting in orphanages for adoption by international families who paid significant adoption fees. These children believed they were orphans and found happiness with their new families, unaware that their birth parents were still waiting for their return. The revelation of this secret came to light in 2006 through a Hong Kong news outlet and again in 2011 by another news agency.

The local government used various methods to handle illegal births under the one-child policy, including tearing down the homes of citizens as a form of deterrence. However, the case of the Shao orphans goes beyond local governments merely following a political policy—it was driven by economic motives under the guise of a social maintenance fee (Pang, 2015).

According to the government's explanation, the social maintenance fee was meant to contribute to community resources such as local infrastructure, education, and healthcare. However, in reality, the fee was collected as a means for the local government to generate additional revenue. The fee amounts were arbitrarily determined based on the financial capability of families and were subject to change over time, making it difficult for many families to fulfill the payment requirements (Li, 2011).

Before the social maintenance fee was fully paid, children in question would be temporarily taken away and placed in local orphanages, with professionals caring for them while awaiting the completion of payment by the parents. However, unbeknownst to the parents, their children were marked as unwanted orphans and put up for international adoption, from which the local government gained further profit.

Not all of these children were deemed illegal according to the central government's definition. For instance, one of the Shao orphans was taken away by local government workers while her family was holding her and walking down the street. The reason for her removal was that her birth parents were not legally married and could not afford the maintenance fee. The only successful case of a Shao orphan being returned to their family involved a previously abandoned boy who was adopted by a local Chinese family. This outcome was achieved only because the family had social connections with influential individuals in the government. For families without such connections, their only option was to gather a large sum of money within a short period and await the orders of the local government.

To this day, many birth parents continue to wait for their children's return, with limited information indicating that their children were adopted by families in foreign countries such as the United States and the Netherlands. Many of these children are unaware that their birth families long for a reunion, having grown up believing they were orphans adopted from China.

The case of the Shao orphans highlights the complex and troubling aspects of the adoption process and the exploitation of financial gains by local governments. It reveals the pain experienced by birth parents who are still hoping for a reunion with their children, despite the children being unaware of their birth families' existence.

#### *3.3.2.4 Reflection on Local Implementations*

It should be noted that the extreme cases of abuse of power by local governments cannot be regarded as representative of the original intention of the one-child policy or other birth planning and control policies implemented in China.

However, these events offer valuable insights into the varied experiences of Chinese women under the one-child policy, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the subject. While we will now explore the positive impacts of the one-child policy on the empowerment of Chinese women, it is essential to maintain awareness of the extreme cases that have caused harm to innocent individuals. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis, enabling a more informed examination of policies such as the three-child policy.

### 3.4 One-child Policy and Women's Empowerment

Based on the information provided, it is evident why the one-child policy is often associated with its negative impact on Chinese women and their reproductive rights.

For instance, it may be challenging for many readers to comprehend that while Chinese women are often portrayed as victims of birthing policies, they are also purported to experience the highest level of gender equality in Asia (UNFPA, 2021). This divergence in characterization and assessment arises from varying framings and definitions of equality, as well as the intersecting experiences of Chinese women.

Therefore, I would like to challenge this common perception and highlight that the experiences of women under the one-child policy were more complex than a simple dichotomy. While stories and stereotypes that conform to the narrative of the one-child policy's harm garnered significant attention, it is important to recognize that the policy did, in some ways, empower certain groups of Chinese women. It is crucial to acknowledge that although the benefits experienced by one group of women cannot justify the harm inflicted upon other citizens, both sets of experiences are valid and should be taken into account when assessing the effects of the policy.

Building upon the premise discussed in Chapter 3, it becomes apparent that the deeply ingrained preference for sons in Chinese society could not be changed easily within one generation. However, the one-child policy unexpectedly served as an external force that accelerated the empowerment process for many Chinese women, particularly in the realms of education, career opportunities, and cultural customs related to marriage.

#### 3.4.1 One Step Towards Equality?

Under the one-child policy, the younger generation of Chinese women experienced a shift in societal attitudes towards gender equality compared to their mothers and grandmothers. Mao's famous quote during the Cultural Revolution, "Women hold up half the sky," marked the beginning of a political campaign aimed at providing more opportunities for Chinese women and recognizing them as equals in labor production and other aspects of life (Du, 2022).

These campaigns served as soft measures to encourage voluntary participation in the birth control policies. Chinese women under the one-child policy were expected to challenge traditional gender roles: while the traditional expectation placed on women in Chinese society was to focus on domestic affairs and assume the role of the primary caregiver, giving birth to multiple children and dedicating themselves to child-rearing, the one-child policy actively encouraged women to develop their capacities and seize the opportunities that accompanied the economic reforms initiated in 1978.

With governmental support, countless posters, and art creations were spreading across the country, portraying women in extremely positive lights as contrary to the traditional views of “Men and women are different, and therefore should keep a distance from each other” (Li, 2022).

The political intention behind these campaigns might not be as altruistic as it seems, but it cannot take away the fact that many Chinese women were able to be given the chance to study, work, and create their own life to become more than just a mother- while that is a complete noble choice of life, it does need to be a choice, to begin with.

However, the advancement of women's empowerment under the one-child policy varied based on the primary economic activity in different regions. In one research conducted between 1996 and 1998 in two rural counties in three Chinese provinces (Jiangsu, Anhui, and Yunnan) with varying economic conditions revealed contrasting levels of women's participation in local economic activities. In the urban Jiangsu area with better economic development, there was a growing involvement of women in economic activities. However, in areas where the primary economic activity was related to agricultural labor, women were comparatively less financially independent (Hardee et al., 2004).

It is important to note that rural Chinese women, particularly those from older generations, have often been characterized as adhering to traditional norms and expressing support for larger family sizes. However, interviews conducted with these women revealed their regret about the lack of access to family planning methods during their childbearing years. They acknowledged their desire to have fewer children but cited a dearth of knowledge and means to practice contraception (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 5). The research findings further demonstrate that in the urban area of Jiangsu, approximately 73% to 75% of the respondents displayed contentment with the one-child policy, indicating satisfaction with their current number of children and showing no strong indication of son preference. In contrast, in Anhui and Yunnan, 54% to 58% of women who had one son and no daughter, and 31% to 50% of women who had one daughter and no son, expressed contentment with their family size. These findings reveal that women, particularly those in rural areas, face a dilemma as they navigate between compliance with governmental mandates and adhering to the societal convention of son preference.

These findings shed light on the regional disparities in women's empowerment and access to reproductive health resources within the context of the one-child policy. While certain areas experienced economic progress and increased opportunities for women, particularly in urban settings, rural areas, primarily reliant on agriculture, exhibited significant gaps in terms of financial independence and access to family planning services.



Moreover, these findings provide nuanced insights into the lived experiences of Chinese women under the one-child policy. It is important to note that this research, based on a selected group of women from three Chinese provinces, cannot be considered representative enough to draw conclusions on behalf of all Chinese women who experienced the policy. Nonetheless, it serves as an illustrative example, underscoring the complexity of their lived experiences and personal choices that warrant further investigation.

### 3.4.2 The Only Daughters

The one-child policy has frequently faced criticism due to its association with the phenomenon commonly referred to as "missing girls." This term encapsulates the distressing reality in which a significant number of female infants were either subjected to infanticide or relinquished for adoption. These outcomes were influenced by the policy's restrictions on family size and the prevailing preference for male offspring. Remarkably, on popular social media platforms such as TikTok and Reddit, a multitude of Chinese adoptees residing abroad have taken to sharing their personal adoption narratives, frequently attributing the one-child policy as a significant factor in their adoption experiences.

While it is indeed true that the one-child policy may have contributed to certain instances of adoption, it is crucial to acknowledge that it is not the exclusive or direct cause of such abandonments. Many Chinese families consciously chose not to strictly adhere to the regulations imposed by the policy. Despite harboring the desire for larger families and the inclusion of both sons and daughters, they did not utilize the policy as a justification for forsaking their daughters.

Consequently, the implementation of the one-child policy has also given rise to another noteworthy social phenomenon within China—the prevalence of "only children." Within this group, there exists a subset comprising women who are the sole daughters in their respective families.

Drawing from my personal lived experience as a girl growing up in China, it becomes evident that there exist distinct intersections within the population of Chinese only daughters. One notable distinction lies in the circumstances surrounding their birth, often influenced by the pressure exerted by government enforcement. These individuals are commonly referred to as passive only daughters, as their parents would have preferred to have sons if not for the strict implementation of the one-child policy.

A shared experience among many only daughters is the sense of disappointment expressed by their families in relation to their biological sex. Comments such as "if only you were a boy" or "too bad you were not a boy" frequently permeate their lives. However, due to the limitations on the number of children permitted per family, the parents of these passive only daughters strive to provide them with every possible resource to ensure their success. It is as if their daughters are engaged in a competitive dynamic with other individuals' sons, and their parents are fervently determined to demonstrate that their daughters are equally capable and that they will not fall short as parents.

Undoubtedly, the circumstances surrounding only daughters generate a considerable amount of pressure on them. Research indicates that Chinese only children already face an unprecedented level of pressure within their families and in societal competitions (Liu et al., 2005). As the sole hope of their entire family, every action they take is subject to intense scrutiny. Moreover, with the escalating competitiveness of Chinese society, these only children encounter even greater levels of pressure.

The burden on only daughters extends beyond the pressure to succeed as the sole hope of their family. They are also expected to conform to traditional societal values associated with women. Despite the need to excel academically and professionally, they are still anticipated to embody feminine values and traits (F. Liu, 2006). This amalgamation of traditional gender expectations may give the impression of gender-neutral parenting; however, it paradoxically engenders confusion and heightened pressure for the only daughters on an individual level (Tsui & Rich, 2002).

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that only daughters have been afforded greater opportunities for higher education and competitiveness in their careers (Fong, 2002). These opportunities may not have been as readily accessible if they had grown up with brothers. According to societal conventions, family resources and expectations tend to be concentrated on sons, regardless of their birth order. As a result, daughters often face disadvantages in terms of skill development and access to resources.

By being the sole focus of their parents' aspirations and investments, only daughters have been able to harness the advantages of concentrated resources and support. This has enabled them to pursue higher education and excel in their chosen fields, which may have been more challenging if they had siblings, particularly brothers. Under such a social system, many Chinese women were able to become top elite sportswomen (Jinxia, 2002), and along with the low fertility rate under the birth control policies, many mothers were able to have their own careers besides childrearing (Fong, 2002). This empowerment was manifested through the cultivation of flexible gender identities, enabling women to compete with their male counterparts within the Chinese market economy (Kim et al., 2018) and fostering more balanced gender expectations in many urban areas (Kim & Fong, 2014).

Thus, the one-child policy, inadvertently, has contributed to providing unique opportunities for only daughters in terms of education and career advancement.

### 3.4.3 The New Marriage Culture

Another aspect of gender equality achieved through the one-child policy relates to cultural norms surrounding marriage. As discussed earlier, traditional Chinese values regarding marriage did not typically provide women with equal footing.

Weiguo Zhang, a professor of the Department of Sociology from University of Toronto has carried out research to explore the changes the one-child policy brought upon the traditional folk practices of marriage. Zhang collected qualitative data through interviews and focus group discussions between 2002 and 2004 in three different counties in Hebei province. In this research, Zhang explored the intersection between state, family, and gender, more specifically traditional gender role that was assigned to Chinese women. Throughout the data collection process, Zhang has noticed the process of negotiation that happened between Chinese women and the traditional norms under the old patriarchal system: with the new social structure given by the state regulation, booming opportunity for women to participate in economic activities and the changing ideologies within each community have helped Chinese citizens to re-examine their traditional values and community structures. The interplay of these factors, resulted in the enhancement of daughter-natal kin ties which also in turn, changed the relationship Chinese women had with their marital families:

When they were no longer seen as additional members of their marital families, with closer social connection with their natal family, the Chinese women also received more support in event of divorce (Y. Zeng & Wu, 2000). As a result of this, getting a divorce is no longer seen as a shameful event where the women would have no one to turn to- since they were considered “spilt water” that cannot be taken back by their natal family- records and stories show that more Chinese women were helped and supported by their natal families in time of need.

Zhang has observed daughters visiting their natal families two to three times a week, since the responsibility of caring for aging parents naturally fell on the shoulders of the only child that the family has. While this can be seen as an additional burden and responsibility for these women, it also provided them with the opportunity to maintain contact with their natal families and communities, affording them more choices instead of being forcibly disconnected from an important part of their lives.

## Chapter 4 The Three-child Policy

The termination of the one-child policy generated widespread hope both within China and internationally. Many observers, particularly from Western nations, interpreted it as an indication of significant improvements in the status of Chinese women, given the government's prioritization of their reproductive rights.

Under the new policy, all Chinese couples are allowed to have a third child regardless of their urban or rural residency, ethnic background; the language that was used to describe marriage age and childbirth was changed into “appropriate” - aiming to remind women of their most fertile ages.

However, I contend that the cessation of stringent birth control policies and the implementation of a more relaxed birth planning policy, such as the three-child policy, should not be solely attributed to humanitarian considerations. The central government's limited response to popular doubts and criticisms suggests that the decision was not driven by purely humanitarian motives. Instead, it marks the beginning of a new form of instrumentalization of Chinese women:

The apparent openness of the policy, allowing women to exercise choice over their own bodies, masks the underlying reality that women, particularly those aspiring to advance their careers, are compelled to sacrifice their personal choices to address national demographic concerns. The positive impacts that were once brought on by the one-child policy, is again being challenged for the shift of narrative.

In contrast to the demographic crisis that prompted the implementation of the one-child policy, the three-child policy has given rise to a fresh set of challenges, some of which can be directly traced back to the overarching influence of the previous one-child policy.

## 4.1 New Demographic issues

### 4.1.1 The Declining Birth Rate and Intention for Marriage

One of the main factors challenging the implementation of the one-child policy was the deeply ingrained traditional value of familism in Chinese society, which fostered a desire for larger families and the preference for male offspring to uphold the family name. However, it appears that the youngest generation of Chinese citizens is showing less enthusiasm for marriage and having children.

China's current birth rate has been steadily declining, seemingly reflecting the desired outcome of the one-child policy. However, the overall birth rate remains low, with approximately 10.645 births per 1,000 individuals in 2023, reaching another historical low (United Nations, 2023). According to data published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the population of mainland China was 1.411 billion at the end of 2022, marking a decrease of 850,000 compared to the previous year. This represents the first recorded population decline in China's history (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023).

Although China's population still stands at a massive 1.4 billion, the declining birth rate signifies more than just statistical changes—it signals a shift in social values that will shape the future development of Chinese society. One prominent concern relates to China's future economic growth. While China rapidly transformed its financial landscape and became the world's factory within a matter of decades, its large population and abundant supply of young, low-cost labor played a significant role in its success. However, with population decline and the rapid advancement of industrial and artificial technologies, many fear that this could mark the end of an era for China, diminishing its competitive power on the global market (Hernandez, 2023).

#### *4.1.1.1 Lack of Intention for Marriage and Children*

One contributing factor to the declining birth rate in China is the reluctance of the younger generation, particularly women, to marry and start families. These individuals exhibit a stronger inclination towards independence and building stable careers, with being a stay-at-home mother not being a priority for them (Jacob, 2023).

In interviews with CNBC regarding career choices among Chinese women, many interviewees expressed concerns about the burden of motherhood. While childcare should ideally be a shared responsibility between parents, there is a perception that Chinese husbands often do not play a significant role in raising their children.

The interplay between traditional cultural rituals and modern adaptations of gender roles has sparked controversies and debates regarding the family dynamics- since it would be almost impossible for one earner to support the life of an entire family in many urban areas, Chinese women need to take on the financial role for practical reasons, they are also expected to fulfill the traditional gender role of completing the domestic tasks.

While the characterization of urban Chinese women as choosing to be child-free is supported by various sources that could show the declining birth rate, it is important to acknowledge the limitations imposed by various factors. Many Chinese women desire the experience of motherhood but face increasing pressure to choose between their careers and starting a family. Chinese female CEO Jane Sun described the limited time frame of approximately seven to eight years for women to accomplish significant life goals such as career development, starting a family, and having children before reaching the optimal age for childbearing. Many career-oriented women in China are confronted with the difficult decision of choosing one over the other (Jacob, 2023).

#### *4.1.1.2 Growing Economic Pressure*

Another concern among the younger generation is the escalating economic pressures. In Chinese tradition, couples are expected to have a place to live before starting a family. Owning property is not only a matter of social status but also an indication of stability, which many Chinese communities strive to achieve. However, housing costs in China, particularly in larger cities with better economic prospects, have become notoriously high, creating housing price bubbles in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Hou, 2010; u & Li, 2014). Many families must bear the burden of housing loans for several years just to secure a place to live. Additionally, the Hukou system mentioned in the previous section limits couples' ability to register their children for future education based on their place of birth.

On top of the lack of housing stability, the Chinese social security system is still in the process of development: retirement, medical care, and children's education have been weighing on the heart of many people, earning them to scrimp and increase their own saving in case of emergency (Xu & Li, 2014). The lack of systematic support for young individuals or couples in their career development further hinders their willingness to settle down and start a family.

#### *4.1.1.3 Toxic Competitiveness*

In addition to the aforementioned factors, the increasing competitiveness within mainland China has added to the challenges faced by the younger generation. Although the People's Republic of China claims to be a socialist country, ever since the 1978 economic reform, many aspects of the economic development are closely related to capitalism and its exploitative ways of managing employees. For example, the "996 working system" that was endorsed by one of China's richest businessmen Jack Ma, said to be "a blessing to the workers", shows the toxic environment and social culture for work-life balance many Chinese workers have to face.

"996" refers to the intensive working schedule of working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week- this was not just a proposal, it is the common setup for many big technology companies and start-ups who would like to have competitive power in the Chinese market (S. Wang & Shane, 2019). With intensive working schedules as such, workers simply do not have time to have children or to participate in their family lives.

Ma's statement has generated significant controversy among ordinary Chinese workers. Many young people have adopted the self-identification of "Chinese chives," a vegetable that grows rapidly and is easily exploited. The term was initially coined by retail investors who had lost their life savings in the stock market, but it has since been embraced by those who perceive themselves as bottom-level workers struggling to make a livable wage. They liken their existence to that of chives, emphasizing their powerlessness and the difficulty of escaping their circumstances (China Digital Times, 2018).

Humor is often employed as a coping mechanism to mask the harsh realities they are forced to confront. They believe that the younger generation is being treated as a commodity for exploitation by the capitalist world. Their hard-earned money is taken without hesitation by the system, while their children are compelled to grow up in challenging conditions, destined to become another generation of chives.

These individuals experience less joy in life while providing greater benefits to the wealthiest individuals who exploit cheap labor. Various online discussions within the Chinese online community reveal that Chinese netizens are deeply concerned about their children's quality of life and express a desire for them to avoid a future of being exploited as low-wage laborers.

#### 4.1.2 Skewed Sex Ratio

Although it would be unfair to attribute the preference for sons solely to birth control policies such as the one-child policy, it cannot be denied that these policies created a situation where parents felt compelled to make a choice. Even after the 2010s, when instances of infanticide became rare, technology was employed to fulfill the desire for sons over daughters.

The Chinese government recognized the issue of skewed sex ratios and the preference for sons among its citizens. As a result, since the 1990s, it has been illegal for expecting parents to undergo medical procedures that reveal the biological sex of the unborn baby. While the policy was challenging to enforce at the local level and many parents resorted to bribery to obtain the information, it did serve to limit access to such procedures.

However, reports from the Beijing Evening News indicate the emergence of illegal gender reveal practices in new industries. Some of these involve sending blood samples to Hong Kong, where gender reveal restrictions do not exist, to obtain the information. Additionally, local photo centers offer sonogram photo shoots for expecting parents, providing them with photos for memory keeping along with baby products in blue or pink, indicative of the baby's gender. If parents receive blue baby socks, they know they are expecting a son.

Although these methods are not always accurate, many parents still choose to utilize these services. Some claim curiosity as their motivation, while others argue practical reasons, such as preparing the baby room or acquiring necessary products in the appropriate color. However, it cannot be denied that many parents use this information to decide whether to undergo abortion if the unborn baby does not match their desired biological sex.

The skewed sex ratio not only reflects the enduring preference for sons in China but also gives rise to societal issues that pose a danger to the general public. By the end of 2020, there were approximately 30 million more adult Chinese men than women. Previous research has shown a correlation between a large number of violent crimes and young, low-status, single men. These men and their desire to enter marriage have also contributed to rising local housing prices and an increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, due to engagement with illegal sex workers.



One notable consequence of the skewed sex ratio is the presence of single men, particularly in rural villages with limited economic conditions and a strong preference for sons. In these areas, previous generations actively abandoned daughters while keeping sons, without considering the future challenges these boys would face in finding spouses, especially within the context of the heteronormative marital system prevalent in mainland China. These single men in rural areas are referred to as "bare branches," denoting their single status and difficulty in finding partners.

Unable to find suitable mates, some of these men resort to illegal methods such as human trafficking to address the imbalance of available "women" as resources. The Chinese police have been combating this issue for years, but international human trafficking operations disguised as "true love that transcends cultural differences" have emerged. Women from Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar are primary targets of these operations.

Research conducted by Huang examined the experiences of 45 trafficked women from Myanmar between 2000 and 2019. These women, in an extremely vulnerable position, are victims in both China and their home country. As they were purchased to fulfill the traditional duties of a Chinese wife and bear children, most of these women were forced into motherhood. Estimating the total number of cases is challenging, as most incidents occur in remote Chinese villages where the community collaborates to conceal their illegal activities from authorities. According to official data from Myanmar, over 3,000 people were trafficked to China between 2006 and 2016.

These issues provide only a glimpse of the problems arising from the skewed sex ratio. While this demographic challenge has a long history in China, the recent escalation is presenting new and complex variations of problems that the Chinese population lacks experience in addressing.

#### 4.2 Three-child policy and Women's Empowerment

The implementation of the three-child policy was introduced as a response to the demographic crisis and the need to increase the birth rate in China. When the policy was first announced, some Chinese media headlines were direct, such as "The Three-Child Policy Has Arrived! Are You Ready to Give Birth?" However, interviews with individuals born between the 1970s and 2000s revealed concerns about raising more than one child due to financial constraints. Many expressed that they did not have the financial capacity to support additional children and, therefore, would not follow the direction of the policy (Fincher, 2021).

This situation is rather ironic, as some women who were willing to have children in the past were restricted by the one-child policy, leading to physical and mental harm. Two decades later, when the country is facing labor shortages and other demographic issues, the younger generation of Chinese women is being blamed as "irresponsible and selfish" for not wanting to become mothers.

In an official report addressing the ongoing population crisis and the impending aging society, the Jiangsu provincial authorities placed blame on the increase in women's educational levels. This blame-shifting strategy holds women responsible for a complex issue created by various economic, social, and cultural factors (M. Fong & Wang, 2022).

This approach puts women's rights to education and career at odds with population growth. If the declining population is attributed to the high educational attainment of Chinese women, the most direct solution would be to limit educational resources for women, forcing them to prioritize domestic responsibilities.

In response to this regressive tendency towards women's empowerment, the Chinese online community often compares it to foot-binding, an inhumane practice that deformed the feet of women to restrict their growth. The comment "So, no more foot-binding, but brain-binding now?" highlights the direction in which the three-child policy is being implemented. It suggests that those in power are willing to sacrifice women's rights once again, but this time by requiring them to have more children.

To navigate the current impact of the three-child policy and estimate its potential influence, it is important to recognize that the policy may be a blessing for families and women who desire larger families. Without the financial penalties that were in place during the one-child and two-child policies, these families may experience less pressure when exercising their reproductive rights; therefore, they are not the most direct influenced group under the policy and its following campaigns.

However, the group of Chinese women who are not willing to have children are being targeted and blamed for an issue that should be the responsibility of the state. There have been assumptions made by demographers and research that the Chinese government has not yet remove all the restrictions towards birth planning, because they do not just want increasing birth rate in general, they wish to promote birth rate in urban areas, from families with high educational background but are currently unwilling to produce bigger families (Fincher, 2021). There have been remarks given on state media, using unscientific reports to blame the birth of babies with birth defects on their mothers "who had their first child at an older age, and therefore, do not have the best physical condition to provide nutrition for their babies."

However, to this assumption, I would like to remind critical since there are no direct evidence to show that couples in the rural areas are experiencing any setback when they building bigger families since the punishments related to the previous birth control policies have been removed; but I do agree that the three-child policy and its existing campaign is indeed targeting career women, women who would like to continue their education and women who do not wish to become mothers for personal reasons.

Therefore, given the additional campaign and social discussions surrounding the three-child policy, I predict that the three-child policy would have the following negative impact on the process of women's empowerment:

#### 4.2.1 Regressive Social Narrative and Encouraging Births

The success of the three-child policy is not easily guaranteed: in order for people to have three children in China, it is important for couples to be legally married, be willing to have two children before they could be motivated to have a third child. Many reports and interviews have showed the strong opposition opinion many Chinese women held towards the three-child policy (Fincher, 2021; Yang, 2021; Attané, 2022).

As Attané has explained, the target women the three-child policy wants to reach are the highly educated women who are currently unwilling to have children and to take on the maternal role. But for these women who are already independent and have received education regarding the importance of establishing their own career, they grew up under the social narrative during the one-child policy: focusing on the importance of quality education instead of the number of children- it would be very difficult to change their mind overnight.

Besides that, without other additional policies to help reduce the practical issues regarding childcare, education and work-life balance, many couples are not capable of having bigger families even if they would like to do so. Based on a cross-sectional Internet-based survey that was conducted on a national level, targeting young people from the age of 18 to 28 years old who are still in the field of academia, despite the lack of policy restricts, a majority of the interviewees are showing low fertility intentions due to anxiety over childbirth and parenthood (C. Zhang et al., 2022).

What is really necessary for the improvement of fertility intention is to create support and services, to reduce economic pressure- but since the process of having fundamental structural changes would be long and difficult, for now, the additional campaign that has been carried out in China surrounding the three-child policy is pointing towards the direction of “peer pressuring” Chinese women into becoming mothers:

The current social discussion surrounding the three-child policy in China is taking a different direction compared to the positive impact of the one-child policy on the social position of Chinese women. After the official release of the three-child policy, one media company released an advertisement featuring interviews with eight fathers, asking them to list the reasons why they would like to have three children. Additionally, there have been organized slogan competitions on Chinese media, encouraging people to create slogans that would boost participation in the three-child policy.

During the advertising campaign, the interviewees were fathers ranging in age from 27 to 51. They appeared confident, happy, and used a lighthearted tone to describe the reasons why they believed having a larger family would be a blessing. However, a fundamental issue with this video is the complete lack of voice for women in the process. Concerns regarding intense educational competition, the role of fathers in childcare, health risks for women over the age of 40, and the sacrifice of their wives' careers were all dismissed easily by the men in the interviews. They offered simplistic and implausible solutions such as "if we get up early in the morning for exercises, keep an eye on nutrition, we will be able to have a smooth childbirth." This narrative, which purposefully ignored the position and experiences of women in the process of childbirth and childcare, received significant negative responses from the public.

This one-sided portrayal that disregarded the concerns and experiences of women in the decision-making process highlights the need for a more inclusive and balanced discussion regarding the three-child policy. It is crucial to consider the perspectives and voices of women, as they play a significant role in the challenges and implications associated with raising multiple children.

#### 4.2.2 “Leftover Women”

Despite the potential efficacy of the three-child policy in increasing the birth rate, it is crucial to examine the social narratives that exert pressure on women to marry and become mothers, as they can significantly impact interpersonal dynamics. In Chinese society, women face disparagement as they approach the age of 25 to 30, commonly referred to as "leftover women" (Fincher, 2014). This derogatory term not only objectifies women, reducing them to commodities for men to choose from, but also reflects deeper societal standards. The primary measure of a woman's worth is often tied to her role in child-rearing, and as she ages, her social value is perceived to diminish due to increased risks during childbirth and potential adverse effects on children's health.

A notable incident occurred in March 2011 when the Chinese Women's Federation website posted a controversial statement shortly after International Women's Day:

*"Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or unattractive appearance will find it difficult. These girls strive to pursue higher education in order to enhance their competitiveness. The tragedy is that they fail to recognize that as women age, their worth diminishes. By the time they obtain their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already considered old, like yellowed pearls."*

This public insult received widespread criticism for its misogynistic intent and disrespectful dehumanization of women. Even state-supported media and popular TV series contribute to normalizing the term "leftover women" by portraying stereotypical characters who prioritize their careers but ultimately regret their life choices, further perpetuating the belittlement of women (Fang, 2012).

With the implementation of the three-child policy in mainland China, concerns over women's age and fertility have intensified. Considering that the optimal childbearing age is believed to be before 30, allowing one to two years between each child for maternal recovery, and the average age of university graduation being around 22, Chinese women are left with limited time to develop their careers and enjoy a single lifestyle. The state media has once again, created even more campaigns, cartoons, sexist articles shaming women over the age of 27, showing remarks to encourage women to limit their career choices and education, to prioritize getting married before their “best age has passed” (Fincher, 2021).

This narrative is not only harmful for women who are considered to be “leftover” women or older, it is also imposing a very damaging idea to the younger generation of Chinese girls when they are dreaming about their futures and forming their identity: when girls grew up hearing that “women can hold up half of the sky”, they would dream of enhancing their abilities, making valuable contributions to the society; but if they grow up fearing that their value would be evaluated by their appearance or age, their development is doomed to be limited to the traditional expectations women, not having the choices to explore their own capacity.

The Chinese feminist movement has witnessed a surge in online support communities where young women can connect and share their experiences regarding sexist ideologies and the societal pressures they face in terms of marriage and childbirth. However, the introduction of the three-child policy and its associated campaigns have also emboldened individuals who adhere to conservative family values, leading to the expression of misogynistic views. These individuals often take advantage of the anonymity provided by the internet to post malicious comments targeting women. In some cases, these online attacks have escalated to the point of doxing, with young women who have achieved high academic accomplishments becoming the targets. The severity of these incidents prompted the Chinese authorities to launch a Cleanup Campaign, but its impact has been limited in addressing the lasting damage caused and the deep-rooted biases against women that have been further exacerbated by the three-child policy and the pro-birth campaigns (Tone, 2023).

#### 4.2.3 Workplace Gender Discrimination

Despite the increased opportunities for urban Chinese women to participate in economic activities, prejudice against working women has not been completely eradicated; instead, it has been concealed during national campaigns aimed at encouraging women to enter the workforce.

A survey conducted by the largest online recruiting service in China revealed that approximately 40% of childless working women in the country had no plans to have children in the future. Many expressed concerns about the challenges of returning to their careers after childbirth (Fincher, 2021).

During job searches, female candidates frequently encounter questions about their marital status and family planning intentions. They are asked about the number of children they want, whether they would prioritize family over career, the duration of their recovery after childbirth, and the length of their maternity leave (Yeung & Gan, 2021).

Instances of job discrimination based on women's marital and parental status have been reported frequently in recent years. Although China technically has anti-discrimination laws in place, the enforcement has not been sufficient to eliminate the uncomfortable position faced by women (Fincher, 2021).

The situation has been further exacerbated by the two-child policy. With the elimination of the strict one-child policy, employers have expressed concerns that female employees may shift their priorities away from work. The encouragement for women to have children, coupled with the potential implementation of the three-child policy, is likely to hinder the personal and professional development of many Chinese women.

Melody Chen, a manager at an internet finance firm in Guangzhou, noted that her initial reaction to the three-child policy was that it would further restrict women's space in the workplace. Many Chinese companies and employers are reluctant to provide maternity leave benefits and view childless women as potential liabilities. If women were to have three children, their maternity leave duration would inevitably increase. Although the official national maternity leave in China is currently set at 98 days, with an additional 15 days for multiple births, it still poses challenges for working women (Fincher, 2021; Yeung & Gan, 2021).

Given the lack of policy support for working women and how they could balance their role as active contributor to the economy and mothers, it is rather clear that even though the three-child policy does provide room for empowerment for some Chinese women, it did not take their situation into consideration, resulting in the three-child policy potentially creating a huge setback to the career women (Fakude, 2021).

### 4.3 Discussion

Considering the historical context and the potential repercussions, there is a legitimate concern regarding the implementation of additional measures to further increase childbirth in China. The past implementation of the one-child policy by local governments raises apprehension about the potential impact on the empowerment of Chinese women, particularly those pursuing careers in a patriarchal societal setting.

Recent accounts shared on Weibo, an online platform for discussions and opinions, have shed light on women's experiences with local hospitals in various provinces. These accounts reveal a common pattern: during the marriage registration process, women are required to undergo medical examinations at these hospitals, which involve the collection of personal information such as marriage date, contact details, and relevant medical history<sup>5</sup>. Subsequently, these women receive periodic phone calls from the hospitals, inquiring about their menstrual cycles, intentions to have children, and discouraging them from seeking abortions. Some doctors even make alarming statements, suggesting a link between not having children and the development of cancerous cells. Many women have expressed offense at these intrusive questions, questioning why such personal information is being demanded and why there is such an obsession with women's reproductive choices. Netizens have remarked on the situation, emphasizing their autonomy as independent individuals and rejecting the notion of being reduced to mere "baby machines."

While the current legal access to abortion remains unchanged, it is important to note that the new Marriage Law in China, implemented in 2021, has imposed restrictions on divorces. Couples now face a mandatory "cool-down" period of 30 days before they can proceed with divorce proceedings. This regulation was introduced as an attempt to curb the rising divorce rate but has also raised concerns about potential abuse and domestic violence (Davidson, 2021).

It is evident that such regulations, aimed at increasing the birth rate or lowering the divorce rate, may not address the underlying issues and could be temporary solutions designed to present favorable statistics without considering the well-being and individual experiences of the people involved. There is a fear that similar legislation, motivated by the desire to raise birth rates, may be implemented, potentially exacerbating the historical challenges surrounding birth planning and control in China. While it is hoped that such concerns are unfounded, the historical context warrants vigilance and consideration of potential outcomes.

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<sup>5</sup> The original post could be found on Weibo: <https://weibo.com/1746958511/4906418219521052>



## Chapter 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research on the three-child policy and its impact on gender equality, analyzed through a feminist lens, reveals a complex and evolving situation for women in China. The one-child policy, unintentionally, brought about certain benefits for women's empowerment by allowing them to pursue education and career opportunities. However, the introduction of the three-child policy threatens to erode some of these gains.

The one-child policy inadvertently challenged traditional gender norms and expectations by providing women with increased opportunities for education and employment. It allowed them to break free from the societal pressure to solely focus on childrearing, leading to improved social status and greater autonomy. This unintentional consequence of the one-child policy can be seen as a step towards gender equality.

However, the implementation of the three-child policy takes a different trajectory. Rather than building on the progress made in women's empowerment, the policy reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations. The emphasis on increasing birth rates places significant pressure on women to bear multiple children, potentially compromising their educational and career aspirations. It perpetuates the notion that a woman's primary purpose is to be a mother, undermining the advancements made in challenging gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the three-child policy and the societal pressure placed on women to conform to traditional family values highlight the persistence of gender discrimination and misogyny. The derogatory term "leftover women" and the scrutiny faced by women in the workplace based on their marital and parental status demonstrate the lingering bias against women who prioritize their careers or choose not to have children.

To achieve true gender equality, it is crucial to recognize the complexities and nuances of reproductive policies and their impact on women's lives. Rather than imposing policies that reinforce traditional gender roles, a more comprehensive approach is needed. This approach should focus on creating an inclusive society that supports women's choices, provides comprehensive childcare support, and ensures equal opportunities for education and employment.

In conclusion, while the one-child policy inadvertently brought about some benefits for women's empowerment, the three-child policy risks undoing these gains and perpetuating gender inequality. It is imperative for policymakers and society as a whole to prioritize gender equality, respect women's choices, and work towards creating an environment that supports the rights and aspirations of all individuals, irrespective of their reproductive decisions.

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