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TRA AREE RURALI E URBANE.

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不孝有三，無後為大。

“There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them”.

- *Mencius, Li Lou I*

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Introduction

China's demographic journey over the last seventy years is nothing short of remarkable, showcasing one of the most dramatic shifts in population policy history. In just one lifetime, the Chinese government transitioned from Maoist pronatalism, where a booming population was seen as the nation's greatest treasure, to implementing the most extensive birth control measures the modern world has ever witnessed. Then, in less than a decade, it made a clear turn back towards promoting higher birth rates to counteract a population decline that the state itself had initiated. Few examples highlight as clearly both the power and the limitations of state influence over reproduction: a government that successfully prevented hundreds of millions of births has, so far, struggled to encourage them. This imbalance, where controlling demographics in one direction seems relatively straightforward, while the opposite proves challenging, forms the core puzzle explored throughout this dissertation.

The dissertation primarily examines the socio-demographic consequences of China's One-Child policy, focusing on declining fertility, the imbalance in the sex ratio associated with son preference, patterns of female education, marriage-market dynamics, household structure and rapid population aging.

A central aim of the thesis is to read these consequences through the lens of the urban-rural divide, showing how the same policy produced markedly different demographic, social, and familial outcomes depending on whether it was implemented in an urban or rural context.

This thesis is structured around two closely linked questions. The first one delves into the socio-demographic impact of years of birth planning: what differences can be observed between urban and rural China in the consequences of birth planning, particularly in terms of the skewed sex ratio at birth, changes in the traditional marriage market, and pressures on old-age support systems, and how can these differences be explained? The second question focuses on the government's recent shift towards promoting higher birth rates: why, despite a decade filled with legal reforms, subsidies, and administrative changes, has fertility continued to drop instead of bouncing back? Additionally, how does the ongoing urban-rural divide, which is still evident in the design, funding, and reception of these new initiatives, contribute to this ongoing challenge?

This analysis draws primarily on the findings of existing demographic, sociological, and political science research. The studies considered rely on a variety of complementary sources, including official census data, demographic estimates designed to address possible undercounting in the 2000, 2010, and 2020 censuses, and primary legal and policy documents covering the period from the 1950s to 2025. Where relevant, particular attention is given to studies employing techniques such as reverse survival estimation, which reconstructs earlier birth levels from the size and survival patterns of later observed population cohorts. Rather than conducting an original quantitative analysis of census data or primary policy documents, this thesis synthesizes and compares the empirical evidence produced by this existing literature in relation to its research questions. Attention is devoted to highlight when the studies cited in this thesis raise concerns about the accuracy of official figures, whether they suggest that fertility was underreported in the 2000s or that the success of recent pronatalist efforts was exaggerated, this is clearly stated.

The thesis further examines how the family planning campaigns, culminating in the One-Child Policy, reshaped traditional family structure, again

with divergent trajectories in urban and rural areas, while also influencing marriage patterns and the functioning of the marriage market.

To dive into these questions, the thesis unfolds across four chapters. Chapter One explores the historical foundations of China's population policy, starting with the pronatalist approach during the early Maoist era, moving through the various family planning initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, and culminating in the implementation of the One-Child Policy after 1979. It reveals that the decline in fertility often credited to the One-Child Policy was actually already in motion before it was put into place. Chapter Two outlines the geographical and administrative framework that has shaped population policy, looking at China's physical landscape, its administrative structure, and the hukou household registration system. Understanding the origins, reforms, and persistent challenges of this system is crucial to grasping why rural and urban areas in China have responded so differently to the same national policies. Chapter Three shifts focus to the social and demographic impacts of the One-Child Policy, examining the skewed sex ratio at birth driven by a preference for sons, the resulting effects on education and the marriage market, the evolution of family dynamics into the 4-2-1 model, and the unique challenges posed by an aging population, pension systems, and healthcare access in both rural and urban settings. Finally, Chapter Four reconstructs the path of China's fertility decline and its urban-rural disparities from the 1990s onward, then delves into the government's policy responses, from reproductive rights reforms in the 1990s to the pronatalist strategies of 2015-2025, evaluating why these efforts have yet to spark the demographic resurgence that policymakers were hoping for.

Finally, the thesis examines how the Chinese government is currently responding to the long-term consequences of decades of restrictive family-planning policies that began in the 1970s. It analyzes the pronatalist measures introduced in recent years as a reaction to the sharp decline in fertility rates and

considers whether these new policies adequately account for persistent asymmetry between urban and rural China.

The thesis closes with some comparative considerations on how the current change towards pronatalist policies resemble to and are different from those enunciated in the first Maoist phase, discussing their actual effectiveness and limitations in the light of how Chinese society, and the urban-rural gap itself, has changed.

Chapter 1: From Planning to Restriction: the Historical Roots and Implementation of China's One-Child Policy.

The One-Child Policy stands out as one of the most significant social policies ever put into action. To truly grasp how this measure has shaped modern Chinese society, however, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the historical context before these reforms, particularly during the Maoist Era. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government actively promoted the idea of larger families, viewing a growing population as a vital workforce for national reconstruction and socialist building. However, when the results of the first national census were released on November 1st, 1954, they showed that the population had increased very quickly, raising fears that rapid demographic growth could outstrip food supplies and economic resources. In response to these concerns, the central government issued *The Instructions on the Issue of Population Control* in 1955, which stated that "In the interests of the nation, families and future generations, the Party is in favor of taking appropriate measures for birth control"¹. Additionally, during the crucial Eighth Peoples' Congress where the economic plans for the next five years were laid out, a report directed by Prime Minister Zhou Enlai for the Second Five-Year Plan recommended that controlling of fertility was essential for sustainable economic development².

The first birth control campaign, which ran from 1954 to 1958, did not really make a noticeable dent in the national birth rate. While discussions about the campaign began to appear in the press as early as 1954, the official launch did not happen until August 1956. That was when the Ministry of Health instructed

¹ "Recent Discussion of the One-Child Policy." China Story, February 12, 2014. <https://www.thechinastory.org/cot/recent-discussions-of-the-one-child-policy/>.

² Jiang, Quanbao, Shuzhuo Li, and Marcus W. Feldman. "China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects." *Asian Journal of Social Science* 41, no. 2 (2013). p.2. doi:10.1163/15685314-12341298.

local health units to step up and help people with birth control practices. The campaign gained a significant momentum in February 1957 thanks to Mao Zedong's clear call for zero population growth. This early movement for birth planning did not last long.

Mao Zedong quickly changed his stance on fertility policy, reaffirming a conviction the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) has held since the founding of People's Republic of China: that a large population was China's greatest strength and that controlling population was fundamentally incompatible with socialist progress. This reversal was driven primarily by ideological rather than demographic considerations. Orthodox Marxist theory, which Mao and CPC, claimed to follow, explicitly rejected Malthusian arguments, as those contained in *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published by Thomas Robert Malthus in 1789, about population outpacing resources. For Marx, overpopulation was not a natural fact but a product of capitalist relations themselves, the "industrial reserve army" that capitalism generates to depress wages, not evidence that the poor bred beyond their means. Mao had made this rejection explicit as early as 1949, arguing against Malthusian pessimism that "of all things in the world, people are the most precious"³. Within this framework, a large population was not a liability but a productive force: more people meant more workers, more soldiers, and greater revolutionary and industrial capacity. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the late 50s, a political purge was initiated by Mao to silence intellectuals and critics; scholars who voiced positions at odds with official Party ideology were labeled as "Anti-Party", "Anti-socialist", and "right-wings reactionaries". Among them, Ma Yinchu, a prominent Chinese economist and the President of Peking University who advocated for systematic birth control while offering detailed insights on how to implement it, be

³ Stycos, J. Mayone. "The Second Great Wall of China: Evolution of a Successful Policy of Population Control." NPG Forum Series, October 1989. <https://npg.org/library/forum-series/the-second-great-wall-of-china-evolution-of-a-successful-policy-of-population-control/>.

came one of the campaign's prime targets: his position was condemned as an endorsement of Malthusianism, leading to his public denunciation and removal from academic and political life. This hostile political climate effectively put a stop to any further academic research and practical efforts toward developing a national population policy⁴.

However, everything changed with the onset of the Great Leap Forward in the spring of 1958. This ambitious economic and social initiative aimed to transform China into a modernized industrial powerhouse. With this new direction, Mao completely shifted his stance on population control, declaring that a large, impoverished population was not a liability, but rather a crucial asset for national growth and mobilizing the workforce⁵.

Following the disastrous economic fallout from the Great Leap Forward and the severe famine that followed between 1959 and 1961, China's leaders began to see rapid population growth as a hurdle to the nation's economic progress. This shift in perspective led to a renewed interest in birth control. By the early 1960s, state propaganda promoting birth control made a comeback, though this time it was delivered in a more tempered manner compared to the campaign of the 1950s. In 1964, to give these initiatives a solid bureaucratic foundation, formal birth control offices were set up within the central government and in various provincial governments. The second planning campaign, which ran from 1962 to 1966, saw particularly impressive outcomes in urban areas, where the birth rate was cut in half between 1963 and 1966. Unfortunately, the political and social chaos brought

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Aird, John S. "Fertility Decline and Birth Control in the People's Republic of China." *Population and Development Review* 4, no. 2 (1978): p.229. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1972279>.

by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 threw a wrench in the works, paralyzing state institutions and halting the entire bureaucratic system, which abruptly interrupted and temporarily derailed the birth control program⁶.

In 1970, the Central Political Bureau of China, which was essentially the powerhouse behind the Chinese Communist Party, recognized that managing population growth needed to be closely tied to economic planning. Consequently, in July 1973, the State Council, along with the government that implements these decisions, decided to reorganize the teams in charge of family planning. Many local governments adopted this approach, either restructuring or creating family planning divisions to encourage planned childbearing in both urban and suburban areas across the country. Then, in December 1973, *The State Council Leading Group Office of Family Planning*, set up as a temporary body to oversee population control, hosted a national conference in Beijing. It was there that they introduced the well-known *Later, Longer, Fewer* policy⁷. “Later marriage” meant, for women, 23 years of age in rural areas and 25 years of age in the city; “Longer birth intervals” where intervals meant 4 years between the first and the second child; and “Fewer children” meant no more than two children in the city or three in the country⁸.

To monitor these activities, oversight committees were set up at every level of government and across various state-owned collective enterprises. This broad and effective administrative network managed to connect with both the urban and rural communities. At this stage, the need for control became pressing: in cities, public safety and police departments created specific sections focused on

⁶ Worden, Robert L., Andrea Matles Savada, and Ronald E. Dolan, eds. *China: A Country Study*. Washington, DC: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987. p.75.

⁷ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p.3.

⁸ Livi-Bacci, Massimo. *A Concise History of World Population*. 7th ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2025. p.227

population management. Meanwhile, in the rural areas, the government took advantage of the “barefoot doctors”, grassroots health workers who brought informational materials and contraceptives straight to the members of the people's communes. This figure was almost legendary in Maoist China. They were often peasants or young individuals who underwent quick and intensive training in basic medical and paramedical skills. They were dispatched to remote villages and agricultural communes to deliver essential healthcare in areas lacking hospitals⁹.

However, Mao's death in 1976 marked the end of an era characterized by ideological campaigns and shifting views on population policy. The leadership was still reluctant to openly declare that controlling the population was essential for driving economic growth and enhancing living standards. In this context, the late 1970s marked a significant turning point for China in various ways. Two key events, in particular, reshaped the country's trajectory: first, the economic reforms and the opening-up initiatives promoted by Deng Xiaoping; and second, the implementation of the One-Child Policy.

During Deng Xiaoping's time in power, a series of economic reforms known as the *Four Modernizations* were introduced in 1977. These reforms aimed to modernize China's economy by embracing market-oriented policies while still upholding the core tenets of socialism. This approach aligned with the Four Cardinal Principles that were later established in China's Constitution in 1982, which emphasized sticking to the socialist path, maintaining the people's democratic dictatorship ensuring the leadership of the Communist Party; and adhering to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The modernization campaign aimed to strengthen four key fields: agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. To achieve these goals, the Chinese government pursued a series of

⁹ Worden, Savada, Dolan, *China: A Country Study*, p.75

reforms, including attracting foreign investment, privatizing state-owned enterprises, and setting up special economic zones, all of which contributed to what is now called the “Chinese economic miracle”¹⁰.

In 1979, China rolled out its highly debated One-Child Policy, which was initially applied broadly to families in both urban and rural areas. Facing strong resistance in rural areas, the government relaxed the policy from 1984 onward, allowing rural couples in most provinces to have a second child if their first was a girl, a compromise later known as “1.5- child policy”¹¹.

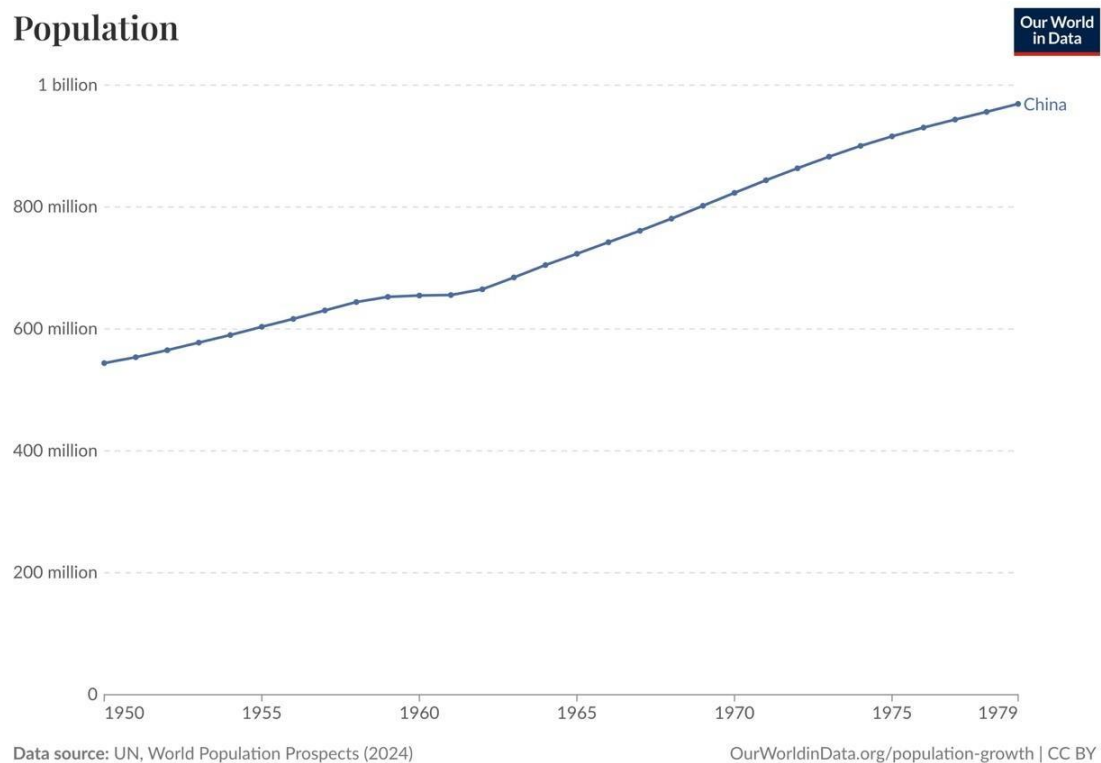
At the time the One-Child Policy was introduced, China’s population had reached nearly 970 million people, increasing by roughly three-quarters since the founding of the People’s Republic three decades earlier¹² (*Figure 1.1*).

¹⁰ Vargas, María. "Chinese Economic Development Under Deng Xiaoping." ResearchGate, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/403661475_Chinese_Economic_Development_Under_Deng_Xiaoping.

¹¹ Zeng, Yi, and Therese Hesketh. "The Effects of China's Universal Two-Child Policy." *The Lancet* 388, no. 10054 (2016): p.2. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31405-2.

¹² United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2024*, processed by Our World in Data, <https://our-worldindata.org/grapher/population-unwpp?time=earliest..1979&country=~CHN>.

Figure 1.1: China's population, 1950–1979



Source: UN, World Population Prospects (2024) – processed by Our World in Data

The leaders at the time were concerned that the country's massive population would hinder economic growth and their ambitions to improve living standards. They felt that the resources like health care, education, housing, and even essentials like land and water were simply too limited to support such a large number of people. In their view, to enhance the quality of life in China, they needed to manage the population size. They believed that drastic measures were the only way to achieve this. Aware that many families would push back against the One-Child

Policy, the government employed a mix of campaigns, persuasion, and coercion for those who dared to defy the rules¹³. To enforce this policy, local officials often resorted to invasive and sometimes brutal tactics. For instance, the local family planning officers (known as “population police”) monitored women’s reproductive health, requiring them to undergo regular physical exams. If they found out a woman was pregnant with a second child, she was frequently pressured into having an abortion. Additionally, many women faced forced sterilization to prevent future pregnancies. Some families took a stand against the policy by having a second or even a third child. If the “population police” detected such misalignment, they would hit the parents with fines that were far beyond what most families could afford. As a result, many of these parents chose to keep their “above quota” children out of sight. Their official invisibility meant that these children did not receive a residence permit, known as *hukou*, which in turn barred them from accessing health care, going to school, or even getting a library card¹⁴. But punishment and coercion were not the only tactics the government employed. They also relied on peer pressure and a sweeping propaganda campaign to encourage the Chinese population to adopt the small family ideal. Over that time, the government relied heavily on public spaces to showcase slogans and images that celebrated the advantages of a happy, healthy and prosperous one-child family¹⁵(*Figure 1.2*).

¹³"China's One-Child Policy Background Reading." Asia Pacific Curriculum, n.d.
<https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/chinas-one-child-policy>

¹⁴ Ibidem, p.4.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p.5.

Figure 1.2: Propaganda: “Prioritize family planning for the sake of development”



Source: Peter Parks/AFP via Getty Images (2019)¹⁶.

In the midst of sweeping economic, political, and demographic changes, a new generation of around 150 million only children, born in the 1970s, came into being. They were brought up in a family system that was drastically different from that of previous generations, and they would go on to play a crucial role in reshaping the family structure in China¹⁷.

¹⁶ Peter Parks/AFP via Getty Images, *China's One-Child Policy Background Reading*, Asia Pacific Curriculum, 2019, <https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/system/files/2019-02/China%27s%20One-Child%20Policy%20Background%20Reading.pdf>.

¹⁷ Feng, Xiao-Tian, Dudley L. Poston Jr., and Xiao-Tao Wang. "China's One-Child Policy and the Changing Family." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014). p.17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24339438>.

Deng Xiaoping aimed to quadruple the annual per capita income by the year 2000 and highlighted how controlling population growth play a key role in achieving that goal. In 1980, the CPC Central Committee issued *An Open Letter to All Members of the Communist Party and Communist Youth League* regarding population control, which advocated for couples to have just one child. This became known as the “one-child-per-couple”, or simply “one-child” policy. The Letter urged all party members and leaders at every level to embrace the State’s call, set a positive example for the public, promote the policy, and actively advance family planning efforts. Consequently, urban administrations found it easier to enforce these restrictions, leading to over 90% of families in urban areas agreeing to have one child.

This was facilitated through the *danwei* (work unit) system, through which urban employers monitored and controlled reproductive behaviour, tracking menstrual cycles, conducting regular checks, and linking compliance to housing, healthcare, and career benefits¹⁸. Unlike rural families, who relied on children, particularly sons, as a source of agricultural labour and old-age security, urban households had less economic incentive to have additional children and at the same time had greater access to pensions and welfare services, making compliance both easier to enforce and more readily accepted¹⁹. Those who complied were awarded “Honorary One-Child Certificates”, officially committing them not to have any more children. This marked the initial phase of the one’s child policy implementation²⁰.

The Chinese One-Child Policy has seen its fair share of ups and downs over the years. Up until 1983, the pressure to comply was intense, with harsh and,

¹⁸Gordon, Stephanie. "The Welcome Demise of China's One-Child Policy." *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/the-welcome-demise-of-chinas-one-child-policy/>.

¹⁹ Goeking, Kira. "China's One-Child Policy: Population Control and Its Unintended Consequences." *Women Leading Change: Case Studies in Women, Gender, and Feminism* 4, no. 2 (2019): p. 84. <https://journals.tulane.edu/ncs/article/view/2427/2251>.

²⁰ Feng, Poston, Wang, *China's One-Child Policy and the Changing Family*, p.17.

in some cases, coercive methods being used on a large scale, sparking widespread protests. At the same time, the generation born during fertility surge that followed the disastrous Great Leap Forward was entering reproductive age. Between 1983 and 1993, the number of women aged 21 to 30 increased from 80 million to 125 million, reflecting the effects of population momentum generated by earlier high birth rates, which made a case for keeping the policy in place²¹. Conversely, the protests from a population dissatisfied with the infringements of basic human right increased pressure for a relaxation of these strict measures. The 1990 census revealed a staggering 1.13 billion people in China already, a trajectory suggesting the original target was unlikely to hold. Up until 1985, the government aimed to keep the population under 1.2 billion by the year 2000, but this target was later adjusted to a more achievable “about 1.2 billion”, effectively raising the cap to 1.25 billion. Eventually, this limit was officially revised to 1.3 billion, surpassing the 1.265 billion recorded in the same census year²².

The growing discontent among the population, feeling deprived of a fundamental human right, became a strong argument for easing the coercive policy. The mid-1980s, in particular, saw several instances of this relaxation, such as allowing rural couples the right to have a second child if their firstborn was a girl, or granting permission under special circumstances, like living in remote areas or having unique family situations²³.

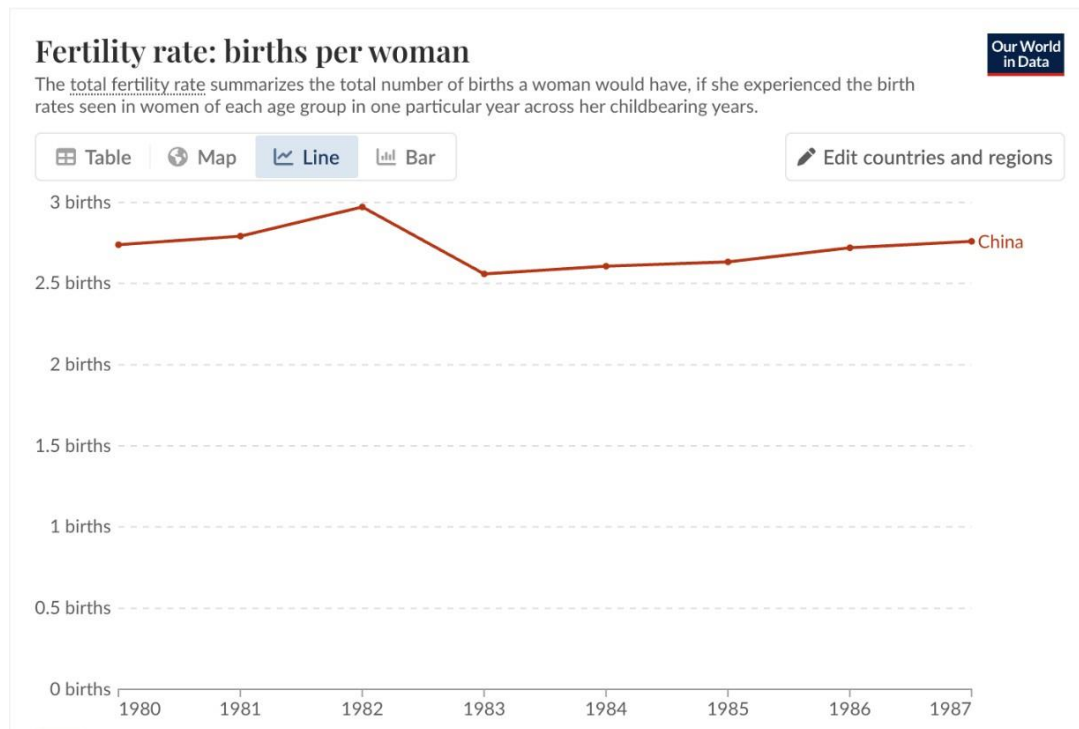
Regarding the effects of changing enforcement intensity on fertility outcomes, fertility rates took a turn in the early 1980s, with a noticeable halt in decline and even a slight uptick between 1985 and 1987 (*Figure 1.3*).

²¹ Hardee-Cleaveland, K., and J. Banister. "Fertility Policy and Implementation in China." *Population and Development Review* 14, no. 2 (1988): p.247.

²² Livi-Bacci, *A Concise History of World Population*, p.230.

²³ Ibidem.

Figure 1.3: China's total fertility rate (births per woman), 1980–1987



Source: UN, World Population Prospects (2024) – processed by Our World in Data

This shift can be traced back to the dismantling of rural collectives, the cooperative units through which agricultural production, land use, and local welfare provision had been organized since the 1950s, between 1978 and 1983 under Deng Xiaoping's Household Responsibility System, which returned land and economic decision-making to individual families. Since collectives, had been central to family planning enforcement, giving local cadres direct control over resources, labor, and rationing, their disappearance weakened cadre authority and collapsed the economic incentives and disincentives that had been the backbone of policy

enforcement²⁴. Additionally, the wave of economic liberalization and a general reduction in public oversight over personal choices made it harder to fully implement the policy. However, as the 1990s rolled in, the Chinese leadership reaffirmed its dedication to One-Child Policy, keeping the regulations in place and ramping up their enforcement. A nationwide fertility survey in 1992 revealed a total fertility rate of 1.9, significantly lower than the average seen in the 1980s. This renewed push from the party proved effective, bolstering commitment to family planning across the board, enhancing responsibility systems, and reinforcing economic incentives and penalties, along with introducing old-age insurance schemes, among other measures²⁵.

Although the One-Child Policy successfully achieved its primary goal of slowing population growth, it also produced a range of unintended consequences that reshaped China's social, economic, and familial life, consequences that, as this thesis will show, unfolded in systematically different ways across urban and rural China. This divide was already visible in the policy's implementation, from the danwei-based enforcement that made urban compliance easier to achieve, to the barefoot doctors who carried family planning into the rural areas, to the concessions rural families won that their urban counterparts never obtained. Against this historical background, this thesis examines the socio-demographic effects of family planning policy in the decades that followed through this same urban-rural lens, focusing in particular on gender imbalance, changes in family structure and reproductive decision-making, and the marriage-market consequences of the resulting sex ratio imbalance²⁶.

²⁴Greenhalgh, S., C. Zhu, and N. Li. "Restraining Population Growth in Three Chinese Villages." *Population and Development Review* 20, no. 2 (1994). p.366. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2137523>.

²⁵Ibidem, p.387.

²⁶Settles, B. H., and X. Sheng. "The One Child Policy and Its Impact on Chinese Families." In *Handbook of Families in Chinese Societies*, 2008. pp. 5-6.

Chapter 2: China's Geographical and Administrative Structure: Rural and Urban Areas and the Hukou System

Before discussing the consequences of the One-Child Policy and its interaction with rural-to-urban mobility, it is necessary to establish the geographical and institutional framework within which Chinese rural and urban populations exist. This chapter therefore introduces, in turn, the physical geography of China, the country's administrative organization, the meaning and evolution of “rural” and “urban” as categories in the Chinese context, and the household registration known as *hukou*, which has historically regulated the relationship between these two spheres more than any other single institution.

2.1 The Physical Geography of China

China stands as one of the largest countries on the planet, boasting a remarkable range of geographical features. The western regions are dominated by high plateaus and mountainous terrain, while the eastern regions consist of extensive plains and densely populated coastal areas. The eastern seaboard, which includes the Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta, has long been the economic heart of the country. This region has thrived thanks to its access to maritime trade routes and its rich agricultural output. These coastal areas have also become major centres of industrial production, employment and urban development, particularly since the beginning of China's economic reforms. In contrast, the western and northwestern areas are marked by dry or high-altitude landscapes, which have made it challenging for large-scale settlements and industrial growth to take root (*Figure 2.1*). This significant variation in geography

has played a crucial role in shaping where people live, how agriculture is practiced, and the overall economic activities throughout the nation²⁷.

Figure 2.1: A map of China's key geographical regions



Source: GIS Geography <https://gisgeography.com/china-map/>

²⁷Britannica. "China – Relief." Accessed 2026. <https://www.britannica.com/place/China/Relief>.
Columbia University. "China's Geography with Maps." Asia for Educators.
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/china/geog/maps.htm>.

This geodiversity has direct implications for the rural-urban divide that this thesis addresses. Fertile, well-connected plains in the east have historically supported denser populations, more intensive agriculture, and, in the reform era, more rapid urbanization and industrial development, while the mountainous, arid, or high-altitude regions of the west and northwest have remained comparatively rural, less densely populated, and less urbanized²⁸.

These geographical differences play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the uneven patterns of urbanization and the movement from rural areas to cities that we will explore in the thesis.

2.2 China's Administrative Organization

China's administrative setup is structured into five levels: provincial, prefecture, county, township, and village. This hierarchy lays the groundwork for how territorial administration and various population statistics are managed. The five levels can be understood as a territorial hierarchy in which progressively smaller administrative units are placed under the authority of larger ones. At the provincial level are provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government; below this level are prefecture-level administrative units, followed by county-level units, township-level units and, at the most local level, villages.

At the provincial level, China is organized into 34 administrative units that can be grouped into four main categories. There are 23 provinces; five autonomous regions that are established in areas with a notable presence of ethnic minorities, like Tibet and Xinjiang, four municipalities directly under the central government,

²⁸Guo, Yuanzhi, Qiao Weifeng, "Rural Migration and Urbanization in China: Historical Evolution and Coupling Pattern", *Sustainability* (2020). p.15. doi:10.3390/su12187307

these are Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing, which are considered provincial-level due to their significant political and economic role and finally two special administrative regions, Hong Kong and Macau, which function under their own unique legal and economic systems. The prefecture level constitutes an intermediate layer between the provincial and county levels. Most prefecture-level units today are prefecture-level cities, which are administratively larger than the urbanised area usually understood as “the city” and may include both urban districts and more rural territories. This is particularly relevant in the Chinese context because an administrative “city” does not necessarily correspond to a continuous built-up urban area. Below the prefecture level are county-level units. These include counties, county-level cities and districts. Districts are generally located within prefecture-level cities and are mainly associated with their urbanised areas, whereas counties and county-level cities may contain both urban and rural territories.

At the next level, townships and towns constitute local administrative units below the county level. Townships are generally associated with rural areas and are responsible for administering a few local communities and settlements. Villages represent a still more local level of rural administration, situated below townships and towns. The geographical layout of these provincial-level divisions across the country is illustrated *Figure 2.2* below.

Figure 2.2: Provincial-level administrative divisions of China



Source: Yuanzhi Guo, Weifeng Qiao (2020)²⁹.

In this hierarchy, urban areas are usually managed by municipal or district-level units, like cities and urban districts, while rural regions fall under the jurisdiction of township and village-level units. However, these administrative categories should not be understood as perfectly equivalent to the rural–urban distinction, illustrated in the following section. Administrative boundaries and the actual characteristics of the population living within them do not always coincide: a single administrative city, for example, can include both densely urbanised districts and rural counties or townships. This distinction in administration goes beyond just

²⁹ Ibidem.

organization; it plays a crucial role in how the National Bureau of Statistics determines whether an area is classified as “urban” or “rural”. This classification hinges on the administrative status of the unit where a person is registered, rather than just looking at factors like population density or economic activity. This, in turn, plays a significant role in how these two categories are defined and reflected in official statistics³⁰.

This administrative hierarchy plays a crucial role in the discussions that follow in this thesis, as it lays down the framework for how we officially classify and measure rural and urban populations. It is also significant because many policies that influence rural-urban dynamics are put into action at the local level, instead of being applied uniformly by the central government. Institutional arrangement such as the hukou system and national policies such as family planning are established at the top but implemented by provincial and sub-provincial governments. Sometimes, this responsibility is further delegated to the county or township level. For instance, the hukou reform guidelines introduced by the central government have generally sought to ease residency restrictions and facilitate the settlement of migrants in urban areas. However, their implementation has not been uniform across the country, as local administrative authorities retain significant responsibility for determining the conditions under which residency requirements are relaxed. The resulting differences between regions and between cities of different administrative and economic levels will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

³⁰Wikipedia. "Administrative Divisions of the People's Republic of China." Accessed 2026. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_China.

2.3 The Hukou System: Origins and Structure

First established in Chinese cities in 1951 and extended to rural areas in 1955, *hukou* system was formalized as a permanent nationwide system in 1958. Although it has undergone significant modification since the early 1980s, its basic structure remains in place today. Economically-oriented explanations in the literature tend to trace its origins to the heavy-industry-oriented development strategy adopted in the early years of the People's Republic: given China's scarcity of capital relative to labour, the state deliberately underpriced agricultural goods and overpriced industrial goods in order to finance industrial expansion and needed a mechanism to prevent labour from flowing freely out of agriculture in response to this artificial imbalance. The hukou system provided exactly this mechanism³¹.

As already noted in the previous section, the system rests on two separate classifications: one's place of registration (rural or urban locality) and one's socio-economic status (agricultural or non-agricultural). The first classification concerned the locality in which a person's household was officially registered, while the second distinguished between agricultural and non-agricultural registration, historically reflecting the person's institutional position within China's rural or urban economic system. Both are inherited at birth from one's mother, making hukou status, in practice, a matter of birth rather than personal choice. Changing either the place or the status of one's registration requires formal government approval, and this approval is granted far more readily for movement from urban to rural areas than in the reverse direction. Formal rural-to-urban migration, accordingly, requires successfully completing both a change of registered residence and a conversion of hukou status from agricultural to non-agricultural, a process known in China as *nongzhuanfei*³².

³¹Chan, Kam Wing, and Li Zhang. "The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes." *The China Quarterly*, 2009. pp. 2-3 doi:10.1017/S0305741000001351.

³² Ibidem, p.5.

This distinction within institutions has significant implications for how rural-to-urban migrants access jobs, public services, and social protection. One key issue is that access to various public services like subsidized education, healthcare, and social housing, depends on a person's hukou registration rather than where they actually live. This means that migrants who move to cities without officially changing their hukou status often miss out on the same benefits that local urban residents enjoy. As a result, their children may have a harder time accessing urban schools, they might face higher healthcare costs, and they could find themselves ineligible for unemployment or pension benefits in the city where they live and work. The implications of this will be explored in Chapter Three.

In the past, changes in hukou status were as tightly regulated, making it difficult for rural residents to secure permanent urban registration. While there have been significant reforms to the system since the start of the reform era, this historical context is crucial for grasping the ongoing disparities faced by rural migrants in modern-day China³³.

³³ Ibidem, p.7.

2.4 Hukou Reforms Since 1980 and Their Consequences

Since the late 1970s, especially from the 1990s onward, hukou reform has gradually eased some of the restrictions on internal migration, shifting more responsibility to local governments. However, gaining access to urban hukou and the social benefits that come with it continues to be a challenge, particularly in the largest and most economically advanced cities³⁴.

One of the outcomes of this unfinished reform is the rise of a significant number of long-term city dwellers who still hold rural hukou. Even though these migrants may spend years living and working in urban areas, their access to social security and public services in the city has often been more restricted compared to those with local hukou. This gap in the system has led to ongoing disparities in welfare support between rural and urban communities³⁵.

Even with these changes, the fundamental differences between rural and urban populations remain intact. The hukou system, which was originally created to control population movement, has transformed into an institution that still plays a significant role in determining access to economic and social opportunities. This ongoing influence is especially important for grasping the varied impacts of demographic shifts throughout China.

³⁴Song, Qian, and James P. Smith. "Hukou System, Mechanisms, and Health Stratification across the Life Course in Rural and Urban China." *Health & Place*, 2019. p.3. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102150.

³⁵Ibidem, p.4.

2.5 Defining “Rural” and “Urban” in the Chinese Context

Although the administrative hierarchy described above provides a formal skeleton, the substantive meaning of “rural” and “urban” in China is considerably more complex than a simple geographical distinction. The Chinese term generally translated as “rural” does not correspond neatly to Western notions of “countryside” or “village”: its meaning has evolved historically, and it is increasingly understood by scholars not as a fixed physical space but as a relational concept, defined through its ongoing interaction and mobility with “urban” areas rather than through any inherent, unchanging characteristic³⁶.

This conceptual complexity is compounded by an administrative one: China's household registration system does not classify individuals simply as “urban” or “rural” residents. Instead, it applies two separate and only partially overlapping classifications, one based on a person's place of registered residence (urban or rural locality) and one based on their socioeconomic eligibility (“agricultural” or “non-agricultural” status). Because these two classifications are assigned on different criteria, urban areas contain both agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* holders, and the reverse is also true of rural areas; in general academic and statistical usage, the two are nonetheless frequently, and imprecisely, conflated into a single rural/urban divide³⁷.

This distinction matters greatly for how population statistics should be interpreted throughout this thesis: measures of the “urbanization rate” based on a person's registered *hukou* status (that is, the share of the population holding non-

³⁶Ye Chao, Pan Jiawei, Liu Zhimin, “The historical logics and geographical patterns of rural-urban governance in China”, *J. Geogr. Sci.* (2022). p. 1227. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-022-1994-5>

³⁷Wing Chan, Zhang, *The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes*, p.5.

agricultural hukou) can diverge substantially from measures based on a person's actual place of residence, since millions of migrants live in cities without holding urban hukou³⁸. This distinction really matters when it comes to grasping the situation of rural-to-urban migrants. These individuals often reside and work in cities but still hold onto their rural hukou status.

In other words, a person's place of residence and their hukou status should not automatically be treated as the same thing. A migrant may physically live and work in an urban area while remaining officially registered in a rural locality. This distinction is essential for interpreting the rural–urban divide used throughout this thesis.

This residence-registration gap is particularly important for understanding the social consequences of rural-to-urban migration, including the emergence of left-behind family members, which will be examined in Chapter Three.

³⁸Ibidem, p.24.

2.6 The Evolution of Rural-Urban Relations Over Time

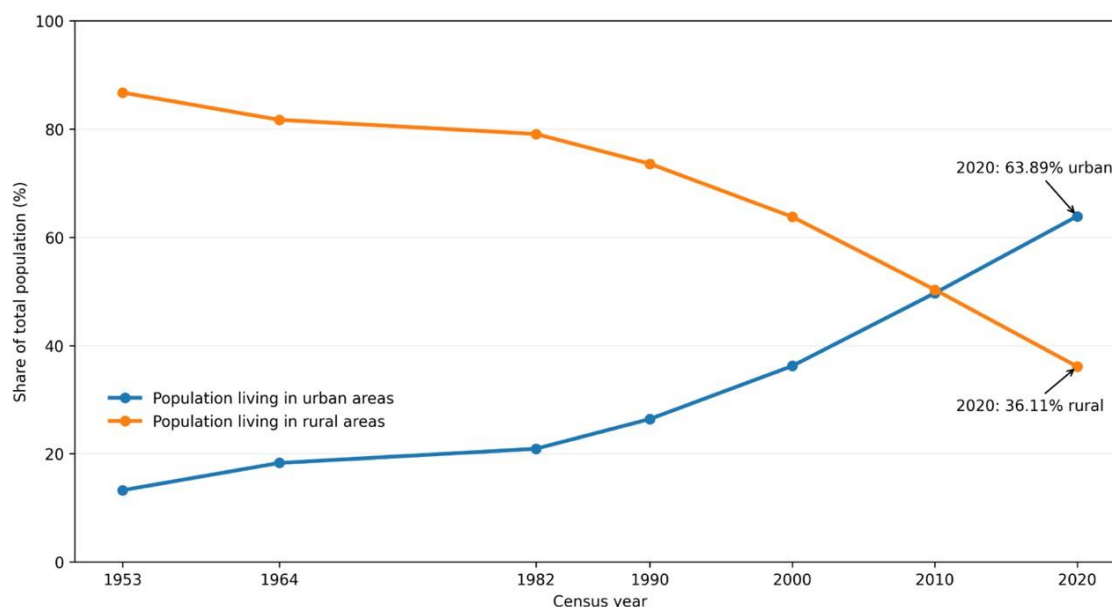
The dynamic between rural and urban China has evolved ~~quite a bit~~ remarkably over the years. Back before the economic reform and opening-up era initiated in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, there was a clear-cut institutional and economic gap between the two, largely due to the hukou system. However, since the late 1970s, a wave of industrialization, market reforms, and a massive movement of people from the rural areas to urban ones, has gradually reshaped ~~the~~ relationship between urban and rural areas. While the lines separating rural and urban areas have blurred in some ways, there are still notable institutional and socioeconomic differences that continue to influence the lives of people in both settings³⁹.

This transformation is reflected in China's demographics and migration patterns. National censuses show that from 2010 to 2020, the percentage of people living in rural areas dropped significantly, hitting about 36 percent by 2020. The number of people living in rural areas has also seen a decline, dropping from roughly 674 million in 2010 to about 510 million by 2020. At the same time, China's "floating population" a term commonly used in discussions about internal migration in China, which refers to those living away from their registered hukou location, increased to around 375.8 million in 2020. The term therefore captures a population whose actual place of residence differs from the location recorded in the household registration system. These numbers really highlight the massive rural-to-urban shift that has come hand in hand with China's economic growth⁴⁰. *Figure 2.3* illustrates the scale of the rural-to-urban transformation that has accompanied China's economic development.

³⁹Chao, Jiawei, Zhimin, *The historical logics and geographical patterns of rural-urban governance in China*, p. 1228.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p.1231.

Figure 2.3: China's Rural–Urban Transformation, 1953–2020.



Source: Realized by Charts.js based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021)⁴¹.

Even with the rapid pace of urbanization, the difference between where people live and their official registration status still exists. Since the 1990s, a surge in rural-to-urban migration and a rise in residence-based urbanization has taken place, yet the number of migrants who actually secure full urban hukou remains low. Following the launch of the National New-Type Urbanization Plan in 2014, there has been a growing emphasis on providing urban services and rights to migrants. Still, the divide between residence and hukou-based urbanization continues to be a significant aspect of modern-day China⁴².

⁴¹ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “Communiqué of the Seventh National Population Census (No. 7): Urban and Rural Population and Floating Population,” May 11, 2021, https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817192.html.

⁴² Guo, Yuanzhi, Qiao Weifeng, *Rural Migration and Urbanization in China: Historical Evolution and Coupling Pattern*, pp. 6-7.

Chapter 3: One Policy, Different Outcomes: The Socio-Demographic Consequences of the One-Child Policy in Rural and Urban China

Building on the social and historical context that led to the introduction of the family planning policies in China, as described in Chapter One, this chapter provides a detailed examination of the socio-demographic consequences of several decades of the One-Child Policy.

The main and explicitly intended consequences of the policies introduced from the 70s onwards were a decline in fertility rates and the number of births, ultimately leading to a reduction in the population growth rate. The evolution of fertility trends will be explored in the next chapter and discussed in relation to the policy responses that followed.

In this chapter, I examine the medium and long-term unintended demographic and social consequences of the policy, highlighting, in particular, the differences between urban and rural China. As described in Chapter One, the policy provisions were applied differently across settings. Likewise, as shown in the following sections, policy implementation led to notably different outcomes based on where it was applied. For instance, son preference and sex-selective practices have proven to be much more entrenched in rural areas compared to urban ones. Additionally, the easing of resource competition among siblings has positively impacted urban daughters' education, while rural sons have increasingly struggled to find wives. The 4-2-1 family structure, consisting of four grandparents, two parents, and one child, represents a generational setup rather than a strict living situation. In urban China, this structure has often evolved into nuclear families, where parents and their only child live apart from the grandparents. In rural China, by contrast, the 4-2-1 model tends to thrive as a

multigenerational household, with grandparents, parents, and the child all under one roof. This divergence also plays a significant role in the accelerated aging of Chinese society, which I will explore in the final section of the chapter. By examining these phenomena in comparative terms, rather than considering urban and rural China together, in this chapter I aim to provide a more nuanced analytical perspective on the medium- and long-term consequences of China's family policies, implemented over more than three decades.

3.1 Male preference and the sex ratio imbalance at birth

One of the most widely discussed consequences of the One-Child policy is the rise in discrimination against girls, driven by a long-standing cultural preference for boys. The trends described in this section relate primarily to the period from the 1980s to the early 2000s, when the gender imbalance was at its peak; more recent trends are discussed separately below.

Traditionally, Chinese culture has held a strong preference for males within society. This inclination can be traced back to the influence of Confucianism and the historical reliance on an agricultural economy, both of which have shaped the value placed on large families; particularly those with many sons. Sons are seen not just as the family's labor force; they also play a crucial role in supporting the older generation. They are viewed as the ones who will carry on the family lineage, honor the ancestral shrine, and uphold the family name. As a result, couples historically felt a deep-seated obligation to have many children, and wealthier families sometimes took concubines to increase the chances of producing a male heir, a practice that was outlawed with the founding of the PRC in 1949 and the 1950 Marriage Law, though its cultural legacy persisted well beyond that. In fact, infertility or failing to have a son is even today often regarded as a "curse

in life” within Chinese society, a belief that, as next sections will show, has only partially faded in recent decades⁴³.

This preference for sons over daughters remained particularly strong in rural areas, where sons were valued for their ability to assist with farming and manual labor. In the 1990s, with around 70% of the population still residing in rural regions of China⁴⁴, this traditional bias towards males continued to play a major role in family decisions. Gender roles were also quite rigid during this period of economic restructuring: men were more often the primary breadwinners, while women were disproportionately affected by the mass layoffs (*xiagang*) from state-owned enterprises in the mid-1990s to early 2000s, and were more likely to find themselves in casual, lower-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement⁴⁵. Additionally, since healthcare coverage was still largely tied to formal employment through the work unit (*danwei*) system, before China rebuilding a broader public health insurance scheme from 2003 onward, women in informal and unstable jobs often lacked the same medical coverage as their male counterparts⁴⁶.

These cultural and socioeconomic factors contributed to the spread of practices of sex-selective abortions, abandonment of newborn girls, and a high number of girls not being registered at birth. These actions have serious social and demographic consequences, which become apparent when considering the imbalance in the sex ratio at birth (SRB), i.e., the number of male births per 100 female births. While the biologically normal range is around 102-107 boys per girls,

⁴³ Chan, Cecilia L. W., Paul S. F. Yip, Ernest H. Y. Ng, P. C. Ho, and Celia H. Y. Chan. "Gender Selection in China: Its Meanings and Implications." *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* 19, no. 9 (2002). p.427. doi:10.1023/A:1016815807703.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Sudbeck, Kristine. "The Effects of China's One-Child Policy: The Significance for Chinese Women." *Nebraska Anthropologist*, 2012. p.45.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/nebanthro/article/1178/&path_info=27_Sudbeck.pdf.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

China's SRB became increasingly distorted during the first two decades of the One-Child Policy, reaching as high as 121 boys per 100 girls, well above the natural range, particularly among second- and third-born children⁴⁷.

The introduction of ultrasound technology in the 1980s made it much easier for families to find out the sex of their unborn child early in the pregnancy, leading to more selective abortions for those wishing for a son. Between 1986 and 1990, over 160,000 abandoned children were reported to civil affairs offices in Hunan Province alone, of them 95% were females⁴⁸. While we lack comprehensive data on abandonment nationwide, some estimates suggest that around 4.5% of newborns, mostly girls, were left behind⁴⁹. These unregistered girls encountered significant obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, and vital welfare services, although a few managed to find some level of protection through informal adoption⁵⁰.

This growing imbalance did not emerge overnight, nor did it affect the country evenly. Looking at its evolution over time and variation across regions, helps explain why the consequences described above (abandonment, missing registrations, sex-selective abortion) became so widespread and so persistent.

Figure 3.1 traces the trajectory of China's sex ratio at birth from 1953, the year of the first national census to systematically record this indicator, through 2021. For nearly three decades, the ratio remained close to the biologically normal

⁴⁷ Tang, M., and J. Hou. "Changes of Sex Ratio at Birth and Son Preferences in China: A Mixed Method Study." *China Population and Development Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024). p.2. doi:10.1007/s42379-024-00151-w.

⁴⁸ Johnson, K. "The Politics of the Revival of Infant Abandonment in China, with Special Reference to Hunan." *Population and Development Review* 22 (1996). p.78. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2808152>.

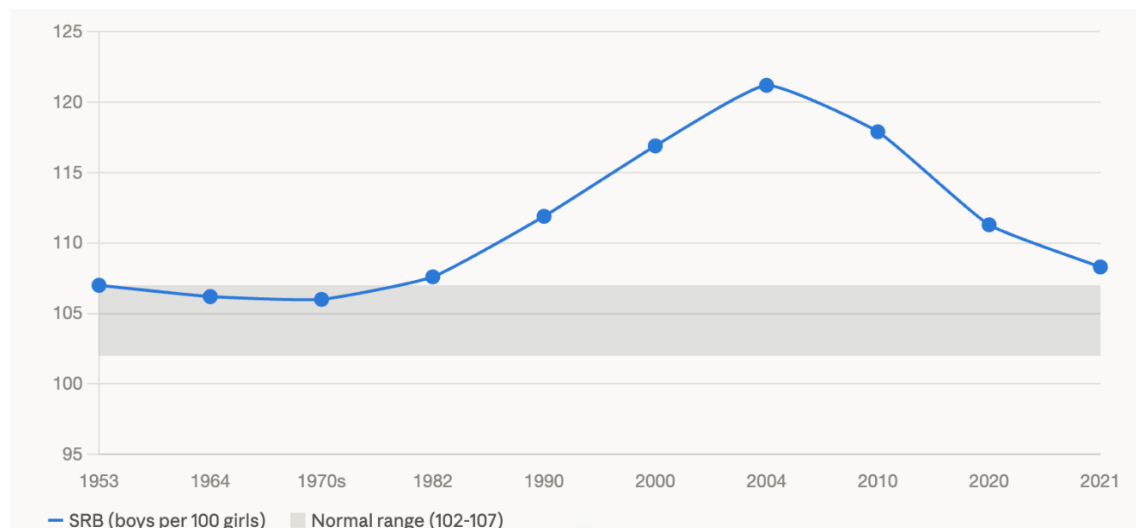
⁴⁹ Deng, Shuman, "Any Other Name (A Documentary Recounting a Chinese Family Saga of Identities Through Generations)", *Research Papers*, (2011). p. 7. http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/164

⁵⁰ Settles, Sheng, *The One Child Policy and Its Impact on Chinese Families*, p.6.

range: it averaged around 107 boys per 100 girls in the 1950s, 107.5 in the 1960s, and declined slightly to 106 in the 1970s⁵¹. This pattern changed markedly from

the early 1980s onward. Starting from a level already slightly above the biological norm in the early 1980s, the ratio climbed steadily over the following two decades, driven by the combination of the One-Child Policy and the spread of ultrasound technology described earlier. It reached its highest point in 2004, at 121.2 boys born for every 100 girls, more than double the natural imbalance that demographers consider normal. From that point onward, the ratio began a slow decline, falling to 111.3 by 2020 and to 108.3 by 2021⁵². Even this improved figure, however, remains meaningfully above the biologically normal range of 102–107, indicating that while the practices driving the imbalance have become less common, they have not disappeared.

Figure 3.1: Sex ratio at birth, 1953-2021



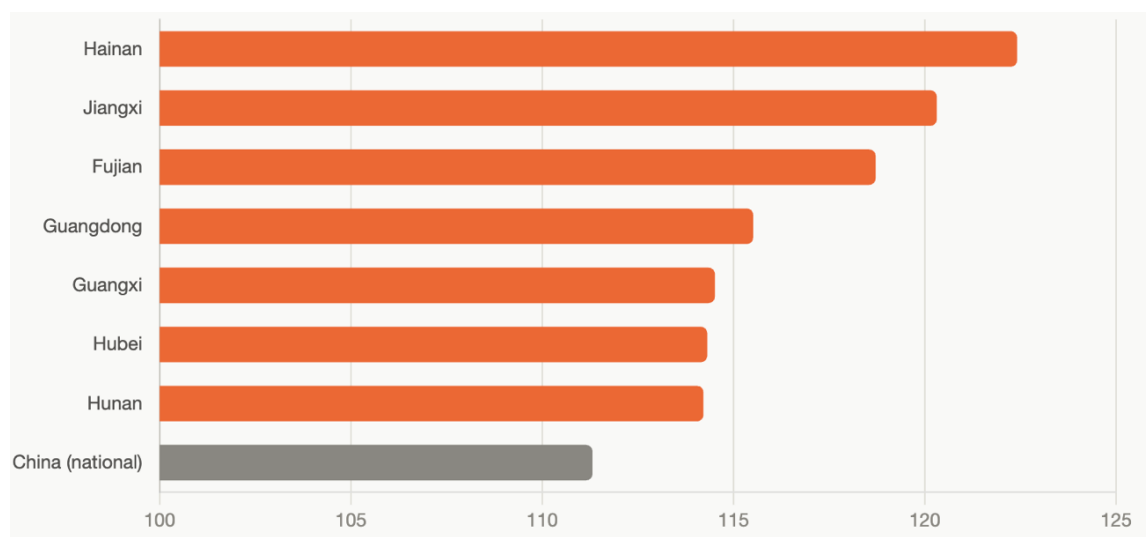
⁵¹ Shuzhuo, Li, Zhen, Guo, “Gender imbalance in China: Dynamics and new trends”, *IUSSP conference paper*, (2012). p.2.

⁵² Tang, Hou, *Changes of Sex Ratio at Birth and Son Preferences in China: A Mixed Method Study*, p.2.

Source: Realized by Chart.js based on the information contained in Shuzhuo, Zhen (2012)⁵³

This national trend, however, conceals significant internal disparities. The imbalance was never distributed evenly across China's provinces. Looking at the most recent period, when the SRB was less imbalanced than in previous decades, substantial geographical disparities remained remarkable. *Figure 3.2* makes this regional dimension explicit by comparing the seven provinces with the highest sex ratios in 2020 against the national average. All seven, Hainan, Jiangxi, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hubei and Hunan, recorded ratios well above the national figure of 111.3, with Hainan and Jiangxi still exceeding 120⁵⁴.

Figure 3.2: Sex ratio at birth: comparison by province, 2020.



⁵³ Shuzhuo, Zhen, *Gender imbalance in China: Dynamics and new trends*, p.2.

⁵⁴ Tang, Hou, *Changes of Sex Ratio at Birth and Son Preferences in China: A Mixed Method Study*, pp. 5-6.

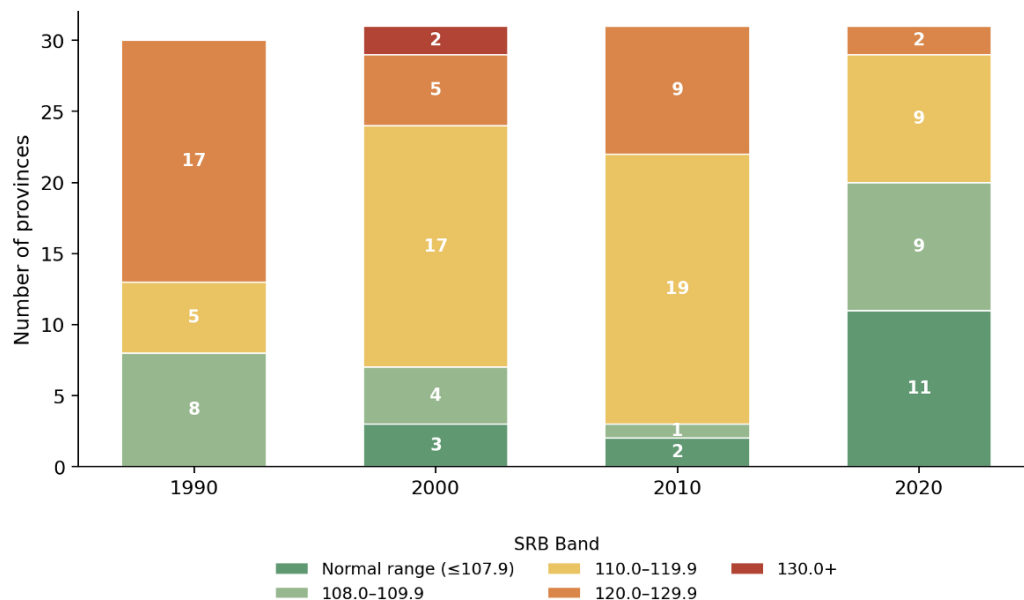
Source: Realized by Chart.js based on the information contained in Tang, Hou (2024)⁵⁵.

This concentration is not a recent phenomenon: the same cluster of provinces has been identified across successive national censuses as an area of persistently high sex ratio imbalance, indicating that the regional pattern of son preference in southeastern China has remained remarkably stable even as the national average has declined. *Figure 3.3* illustrates this persistence tracking the distribution of Chinese provinces across SRB bands from 1990 to 2020. While the number of provinces in the highest bands has fallen sharply, from 17 provinces above 120 in 1990 to just 2 in 2020, a comparable share of provinces has remained in the elevated 110–119.9 range across all four decades, indicating that the normalization of the SRB has been far from uniform across the country⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ UNFPA China. "The Challenge of Normalizing Sex Ratio at Birth in China: A Long-Term Endeavor." Policy Brief Series, 2024. <https://china.unfpa.org/en/publications/policy-brief-challenge-normalizing-sex-ratio-birth-china-long-term-endeavor>.

Figure 3.3: SBR distribution across Chinese provinces by band, 1990-2020.



Source: Realized by Chart.js based on UNFPA China (2024)⁵⁷.

Notably, these provinces are geographically clustered in southeastern China, a region historically defined by strong clan-based, patrilineal family structures in which ancestor worship, genealogical continuity, and the social pressure to produce a male heir remained particularly resilient even as the practice declined elsewhere. The scale of this concentration is considerable: together, these seven provinces accounted for over a third of all births registered in China in 2020, meaning that a disproportionate share of the country's remaining gender imbalance is rooted in a relatively small number of regions rather than spread uniformly across the population.

⁵⁷ Ibidem.

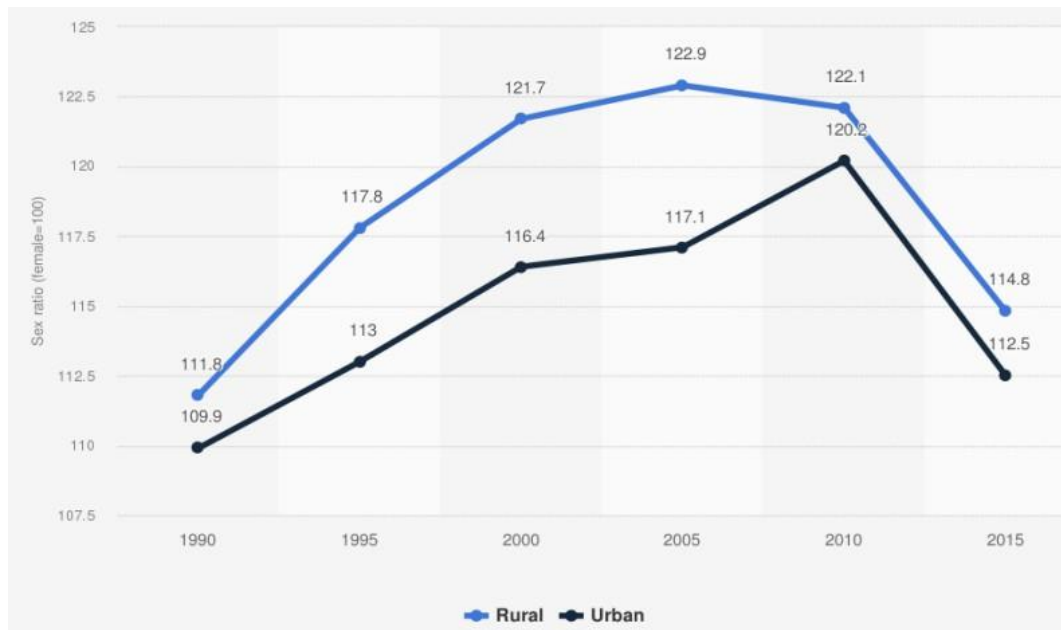
This provincial pattern points to a broader dynamic, that underpins the interpretation of the phenomena discussed throughout this thesis: the gap between rural and urban China. Historically, the sex ratio at birth rose considerably faster in rural areas than in urban ones, particularly between 1980 and 2000, as rural families faced both stronger cultural pressure to secure a male heir and, in many provinces, greater reliance on sons for agricultural labour and old-age support. After 2000, this trend began to reverse: the decline in the rural ratio outpaced that of urban areas, gradually narrowing what had once been a wide gap, to the point where, by 2020, rural and urban sex ratios had converged to a similar range of around 110–111⁵⁸.

Figure 3.4 confirms this convergence in more granular detail, tracking the urban-rural gap in the sex ratio at birth between 1990 and 2015: as of 2015, the rural ratio stood at 114.8 boys per 100 girls, about 2.5 points above the urban figure, illustrating that, even as the two curves moved closer together, a measurable rural excess persisted⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Yujia Gu. “Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China”, *Asian Culture and History*; Vol. 14, No. 2. (2022). p.177. doi:10.5539/ach.v14n2p173

Figure 3.4: The number of male births per 100 female births in China from 1990 to 2015, by urban-rural area



Source: Gu (2022)⁶⁰.

This convergence suggests that the cultural preference for sons described above, while still measurable, has weakened significantly since the early 2000s; however, as *Figure 3.3* confirms, a persistent core of provinces has remained above the normal range across every decade examined, indicating that this preference has not disappeared, and remains tied to the strength of local patrilineal traditions rather than to economic development alone.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

3.2 Educated Daughters, Unmarried Sons

3.2.1 Educational attainment

A different dimension of the issue is that while the One-Child Policy did lead to a higher sex ratio at birth, it also meant that singleton daughters did not have to compete with brothers for resources, particularly when it came to education. In the past, families with several children often chose not to send their daughters to school to save on costs⁶¹. However, with the One-Child Policy in effect, the financial burden per household lightened, allowing more girls to access the same educational opportunities as their male counterpart.

Back in the late 1980s, national survey data revealed that people living in big cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai did not really show a strong preference for sons. It is worth noting that these same cities, while progressive in gender norms among their registered residents, are also, as shown in Chapter Two, among the most restrictive in China in granting hukou to migrants, meaning this gender-equal environment has historically applied mainly to the locally registered urban population, not to migrants living there. By 1990, the floating population accounted for approximately 11.1 to 27.5 percent of the de facto urban population in the built-up areas of China's eight largest cities. This was reflected in Shanghai's sex ratio at birth, which had dropped to nearly normal levels, about 105 boys for every 100 girls, by 1990. This was quite a contrast to the much higher ratios seen in rural provinces during that same time⁶². Such change was closely linked to equal access to education and employment; by 2000, the city's sex ratio at birth stood at

⁶¹ Tsui, Ming, and Lynne Rich. "The Only Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China." *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (2002). p.86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081877>.

⁶² Arnold, Fred, and Zhaoxiang Liu. "Sex Preference, Fertility, and Family Planning in China." *Population and Development Review* 12, no. 2 (1986). p. 240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1973109>.

106 boys per 100 girls, within the biological norm and far below the levels recorded in many rural provinces during the same period⁶³.

According to a study conducted by Institute of Social Science Survey in 2022, men and women born in 1980, after the One-Child Policy was implemented, had nearly equal levels of education. National statistics reveal that, by 2020, the overall gender gap in years of education, historically in favor of men, had decreased to 0.6 years, a drop from 0.8 years ten years prior. These data may be suggestive that the One-Child Policy, by limiting families to one child, enabled daughters to receive more focused parental support and attention in their educational pursuits. Additionally, following the introduction of the birth control policy, the number of female students in primary, secondary, and tertiary education saw a remarkable increase, even surpassing their male peers in college enrollment rates⁶⁴.

This growing parity in educational access had consequences for women's economic and social position. As singleton daughters entered the workforce with qualifications equal to, and in college enrollment rates sometimes exceeding, those of their male peers, they gained a degree of financial independence and social standing that earlier generations of Chinese women had rarely enjoyed. According to a 2002 ethnographic study of urban only-daughters growing up under the One-Child Policy, the absence of competition with brothers for family resources enabled these young women to benefit from unprecedented parental support. They gained more power than ever before to challenge disadvantageous gender norms while taking advantage of those norms whose implications were more ambiguous rather than strictly limiting, allowing daughters to reinterpret them and use them to their own advantage⁶⁵.

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ Xie, Yu, and Jingwei Hu. "An Introduction to the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)." *Chinese Sociological Review* 47 (2015). pp. 3-4.

⁶⁵ Fong, Vanessa L. "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4 (2002): p. 1098-1109.

Parents who, under different circumstances, might have concentrated their investment in a son instead directed the whole of their educational and emotional resources toward their only child, regardless of her sex. This shift, in turn, weakened the traditional preference for sons in the very cities where daughters' educational and professional opportunities expanded fastest

This female educational gain has since become structural at the national level. Since 2010, young women have consistently outnumbered young men in Chinese college and university enrollment, reversing a gender gap that had persisted for decades; by 2020, women represented 51% of undergraduate students and 50.9% of graduate students nationwide, while the overall gender gap in years of schooling for the population aged 15 and over had narrowed to 0.6 years, down from 0.8 a decade earlier, as described above⁶⁶. What began as an unintended demographic side effect of the One-Child Policy in a small number of large cities had, within a generation, become a nationwide reversal of China's traditional educational gender gap.

However, this national improvement in female educational attainment has not eliminated the gendered rural-urban educational divide. The expansion of education has been particularly pronounced in urban areas, where economic development and returns to education have historically been greater. The same eastern, coastal macro-regions that industrialized and urbanized fastest are also where returns to education, and therefore incentives to invest in daughters' schooling, grew fastest. Although the rural-urban educational gap narrowed during the Cultural

⁶⁶ Zheng, Zhenzhen. "Gender Equality Progress in a Decade: Health, Education, and Employment." *China Population and Development Studies* 6 (2022). p. 456. doi:10.1007/s42379-022-00123-y.

Revolution, rural educational gains subsequently regressed, and education continued to favour urban areas⁶⁷. Scholars also observe that the gender gap in secondary education narrowed more substantially in urban areas than in rural ones. Thus, while the reduction of the gender gap in education represents a national trend, women in urban areas have generally benefited from greater educational opportunities than their rural counterparts⁶⁸.

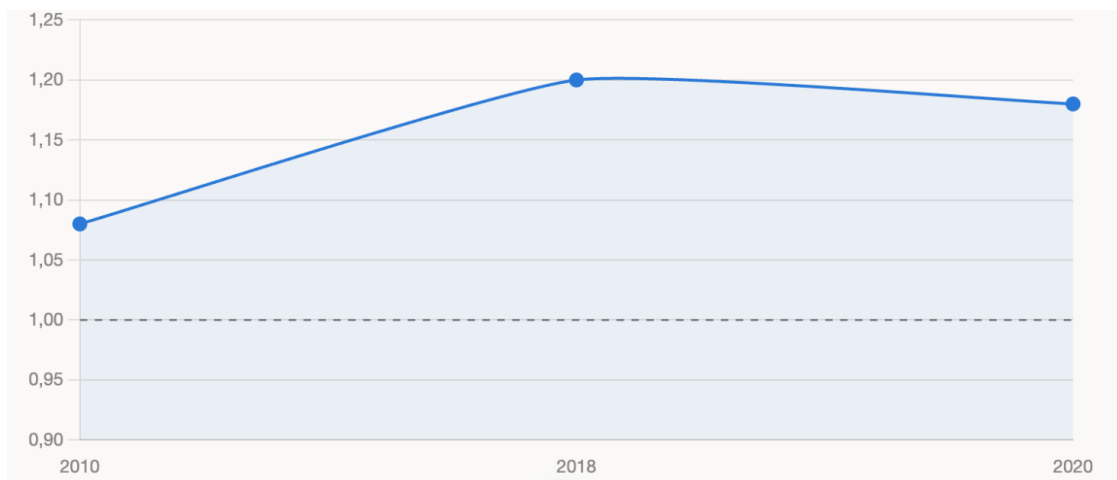
The Gender Parity Index (GPI) is an indicator used to measure gender equality in access to education. For tertiary enrollment, it is calculated by dividing the female gross enrollment ratio by the male gross enrollment ratio: a value of 1 indicates perfect parity between men and women, a value below 1 indicates an advantage for men, and a value above 1 indicates an advantage for women. According to the World Bank's development indicators, the percentage of female students in tertiary education in China increased from 34% to 52.74% between 1994 and 2016. China's GPI for tertiary enrollment showed a steady rise between 2010 and 2020: young women began outnumbering young men in college and university enrollment starting in 2010, when the index first crossed the parity threshold of 1.08, and continued climbing to reach 1.18 by 2020, meaning that, by that point, 118 women were enrolled in tertiary education for every 100 men (*Figure 3.5*). This trend is consistent with the dynamic described above: freed from competition with brothers for family resources, singleton daughters were able to receive the same, and in many cases more concentrated, parental investment in their education as sons, translating into measurably higher enrollment outcomes at the national level. As a result, many urban families began to shift their preferences from favoring sons to favoring daughters⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ ⁶⁷ Piotrowski, Martin, Lu Chao, Yuying Tong, and Yueyun Zhang. "The Transition to First Marriage in China, 1966–2008: An Examination of Gender Differences in Education and Hukou Status." *European Journal of Population*, 2016. pp. 132-133. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6240985/>.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Kim, S. W., and V. L. Fong. "A Longitudinal Study of Son and Daughter Preference among Chinese Only-Children from Adolescence to Adulthood." *The China Journal* 71 (2014). p.5. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674551>.

Figure 3.5: Gender Parity Index (GPI) for tertiary education enrollment in China, 2010, 2018 and 2020.



Source: *Realized by Chart.js based on the information contained in World Bank Group (2020)*⁷⁰

⁷⁰ World Bank Group. "School Enrollment, Tertiary, Female (% Gross) – China." World Development Indicators. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ENR.TERT.FM.ZS?end=2020&locations=CN&start=2010&view=chart>.

3.2.2 Marriage market

The increase in female educational attainment has also been accompanied by a broader transformation of marriage patterns across China. According to China's national population censuses, the average age at first marriage for Chinese women rose from 22.9 in 1980 to 28.0 in 2020, reflecting a long-term trend toward delayed marriage that accelerated in the 2000s and 2010s.

In Shanghai, men's average age at first marriage surpassed 30 for the first time around 2012, while women's average age reached 28.4 by 2015, both well above the national average⁷¹.

Nevertheless, this national trend toward later marriage should not be read as a straightforward, uniform shift, and the reasons behind it vary. This trend of delaying marriage could be partly tied to the anxieties that come from the strict parenting styles many of these young adults faced during their upbringing. It is worth noting, however, that marriage and parenthood are increasingly distinct decisions in China: childless marriages have become more common, meaning that reluctance toward one cannot be assumed to translate directly into reluctance toward the other. Many teenagers, particularly girls, have seen their parents make significant sacrifices in terms of time, money, and personal interests to support the family, which can make the idea of marriage seem less appealing. A survey conducted in Shanghai in 1999 among eighth and ninth graders revealed that 22% of female respondents (n=190) and 14% of male respondents (n=180) expressed a desire to remain unmarried for life. This reluctance extended beyond marriage itself to the prospect of parenthood. The same 1999 survey also found that 39% of female respondents (n=186) and 15% of male respondents (n=176) were hesitant about the prospect of having children, a markedly higher share than those who

⁷¹Gu, *Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China*, p.176.

rejected marriage outright, suggesting that for many teenagers it was the demands of raising a child, rather than marriage as such, that felt most daunting⁷². For many of these teenagers, the parenting they witnessed shaped their view of raising children as something exhausting and self-consuming, rather than a relationship they necessarily wished to reproduce with their own future family.

Nonetheless, the national trend toward later marriage conceals important differences between urban and rural areas. Research on first marriage in China shows that education and place of residence interact differently in shaping women's marriage chances. In particular, higher levels of education are associated with lower marriage chances among rural women, whereas the effect of education on marriage is not significant for urban women once other factors are taken into account⁷³. This suggests that the relationship between women's educational advancement and marriage cannot be understood without considering the rural-urban context.

As women continue to excel in education, it is becoming increasingly challenging for elite women to find partners who match their achievements. This shift has led to a notable rise in the number of so-called “leftover women” (*sheng-nü*), a term introduced by the government in 2007 to refer to unmarried women over the age of 27⁷⁴. Recent estimates indicate that about one in five women between the ages of 25 and 29 are still single⁷⁵. In contrast to Western societies, China's patriarchal culture tends to blame these women for having “unrealistically high expectations”⁷⁶. There is also significant pressure on women to adhere to traditional roles, such as caring for their families and becoming housewives. This

⁷² Ibidem.

⁷³ Piotrowski, Chao, Tong, Zhang, *The Transition to First Marriage in China, 1966–2008: An Examination of Gender Differences in Education and Hukou Status*, p. 129.

⁷⁴ To, Sandy. *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and Its Consequences*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2015. p.1.

⁷⁵ Ibidem

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

stigma surrounding being “leftover” has pressured many highly educated, urban women, precisely those with higher socioeconomic status, into marriages they might not have otherwise chosen, and has sparked a nationwide matchmaking movement⁷⁷. However, with feminist ideals gaining traction in China, many women are now pushing back against the traditional views of marriage and rejecting the “leftover” label. They argue that the term “*sheng*” can mean “victorious” instead of “leftover”, emphasizing that being single and unmarried is nothing to be ashamed of⁷⁸. In fact, women are increasingly claiming their right to delay marriage, focusing on education and career development, achieving financial independence, and ultimately living the life they want.

The phenomenon of highly educated unmarried women is therefore particularly visible in urban China, where the expansion of female education and professional opportunities has been especially pronounced. Urban women experienced a different relationship between education and marriage from rural women, reflecting the more advanced stage of socioeconomic development and the reduced prevalence of traditional “marrying up” patterns in urban areas⁷⁹.

For some unmarried women, staying at home with their parents is seen as a more appealing choice than getting married. A survey carried out in urban Dalian from 2014 to 2015 revealed that a whopping 85% of the 101 unmarried participants preferred living with their parents as long as possible⁸⁰. Interestingly, many of

⁷⁷ Gu, *Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China*, p.175.

⁷⁸ Tatlow, D. K. "Rejecting the 'Leftover Women' Label." *New York Times*, April 23, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/24/world/asia/24iht-letter24.html>.

⁷⁹ Piotrowski, Chao, Tong, Zhang, *The Transition to First Marriage in China, 1966–2008: An Examination of Gender Differences in Education and Hukou Status*, p. 142.

⁸⁰ Fong, Vanessa L., Greene Ko, Cong Zhang, and Sung Won Kim. "The 'Leftover' Majority: Why Urban Men and Women Born under China's One-Child Policy Remain Unmarried through Age 27." In *Chinese Families Upside Down: Intergenerational Dynamics and Neo-Familism in the Early 21st Century*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021. p.57.

these young adults earned more than their parents, which meant they often contributed to household expenses. This arrangement is not purely a product of contemporary economic pressures, however: intergenerational co-residence conforms to the Confucian tradition of filial piety, which historically demanded deference and support toward one's parents and ancestors, and remains a dominant moral framework in Chinese and other East Asian societies. Under this cultural lens, staying in the parental home, even as an adult with independent earnings, can be read less as a departure from traditional norms and more as a continuation of them, giving young unmarried adults a socially legitimate alternative to forming a new, separate household through marriage⁸¹. In addition, this arrangement was viewed as a better deal compared to the high costs of renting a place on their own. The money they saved on housing could be used for travel and enhancing their quality of life. As a result, living with parents has kept many women from rushing into marriage, which would bring along the hefty financial responsibilities of housing, monthly mortgage payments, and the potential costs of raising a child⁸². It is worth noting that cohabitation outside marriage remains comparatively rare in China: even among the most recent birth cohorts (those born after 1977), the cohabitation rate exceeds 20% up from an average of just 7% among those born before 1980⁸³. Moreover, where it does occur, premarital cohabitation in urban China is increasingly understood not as an alternative to marriage but as a transitional stage leading toward it⁸⁴, meaning that, unlike in many Western contexts, living with a partner outside marriage has not emerged as a widespread substitute for the arrangement described above, in which many unmarried young adults instead remain in their parents' household⁸⁵.

⁸¹ Chen, F., K. Shen, and D. Ruan. "The Mixed Blessing of Living Together or Close by: Parent–Child Relationship Quality and Life Satisfaction of Older Adults in China." *Demographic Research* 44, art. 24 (2021). pp. 3-4. <https://doi.org/10.4054/demres.2021.44.24>.

⁸² Gu, *Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China*, p.176.

⁸³ Yu, J., and Y. Xie. "Cohabitation in China: Trends and Determinants." *Population and Development Review* 41, no. 4 (2015): pp. 616-617.

⁸⁴ Ibidem, p.609.

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

The urban pattern of delayed and selective marriage among highly educated women contrasts sharply with the situation in rural China. While highly educated women in cities have increasingly been associated with delayed marriages and the phenomenon of the “leftover women” have been increasing, rural marriage markets have been particularly difficult for men with lower levels of education and socioeconomic status. It has been found that lower-educated rural men are particularly disadvantaged in the marriage market, partly because of the persistence of the expectation that men should fulfil the male breadwinner role as well as the highly gender-imbalanced nature of the marriage market⁸⁶.

The educational and marital issues outlined in this section, delayed marriages, rising rates of singlehood, and the “leftover women” trend, are primarily urban phenomena. They stem from the rapid growth of female education and job opportunities in cities. In contrast to urban environments, the marriage situation in rural areas primarily affects men who find themselves at the lower end of the social ladder. With agriculture being the main source of income for these households, the amount of manual labor each family can provide directly influences their financial well-being. This is one of the reasons why the One-Child Policy was not enforced as strictly in rural regions; it allowed families to have more sons who could eventually inherit the land and take on farming responsibilities. As discussed in Section 3.1, this strong preference for sons is reflected in a persistently higher rural sex ratio at birth, which has translated into a shortage of women in the rural marriage market.

This notable gender disparity has created a shortage of women available for marriage in rural China. A 2017 survey by Central China Normal University revealed that single women made up just 3.62% of the population in 267 rural villages, compared to 5.92% for single men, a ratio of roughly 1.6 unmarried men

⁸⁶ Piotrowski, Chao, Tong, Zhang, *The Transition to First Marriage in China, 1966–2008: An Examination of Gender Differences in Education and Hukou Status*, pp. 149-150.

for every unmarried woman. This figure, however, likely understates the true scale of the imbalance, since it is calculated over the entire village population rather than the marriageable age cohort⁸⁷. National census data offers a clearer picture of the scale of the phenomenon. According to the 2020 National Population Census, China recorded its highest historical sex ratio of marriageable population, reaching 110. In rural areas specifically, the proportion of single, never-married men who had reached age 34 without marrying stood at 45.72% in 2020, declining only slightly to 42.55% by age 35, compared with a much lower 3.62% of urban men remaining unmarried at age 35 and above, indicating that a substantial share of rural men remain unmarried well into their mid-thirties, a pattern far less common among women of the same age⁸⁸.

The contrast between urban and rural singlehood is therefore particularly pronounced. In urban China, singlehood is more closely associated with women's delayed marriage, higher educational attainment, and greater economic independence. In rural China, by contrast, singlehood is disproportionately concentrated among men and is closely connected to the shortage of women in the marriage market. This phenomenon has been described as a “marriage squeeze” affecting surplus rural men, whose difficulties in finding a spouse are linked to the male-biased sex ratio that has developed since the 1980s⁸⁹. Government forecasts had anticipated this imbalance well in advance: by 2020, there were projected to be around 30 million more men of marrying age than women nationwide⁹⁰.

⁸⁷ Lu, Y. M., L. L. Huang, and X. Y. Lin. "Single Rural Chinese Men Are Having a Hard Time to Find a Wife Due to Gender Imbalance." *Global Times*, May 21, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1224091.shtml>.

⁸⁸ Yang, Liuqing, Zhen Guo, Haili Liang, Persis Samuel, Lin Dong, Yuan Peng, and Shuzhuo Li. "Male Marriage Squeeze and a Sociodemographic Portrait of Involuntary Bachelors in Rural China." *China Population and Development Studies*, 2023.

⁸⁹ Meng, Yang, Bo Yang, Shuzhuo Li, and Marcus W. Feldman. "Marriage, Health, and Old-Age Support: Risk to Rural Involuntary Bachelors' Family Development in Contemporary China." *Asian Bioethics Review*, 2021. P.82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00163-x>.

⁹⁰ To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and Its Consequence*, p.1.

The intense competition among men for wives has pushed rural women to elevate their expectations when it comes to finding husbands. For many of these women, marrying into a wealthy family is often the most viable path to improving their social standing. This situation has also contributed to a growing gender imbalance, as some rural women opt to move to urban areas and secure a permanent urban hukou, the household registration status described in Chapter Two, conversion of which (*nongzhuanfei*) remains institutionally difficult, effectively shedding their rural identities. It is important to understand that this mobility is not just about women gaining market power. Research on intimate partner violence in China reveals that rural women have long experienced much higher rates of abuse in marriage compared to their urban counterparts. For many of these women, migration is often fueled by vulnerability and the pressure to marry, rather than a sign of increased bargaining power⁹¹.

Given that the likelihood of mistreatment after marriage tends to be higher in rural settings compared to urban ones, female migrant workers seeking better opportunities in cities represent a significant portion of China's internal migration⁹². The 2016 Rural-Urban Migrant Workers Surveillance Survey revealed that approximately 169.34 million workers from rural backgrounds migrated to urban ones in search of paid employment, with women making up about 31.7% of that number⁹³. This figure is consistent with the broader growth of China's floating population described in Chapter Two, which reached an estimated 375.8 million by 2020. The decline in the rural female population has led to a serious marriage crisis for rural men, particularly those lacking both status and financial means. In these areas, men without wives face relentless pressure from their families and

⁹¹ Fong, W. S. "When Millions of Rural Chinese Men Are Desperate for a Wife." ThinkChina, April 1, 2022. <http://www.thinkchina.sg/when-millions-rural-chinese-men-are-desperate-wife>.

⁹² Zhang, Jingwen, James Nazroo, and Nan Zhang. "Gender Differences in Rural-Urban Migration and Its Impact on Depression in Later Life." Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing, 2022. p.3 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102890>.

⁹³ National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC). "Report of 2016 Rural-Urban Migrant Workers Surveillance Survey" [in Chinese]. 2017. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201704/t20170428_1489334.html.

often endure humiliation from their neighbors, as having a wife and children is closely tied to a man's social standing⁹⁴.

Along these shifts in marriage timing and partner selection, divorce has also become increasingly common in China over the past decades: between 2010 and 2019, the crude divorce rate rose from 2 to 3.36 per 1,000 people⁹⁵. Many young adults are worried about potential conflicts after marriage, often stemming from differences in family wealth, educational backgrounds, and parental disapproval. On top of that, external influences like movies, books, and songs that glorify the idea of everlasting love make it even harder to navigate a successful marriage. A 2022 study on Chinese college students' marriage attitudes found that, among the reasons for wanting to marry, having a companion for spiritual support received the highest average rating, even higher than instrumental considerations such as material support or having children, underscoring how strongly the emotional and romantic dimension now shapes marriage expectations among young Chinese adults. As a result, some women opt to postpone or even forgo marriage if they cannot find a partner with whom they feel a genuine romantic connection⁹⁶. However, the evidence presented in this section does not provide a sufficiently clear and comparable urban-rural breakdown of divorce rates. For this reason, divorce is presented here as part of the broader national transformation of marriage, while the rural-urban comparison is developed more clearly through differences in female education, marriage timing, and singlehood.

⁹⁴ Lu, Huang, Lin, *Single Rural Chinese Men Are Having a Hard Time to Find a Wife Due to Gender Imbalance*.

⁹⁵ National Bureau of Statistics of China. "Divorce Rate in China from 2010 to 2020 (per 1,000 Population)." Statista, October 9, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/279449/divorce-rate-in-china/>.

⁹⁶ Xie, Q., and X. Hong. "Research on Factors Affecting Chinese College Students' Marriage Intention: Applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour." *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022). p.6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.868275>.

3.3 The 4-2-1 Family: Smaller in the Urban China, Still Extended in Rural China

As of the early 2010s, nearly a third of all families in China were one-child families, marking a significant shift in family structure. The aging population is becoming increasingly evident at a societal level, and the changes are striking for each family and individuals. The family model of four (grandparents)—two (parents)—one (child) is now a common reality for many⁹⁷. Recognizing the potential decline in family support for the elderly, the Chinese government implemented regulations that require adult children to visit and assist their parents when necessary⁹⁸. This transformation in family structure, along with better housing, extensive migration, and rapid urbanization, has led to household arrangements and living situations that would have been hard to imagine just a few decades ago.

The One-Child Policy has sped up changes in family size and structure that were already in place, leaving its own distinct marks. Today, over 150 million families in China are made up of just one child, a figure that, unlike the individual-level counts discussed later in this chapter, measures households rather than people. With only one child, the chances of parents living with their child have dropped, partly simply because parents have fewer children with whom they may potentially cohabit as it has been documented⁹⁹. At the same time, this situation might have increased the pressure on single children to stay close to their parents. Back in the

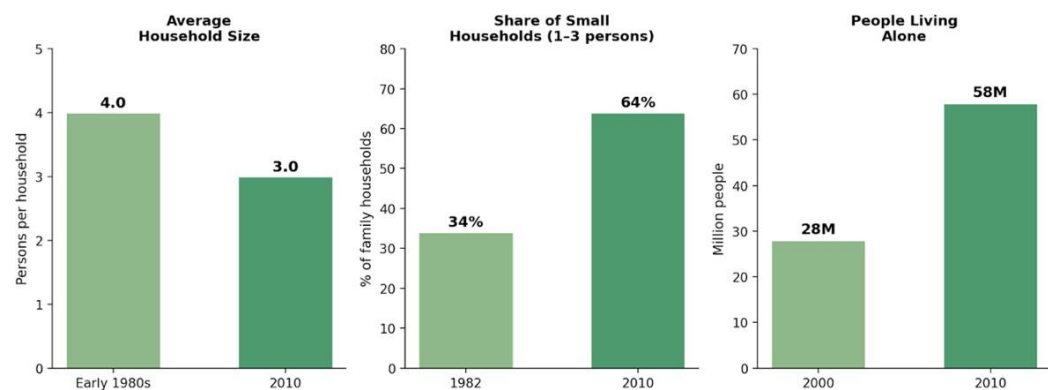
⁹⁷ Davis, Deborah S. "Demographic Challenges for a Rising China." *Daedalus* 143, no. 2 (2014). p.27. https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00270

⁹⁸ Meng Meng and Katie Hunt, "New Chinese Law: Visit Your Parents," *CNN*, July 2, 2013. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/02/world/asia/china-elderly-law/index.html>

⁹⁹ John R. Logan, Fuqin Bian, and Yanjie Bian, "Intergenerational Relations in Urban China: Proximity, Contact, and Help to Parents," *Social Forces* 76, no. 3 (1998). p.115.

early 1980s, the average Chinese household had more than four components, but by 2010, that number had shrunk to just about three. The proportion of small family households, those with one to three members, increased from 34% in 1982 to 64% by 2010, with the biggest increase seen in single-generation households. In the first decade of the 2000s, the number of people living alone more than doubled, jumping from 28 million to 58 million, which made up 4.4% of the population by 2010¹⁰⁰. *Figure 3.6* traces this shift in family composition across the same three decades, showing the steady contraction of the average Chinese household alongside the corresponding rise in small and single-person households. While these significant shifts in household size and structure can be linked to other major social changes happening in China, like large-scale migration, better housing conditions, and a growing desire for independence, we cannot overlook the impact of demographic changes.

Figure 3.6: Changes in Chinese Family Size and Structure, 1980s–2010



Source: Realized by Chart.js based on data reported in Cai, Feng (2021)¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Cai, Yong, and Wang Feng. "The Social and Sociological Consequences of China's One-Child Policy." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2021. p.595.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem

Even though the average household size is getting smaller, the tradition of living together remains strong. According to data from the 2010 Chinese census, intergenerational co-residence remained widespread among older adults: 32.8 percent of people aged 65 and over lived in three-generation households, while 12.5 percent lived alone and 29.2 percent lived only with their spouse¹⁰². Regardless of whether they live together or apart, families continue to nurture strong connections across generations. This intergenerational support is evident in the significant childcare provided by grandparents, whether through co-residence (including situations where grandparents take care of grandchildren without parents present) or assistance from grandparents who do not live with the family¹⁰³. The sense of filial duty from children towards their parents is still very much alive, with daughters increasingly stepping up to offer both financial help and emotional support¹⁰⁴. Meanwhile, the younger generation, often referred to as the “sandwich generation”, is under growing pressure to balance the cultural expectations of caring for two parents and, in many cases, four grandparents, all while managing the usual financial, caregiving, and emotional responsibilities of raising their own child, especially when all of this falls on one person. As the parents and grandparents of this generation of only children continue to age, the challenges of this situation are expected to become even more pronounced in the coming decades, rather than lessen¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰² Yuan, L., and W. Cao. "Effects of Sibship Size and Birth Order on Sexual and Reproductive Health among Sexually Active Young People in China." *Children* 9, no. 9 (2022). p.1. doi:10.3390/children9091302.

¹⁰³ Chen, Feinian, Guangya Liu, and Christine A. Mair. "Intergenerational Ties in Context: Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren in China." *Social Forces* 90, no. 2 (2011): p.572. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sor012>

¹⁰⁴ Xie, Yu, and Haiyan Zhu. "Do Sons or Daughters Give More Money to Parents in Urban China?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71, no. 1 (2009): p. 174-175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00588.x>

¹⁰⁵ Cai, Feng, *The Social and Sociological Consequences of China's One-Child Policy*, p.595.

The 4-2-1 family structure has taken on quite different shapes in urban and rural China. In urban areas, the One-Child Policy was enforced with strictness, while in rural areas, couples were often allowed to have a second child if their first was a girl. This variation was administered largely at the provincial and local level, consistent with the administrative hierarchy described in Chapter Two, through which policy implementation has historically been delegated to lower levels of government. This leniency reflects the government's acknowledgment of how rural families depend more on sons for farming and support in their later years¹⁰⁶. As a result, urban areas saw a rapid shift towards nuclear families after the post-Mao reforms, while in rural regions specifically, extended families with three generations living together remained more common. This is largely due to housing limitations and the ongoing need for help with childcare and caring for the elderly in rural areas, where access to state-provided childcare and eldercare services has traditionally been much more restricted compared to what may be available in urban areas¹⁰⁷.

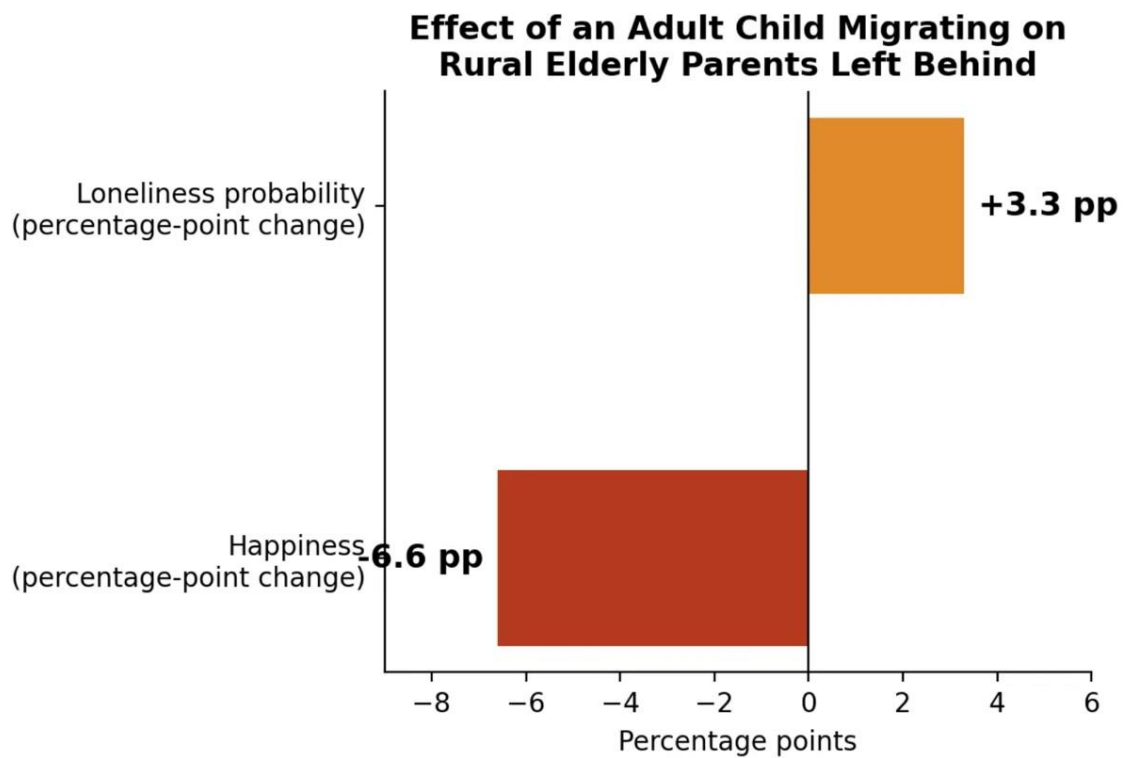
The trend of rural-urban migration has added more pressure to this family dynamic. Studies using national data show that when an adult child moves away for work, the happiness of elderly parents left behind in rural areas drops by 6.6 percentage points, and their chances of feeling lonely increase by 3.3 percentage points. This highlights how the decline of family-based elder care has hit rural China particularly hard¹⁰⁸ (Figure 3.7).

¹⁰⁶ Jiang, Quanbao, and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte. "The 4-2-1 Family Structure in China: A Survival Analysis Based on Life Tables." *European Journal of Ageing*, 2011. p.119.
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5547295/>.

¹⁰⁷ Cai, Feng, *The Social and Sociological Consequences of China's One-Child Policy*, p. 596.

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, Chi, Kaiyu Lyu, Xiaoyu Cheng, and Chongshang Zhang. "The Impact of Adult Children Rural-Urban Migration on Left-Behind Parents' Health: Evidence from China." p.8. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2022. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2022.951124.

Figure 3.7: Effect of an Adult Child Migrating on Rural Elderly Parents Left Behind



Source: Realized by Charts.js based on Zhang et al. (2022)¹⁰⁹

The impact of these changes is also felt by the youngest generation. By 2010, around 61 million children were classified as “left-behind children” in rural

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem.

China, living apart from their migrant parents¹¹⁰. This phenomenon is a direct consequence of the gap between hukou-based and residence-based population statistics discussed in Chapter Two: migrants who move to cities without converting their hukou status leave both their children and their parents formally registered, and often practically stranded, in the countryside. In most cases where both parents had migrated, grandparents took on the primary caregiving role. While urban China has created a “sandwich generation” caught between caring for aging parents and a single child, rural China has often seen a complete generational shift, with grandparents stepping in as the main caregivers for children who are largely raised without their parents around¹¹¹.

The One-Child Policy has not only reshaped family structure but also introduced new concerns and vulnerabilities for families. One such concern is the possibility for parents outliving their only child, a particularly significant fear in the context of an ageing population. However this risk must be considered against the broader demographic context of declining mortality rates and increasing life expectancy in China, which also contributed to the decline in fertility. This fear became a tragic reality, for example, for some families following events such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which claimed around 70,000 lives, including an estimated 12,000 only children.

By the early 2000s, the number of only children in China, as opposed to the household count cited at the start of this section, had already grown into the tens of millions: an estimated 95.47 million children aged 0–17 were only children by the end of 2000. By 2005, once the same cohort is tracked into a wider 0–30 age bracket, this figure had risen to approximately 158.41 million, an increase that

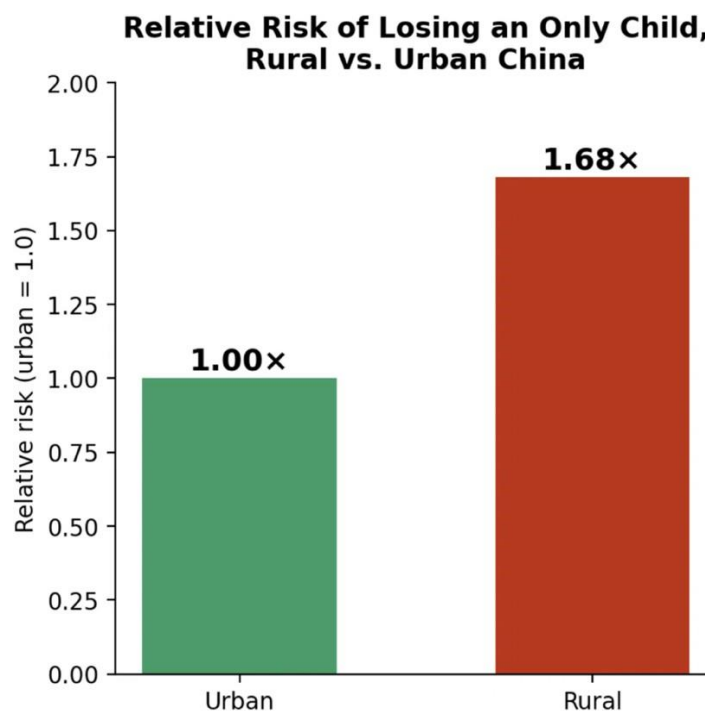
¹¹⁰ Zhou, Minhui, Rachel Murphy, and Ran Tao. "Effects of Parents' Migration on the Education of Children Left Behind in Rural China." *Population and Development Review* 40, no. 2 (2014). p.273.

¹¹¹ Lu, Yao, Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, and Donald J. Treiman. "Parental Migration and Children's Psychological and Cognitive Development in China: Differences and Mediating Mechanisms." *Chinese Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (2020). p.10. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7989854/>.

reflects the broader age range counted, not a sudden rise in the number of only children born¹¹².

It is estimated that a million families in China have already faced the heart-breaking loss of their only child, with rural families facing a risk of losing an only child that is 1.68 times higher than that of urban families¹¹³ (*Figure 3.8*)

Figure 3.8: Relative risk of losing an only child, rural vs. urban China.



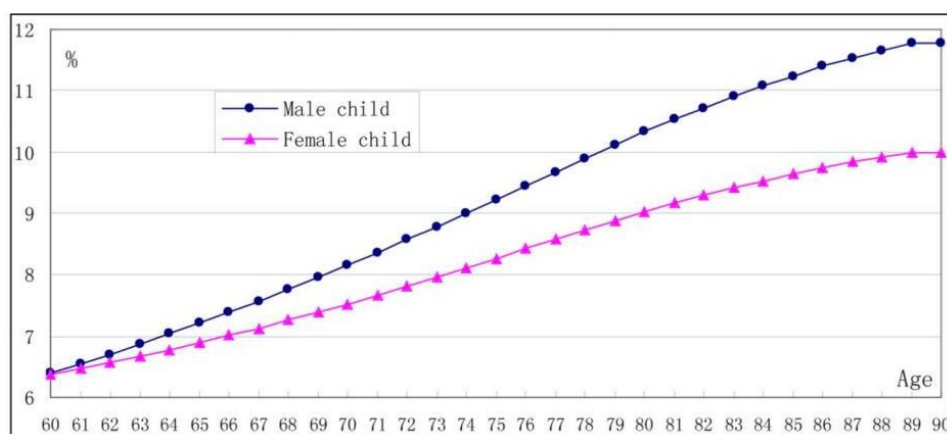
¹¹² Wang, Feng. "The Future of a Demographic Overachiever: Long-Term Implications of the Demographic Transition in China." *Population and Development Review*, 2011. p.12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2011.00383.x>.

¹¹³ Zhang, Yudi, and Xiaoming Jia. "A Quantitative Study on the Grief of People Who Lose Their Only Child: From the Perspective of Familism Culture." *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2018. p.2. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5989060/>.

Source: Realized by Charts.js based on Zhang, Jia (2018)¹¹⁴

Using life tables from the 2000 census, Jiang and colleagues modelled the cumulative probability that Chinese fathers, typically the heads of households, would outlive their only child (*Figure 3.9*). At age 60, a father already has over a six percent chance of having lost his child, and by age 90 that probability climbs to over ten percent, leaving a growing share of elderly parents with no living child at all as they enter old age. Grandchildren, when present, can offer a sense of emotional continuity, but they rarely provide the same level of practical and financial support as a child, and the bond with daughters- and sons-in-law, who typically play a central role in day-to-day care, tends to weaken once the child who connected them is no longer there¹¹⁵.

Figure 3.9: Cumulative probability of losing a child.



¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p. 10.

Source: Jiang et al, (2013)¹¹⁶

By 2010–2012, official estimates put the number of *shidu* families, those who had lost their only child, at more than a million nationwide, with around 76,000 new families added to this count every year¹¹⁷.

It is important to contextualize that the fear of losing own child occurs within a period characterized by a significant decline in child mortality. Indeed, in China, the infant mortality rate dropped from 46.9 per 1,000 live births in 1980 to 5.5 per 1,000 by 2020. At the same time, life expectancy rose from around 64 years to over 78 years. So, the worry about losing an only child was not related to a higher risk of child mortality. Instead, it was influenced by the structural realities brought about by the One-Child Policy: families found themselves limited in their ability to have more children who could offer some intergenerational security if their only child were to pass away. In this way, even though the statistical risk of child mortality was decreasing, the impact of losing an only child remained particularly heavy for families, as the chance to fill that void with additional births was significantly restricted¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, p.9.

¹¹⁷ Yin, Qianlan, Zhilei Shang, Na Zhou, Lili Wu, Guangyu Liu, Xiaoqian Yu, Huaihui Zhang, Haidong Xue, and Weizhi Liu. "An Investigation of Physical and Mental Health Consequences among Chinese Parents Who Lost Their Only Child." *BMC Psychiatry*, 2018. p.1. doi:10.1186/s12888-018-1621-2.

¹¹⁸ World Bank. "Mortality Rate, Infant (per 1,000 Live Births) – China" and "Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years) – China." World Development Indicators. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.IMRT.IN?locations=CN>.

The grieving parents are “not only deeply impacted by the loss of their child, but are also stigmatized by the culture and victimized by the One-Child Policy”¹¹⁹. A 2015 report from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in New York, developed in collaboration with the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), indicates that women who have lost their only child often have lower education levels, are more likely to be divorced or widowed, and face higher unemployment rates¹²⁰.

In response to this new demographic reality, families and individuals are adjusting their expectations and behaviors. This adaptation is a two-way street, involving both parents and their children. With just one child, parents are increasingly focused on investing in their education and covering their housing and other expenses¹²¹. At the same time, Chinese parents are also preparing their children for independent lives. By the mid-2010s, the once-dominant preference for sons began to wane in some parts of the country. This shift did not take the form of sex-selective practices favoring girls, which have remained rare in China; rather, it manifested as a growing number of families choosing to stop at one daughter in-stead of pursuing additional births in search of a son. Research has shown that being an only child can really boost a child's sense of filial piety and their desire to see their parents happy. With just one child in the picture, many parents have come to recognize the true value of their children, particularly the care that daughters provide¹²². This has led to stronger emotional connections between daughters and their parents, along with an increase in the support daughters offer to their

¹¹⁹ Zheng, Y., and T. R. Lawson. "Identity Reconstruction as Shiduers: Narratives from Chinese Older Adults Who Lost Their Only Child." *International Journal of Social Welfare* 24, no. 4 (2015). p.399.

¹²⁰ National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *Women Who Lost Their Only Child in China and Their Family Status: Facts and Figures 2015*. New York: UNFPA, 2015.
<https://china.unfpa.org/en/publications/women-who-lost-their-only-child-chinaand-their-family-status-facts-and-figures-2015>.

¹²¹ Zhai, Fuhua, and Qin Gao. "Center-Based Care in the Context of One-Child Policy in China: Do Child Gender and Siblings Matter?" *Population Research and Policy Review*, 2010. p.749.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-009-9171-4>.

¹²² Murphy, R., R. Tao, and X. Lu. "Son Preference in Rural China: Patrilineal Families and Socioeconomic Change." *Population and Development Review* 37, no. 4 (2011). p.672.

aging parents, these have turned out to be some surprising social effects of the policy.

As China's population continues to age in the coming decades, the structural pressures on the 4-2-1 family model are anticipated to intensify. This situation brings to light some pressing questions about whether family-based elder care can remain viable in a society where the number of children per household is steadily declining¹²³. The decline in the size of Chinese families and the fading of traditional multigenerational support systems, as mentioned earlier, are not just random changes; they represent a significant shift in demographics that is altering the age structure of Chinese society on a broader scale.

¹²³ Cai, Feng, *The Social and Sociological Consequences of China's One-Child Policy*, p.596.

3.4 Growing Old in Urban and Rural China

3.4.1 *How Fast China's Population Is Aging*

While it is true that the rapid aging of China's population is partly due to longer life expectancy, the decisive factor has been the decline in birth rates linked to the family planning policy¹. This has led to a shrinking child population, which in turn affects the working-age population even more significantly. This demographic shift is not just a byproduct of socioeconomic progress; its remarkable pace has also been shaped by the strict family-planning measures in place. As a result, China is experiencing one of the largest and fastest demographic transition in the world¹²⁴.

As mentioned earlier, the speed and impact of this change vary greatly across the country, with rural areas of China facing the toughest and complex challenges of population aging.

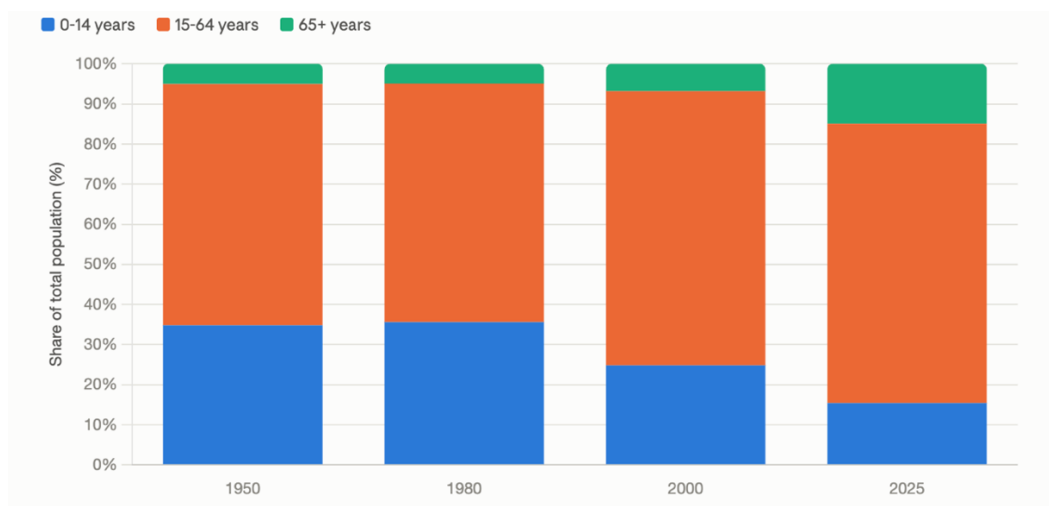
Over the last 50 years, mortality rates in China have plummeted, particularly during the early years of the People's Republic of China. Life expectancy jumped from just 48 years between 1950 and 1954 to over 71 years by 2000. A significant part of this decline in mortality can be traced back to the drop in infant and childhood mortality rates, which resulted from improvements in living standards and education levels among the Chinese population¹²⁵.

¹²⁴ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p.9.

¹²⁵ Li, Qiang, Mieke Reuser, Cornelia Kraus, and Juha Alho. "Ageing of a Giant: A Stochastic Population Forecast for China, 2006–2060." *Journal of Population Research* 26, no. 1 (2009): p.22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41110922>.

Back in 1982, the elderly population, those aged 65 and older, made up 4.9% of the total population. Fast forward to 1990 that figure climbed to 5.6%, reaching 6.8% by 2000. Interestingly, in China, it took only around 20 years for the elderly demographic to grow from 5% to 7%. In contrast, many developed nations typically see this shift take about 50 to 80 years¹²⁶. *Figure 3.10* situates this acceleration within the longer-run evolution of China's age structure between 1950 and 2025, showing the steady contraction of the working-age share and the corresponding expansion of the 65+ population over the following decades. The pace has further intensified, and by 2025 the share of the population aged 65 and over had reached 15.9%, up from 6.8% in 2000, meaning the increase recorded over these twenty-five years (9.1 percentage points) is nearly five times larger than the increase recorded over the previous eighteen years (1982-2000, 1.9 percentage points). China's population is therefore ageing at an accelerating rate.

Figure 3.10: Share of China's population by broad age group (0–14, 15–64, 65+), 1950–2025.



¹²⁶ Ibidem.

*Source: Realized by Charts.js based on World Bank, World Development Indicators (2024)*¹²⁷

3.4.2 Pensions: A Widening Rural-Urban Gap

This contraction of the working-age population, combined with the rapid expansion of the elderly population documented above, puts considerable pressure on China's pension system. Like most pay-as-you-go systems, China's basic pension relies on contributions from current workers to fund the benefits paid to current retirees, meaning that a shrinking ratio of workers to pensioners directly threatens the system's financial sustainability. This system is itself split along the urban-rural line: the Urban Employees Pension Scheme is mandatory for formally employed urban workers, jointly funded by employer and employee contributions, and combines a pooled, pay-as-you-go component with an individual account. Rural residents and the urban self-employed, by contrast, were long excluded from any formal pension coverage until 2009, when the government introduced the New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS), a voluntary and subsidized pension program aimed specifically at rural residents and a groundbreaking initiative on a national scale. Eligibility for this scheme, like most rural welfare programmes, is defined by hukou status rather than actual residence, a distinction explained in Chapter Two. By 2012, the program had rapidly expanded, enrolling over 400 million people and reaching nearly every county in China¹²⁸. In 2014, the State Council

¹²⁷ World Bank. "Population Ages 0–14, 15–64, and 65+ (% of Total Population) – China." World Development Indicators.

¹²⁸ Chen, Xi, Karen Eggleston, and Ang Sun. "The Impact of Social Pensions on Intergenerational Relationships: Comparative Evidence from China." *Journal of the Economics of Ageing*, 2018. p.6. doi:10.1016/j.jeoa.2017.04.001.

merged the NRPS with the Urban Residents Pension Scheme into the current, unified Rural and Urban Residents Pension Scheme, a far more recent and considerably less generous programme than its urban-employee counterpart¹²⁹.

The basic benefit is set at a mere 660 RMB per year, which is about 98.22 dollars. This amount falls woefully short of covering rural living expenses and pales in comparison to the much higher pensions that urban enterprise employees receive, which are calculated based on their wages. As a result, even though there is nearly universal coverage, the support that rural pensioners receive is minimal when compared to what their urban peers enjoy. Looking ahead, it is hard to see how these systems will adequately support the rural population, and the pensions on offer are unlikely to be sufficient for a comfortable retirement, especially with inflation on the rise. Even in cities, the old-age social security system does not reach all older adults, and there is a notable lack of nursing facilities for the elderly¹³⁰.

In rural China, most older adults, who spent their youth as peasants or in informal jobs, continued working until they could no longer do so, often without any social security benefits. More than a decade after the NRPS was introduced, the rural-urban workers gap has not faded; in fact, it has become even more pronounced. By the end of 2023, this gap in pension income was stark and, moreover, cut across more than a simple urban-rural line. Within the formal employee system itself, the average monthly pension for retired urban enterprise workers stood at around RMB 3,271, while a more privileged subgroup, those who had retired from government agencies and public institutions, received considerably more, around

¹²⁹ Ibidem.

¹³⁰ Liu, Siyuan, Hong He, and Hanzhi Gao. "The Effect of Social Pension on Health-Related Quality of Life of the Rural Older People: A Panel Study from China." *BMC Geriatrics*, 2024. p.2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-024-04880-y>.

RMB 6,243 per month¹³¹. Both figures dwarfed the pensions available under the separate Basic Pension Insurance for Urban and Rural Residents, the voluntary, low-contribution scheme discussed above, which covers rural residents and urban residents outside the formal workforce alike: its 172.68 million enrollees received an average of just RMB 223 per month in 2023, rising only slightly to RMB 246 by the end of 2024¹³². The real divide, in other words, runs less between “urban” and “rural” as such than between the formal employee pension system, itself internally stratified by type of employer, and the residential pension system that catches everyone outside it, rural and urban alike.

Until the 2025 reform introducing a gradual increase in the statutory retirement age, discussed in Chapter Four, China's statutory retirement ages had remained essentially unchanged since the 1950s and were explicitly differentiated by sex: 60 for men, 50 for female blue-collar workers, and 55 for female white-collar workers¹³³. These thresholds applied to workers covered by the Urban Employee Pension Scheme. By contrast, the Basic Old-Age Insurance for Urban and Rural Residents, which covers residents outside the employee pension system, allows eligible participants to receive pension benefits from the age of 60, regardless of sex¹³⁴. In practice, the effective retirement age was lower: Chinese authorities reported an average retirement age of around 54, a figure that reflected the prevalence of early retirement before the recent reform¹³⁵. By comparison, the average

¹³¹ Lu, Zhiheng. "让养老更有'底', 让消费有'力'——完善基本养老保险的四个建议" [Giving Greater Security to Old Age and Greater Strength to Consumption: Four Recommendations for Improving Basic Pension Insurance]. 2025.

¹³² Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China. *2024 Statistical Bulletin on Human Resources and Social Security Development*. Beijing: MOHRSS, June 13, 2025.

¹³³ John T. Giles, Xiaoyan Lei, Gewei Wang, Yafeng Wang, and Yaohui Zhao, “One Country, Two Systems: Evidence on Retirement Patterns in China,” *Journal of Pension Economics and Finance* 22, no. 2 (2023): p.196, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474747221000391>.

¹³⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Pensions at a Glance Asia/Pacific 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), section “China: Pension System in 2022,” <https://doi.org/10.1787/d4146d12-en>.

¹³⁵ “Raised Retirement Age Won’t Hurt Young People’s Job Market: Experts,” *ECNS*, July 27, 2016.

normal retirement age across OECD countries was 64.4 years for men and 63.6 years for women in 2022¹³⁶.

Against this background, one of the policy responses to population ageing has been the gradual reform of the statutory retirement age. From January 2025, China began progressively increasing the retirement age over a fifteen-year period: the statutory retirement age for men will rise from 60 to 63, while the retirement age for women will increase from 50 to 55 for women previously covered by the lower threshold, and from 55 to 58 for those previously covered by the higher threshold. The reform is being implemented gradually rather than through a single increase in the retirement age. One potential solution could be to increase the tax rate for the working-age population. The old-age dependency ratio, which compares the number of people aged 65 and older to those in the working-age group (15–64), is expected to climb from about 18.2% in 2020 to over 50% by 2050. This means that, in the not-so-distant future, just two working-age adults will be responsible for supporting each elderly person. Even a sixfold increase in the pension contribution rate alone would not be enough to close the resulting financial gap¹³⁷.

¹³⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Pensions at a Glance Asia/Pacific 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), section “Current Retirement Ages,” <https://doi.org/10.1787/d4146d12-en>.

¹³⁷ Ibidem, p.11.

3.4.3 *The Erosion of Family-Based Old-Age Support: Migration, Separation, and Child Loss*

Section 3.3 has examined how the One-Child Policy reshaped the size and internal composition of the Chinese family; this section focuses on a related but distinct problem: even where adult children exist, they are not always physically available to provide day-to-day support. While the pension system provides an increasingly important source of support for older people, family members continue to play a central role in old-age care in China; this reliance becomes particularly problematic in rural areas, where large-scale rural-to-urban migration has physically separated many older parents from their adult children. When adult children migrate to cities for employment, elderly parents may remain in rural areas and become increasingly dependent on other family members, particularly spouses or grandchildren, for everyday assistance and care. This creates a specific rural dimension of population ageing: the challenge is not only that families are becoming smaller, as discussed above, but that younger generations are increasingly geographically distant from older ones even where they exist.

By 2014, rural China was home to 127 million elderly residents, with 50 millions of them, about 39.4% of the rural elderly population, classified as “left-behind”, living without their migrant children nearby¹³⁸. This situation mirrored the 61 million left-behind children mentioned earlier in Section 3.3, highlighting how the same migration trends were simultaneously depleting rural households at both ends of the age spectrum.

¹³⁸ Luo, R., C. Zhang, and Y. Liu. "Health Risk Assessment Indicators for the Left-Behind Elderly in Rural China: A Delphi Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 1 (2020). p.1. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/17/1/340>.

Furthermore, due to the urban-rural divide, Migrant workers' children, meanwhile, often lack the same access to welfare, healthcare, and educational opportunities as those living permanently in urban settings, a hukou-linked disparity that reinforces the pressure on the family members, typically grandparents, left behind to raise them, compounding rather than relieving the caregiving burden on rural households¹³⁹.

The clearest illustration of what happens when family-based support disappears entirely, rather than merely becoming geographically distant, is the case of these shidu families, literally meaning lost the only child, whose numbers, as noted in Section 3.3, had already surpassed one million by 2010–2012. In 2012, more than 80 shidu parents, representing roughly 2,000 who had signed a petition, gathered at the National Family and Birth Planning Commission of the PRC in Beijing to demand greater state support; it was the first time the group had received sustained national attention, and it prompted a rapid, if limited, government response, including increased pension subsidies and priority placement on adoption waiting lists for shidu parents. The episode also marked the start of a longer-term shift: bereaved single-child parents have since become a recurring focus of local family-planning officials, who treat continued shidu petitioning as a social-stability concern requiring ongoing management, illustrating how a demographic side-effect of the One-Child Policy turned into a lasting political and administrative problem in its own right¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁹ Bouey, Jennifer, Michael S. Pollard, Agnes Xiangzhen Wang, and Rakesh Pandey. "China's Aging Population and the Implications for China's Security." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, March 12, 2026. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA3372-1.html.

¹⁴⁰ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p.

3.4.4 Healthcare needs and coverage

Population ageing also has direct implications for healthcare demand, since older adults are more likely to require medical treatment, repeated hospital care, and assistance with chronic conditions and loss of functional autonomy. By the end of 2023, over 1.33 billion people had signed up for China's basic medical insurance system, which means that more than 95 percent of the population is covered. However, the level of protection really varies depending on the specific insurance schemes. In 2023, the Urban Employee Basic Medical Insurance covered 84.6 percent of inpatient costs that fall under the reimbursable medical insurance catalogue, while the Urban and Rural Resident Basic Medical Insurance only covered 68.1 percent. This gap was even more noticeable in tertiary hospitals, where the reimbursement rates were 83.5 percent for the Urban Employee plan and just 63.2 percent for the Urban and Rural Resident plan¹⁴¹.

To address this gap, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security launched a long-term care insurance (LTCI) pilot program in 2016, starting in 15 cities and expanding to 49 by 2020; the program has remained capped at these 49 pilot cities since then, though coverage and take-up within them have grown substantially. By the end of 2024, around 187.86 million people were participating in LTCI, with 1.46 million actively receiving benefits. Even so, the pilot cities together employ only around 300,000 registered LTC workers nationwide, far fewer per capita than in Germany, Japan, South Korea or the United States, and evidence on the programme's effects, while positive, so far comes only from these pilot areas rather than the country as a whole. In December 2024, the Chinese government signaled plans to move beyond the pilot phase and accelerate the development of

¹⁴¹ National Healthcare Security Administration (China). *2023 National Statistical Bulletin on Medical Security Development*. Beijing: NHSA, July 25, 2024.

a nationwide LTCI system; as of now, however, the programme has not officially expanded beyond the original 49 cities¹⁴².

Back in 2015, around 18.3% of the elderly in China, about 40.6 million people, were either fully or partially disabled, a figure projected to reach approximately 65 million by 2030, according to nationally representative estimates based on China's seventh population census. Using a broader clinical definition of functional disability, one that also captures moderate cognitive impairment alongside physical limitations in daily activities, a separate Markov-model projection based on longitudinal health survey data estimates that the share of older adults classified as disabled could rise from approximately 39.75% in 2030 to 45.28% by 2100, with the absolute number peaking at 160 million around 2070 before settling above 115 million by the end of the century¹⁴³.

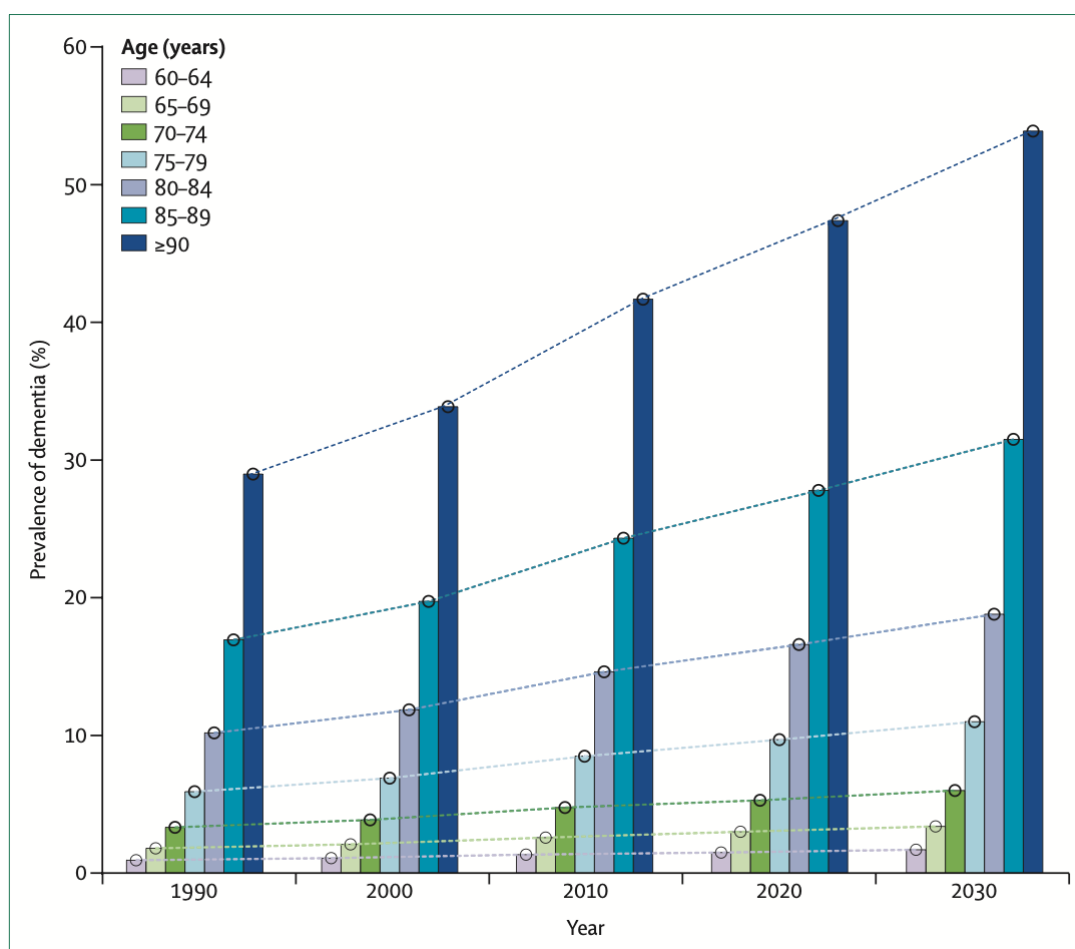
Cognitive impairment represents a related and growing dimension of this burden: a nationally representative study estimated that 15.07 million Chinese adults aged 60 and older were living with dementia, corresponding to an overall prevalence of about 6%, with prevalence rising sharply with age, from roughly 2% among those in their sixties to over 30% among those aged 90 and above. Rural areas show a distinct trajectory: the prevalence of dementia among people aged 60 and older is estimated at 7.2% in rural China, compared to 4.8% in urban areas, a gap that reflects both the concentration of population aging in the countryside and, according to several studies, the lower average educational attainment among rural

¹⁴² Peng, Rong, Xueqin Deng, Yinghua Xia, and Bei Wu. "Assessing the Sustainability of Long-Term Care Insurance Systems Based on a Policy–Population–Economy Complex System: The Case Study of China." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 11 (2022). p.2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116554>.

¹⁴³ Feng, Ran, Yiting Tan, and Jianyuan Huang. "The Future Dynamics of Long-Term Care Pressure in China's Longevity Era: A Prediction Based on the Discrete-Time Markov Model." 2025. p.15. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12692574/>.

older adults, a well-established risk factor for dementia; nationally, overall dementia prevalence is projected to rise from 5.8% in 2020 to 6.7% by 2030 as the population continues to age¹⁴⁴. (Figure 3.11)

Figure 3.11: Estimated age-specific prevalence of dementia from 1990 to 2030 in China



¹⁴⁴ Jia, Longfei, Meina Quan, Yue Fu, Tan Zhao, Yan Li, Cuibai Wei, Yi Tang, Qi Qin, Fen Wang, Yuchen Qiao, Shengliang Shi, Yan-Jiang Wang, Yifeng Du, Jiewen Zhang, Junjian Zhang, Benyan Luo, Qiumin Qu, Chunkui Zhou, Serge Gauthier, and Jianping Jia. "Dementia in China: Epidemiology, Clinical Management, and Research Advances." *The Lancet Neurology*, 2019. p.3.

Source: Jia et al, (2019)¹⁴⁵

From 2010 to 2016, a nationwide panel of 276 prefecture-level and above Chinese cities recorded a significant rise in urban elderly care institutions, residential facilities providing long-term institutional care for older adults, increasing from 5,510 to 8,474. The number of available beds more than doubled during this time, from 576,700 to 1,310,800. In stark contrast, rural elderly care institutions declined sharply over the same period, dropping from 28,520 to 14,773, while the number of beds in rural areas fell from 2,092,100 to 1,680,600¹⁴⁶. This shift highlights a troubling trend: while urban facilities expanded, rural ones shrank, ultimately widening the gap between the two.

The programme is designed primarily to provide support for people with significant care needs and to reduce the burden placed on family members who provide unpaid care. However, its coverage remains geographically limited, since it has not yet been implemented as a nationwide insurance system. Many rural care options are priced out of reach for local incomes, leading to a staggering surplus of over 475,000 vacant beds in rural nursing homes, with a utilization rate of only 78%¹⁴⁷. In reality, this means that while older adults in cities are gradually gaining access to institutional care options, albeit not without their flaws, those in rural areas are still heavily reliant on family support. This is particularly concerning as migration trends are weakening those very family ties.

Long-term projections indicate that the disparity in aging between rural and urban areas in China is likely to grow rather than diminish. Specifically, the aging rate, referring to the proportion of people aged 65 and above in the total

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁶ Li, Xiang, Chen Li, and Yi Huang. "Spatial-Temporal Analysis of Urban-Rural Differences in the Development of Elderly Care Institutions in China." *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2022. p.10.

¹⁴⁷ Zhang, Z., Z. Wang, and Z. Qiu. "Unveiling the Evolution of Eldercare Facilities in Rural China: Tracing the Trajectory from Eldercare Support Pattern and Service to Facilities for the Aging Population." *Healthcare* 11, no. 18 (2023). p.11. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10531381/>.

population, in rural regions is expected to jump from 13.5% in 2020 to 28.74% by 2050, more than doubling in just a few decades. This shift is largely driven by the ongoing outmigration of young people, rather than any significant increase in longevity among rural residents¹⁴⁸.

The evidence presented in this chapter highlight how the socio-demographic impacts of the One-Child Policy have taken different routes in urban and rural China. Rural areas have consistently dealt with tougher and more lasting effects, particularly in terms of the disruption of the local marriage market and the weakness of formal old-age support systems, pension coverage, healthcare reimbursement, and institutional elder care, which have left rural families more exposed than their urban counterparts to the compounding pressures of an aging population with fewer formal safety nets to fall back on.

These trends are closely linked to China's falling fertility rate, which has also shown a divide between urban and rural regions that initially grew wider before starting to close. The next chapter will delve into this issue, along with the government's recent shift towards promoting higher birth rates.

¹⁴⁸ Dou, H., C. Wang, G. Cheng, X. Lei, and S. Xu. "The Vision of Younger-Seniors-Based Elderly Care in Rural China: Based on Population Aging Predictions from 2020 to 2050." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12 (2025). p.4. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04994-7>.

Chapter 4: The Limits of Persuasion: China's Pronatalist Turn

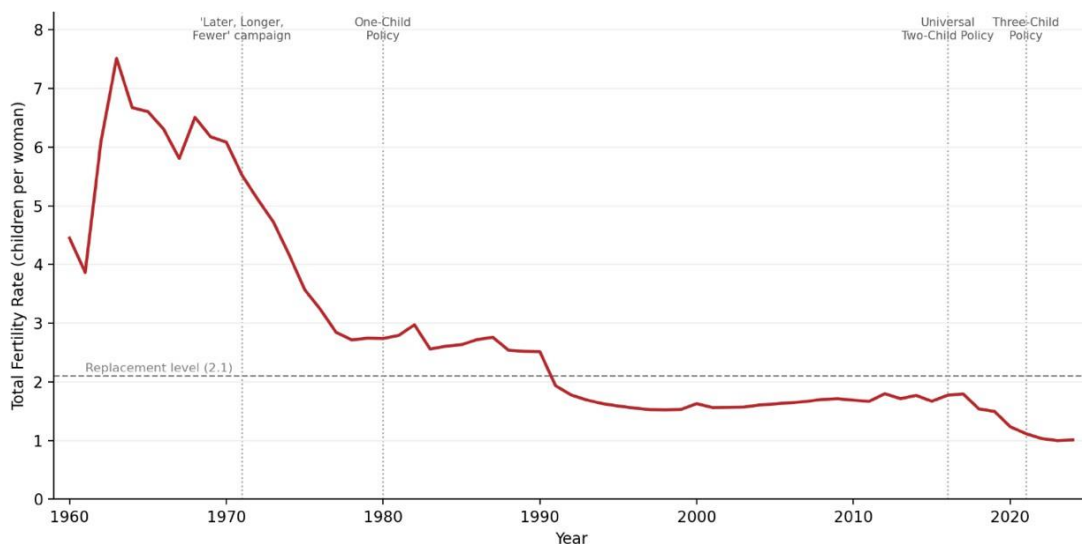
As we explored in Chapter One, the evolution of China's population policies wasn't just a straightforward shift from Mao's pro-birth stance to the restrictive One-Child Policy. Instead, the government's approach to fertility has changed multiple times, influenced by varying demographic, economic, and political factors. Notably, the drop in fertility rates was already in motion before the One-Child Policy was officially implemented, thanks to earlier family planning efforts that significantly lowered birth rates during the 1970s. Understanding this historical context is crucial to grasping a key paradox of China's current demographic challenges: even though the state once effectively discouraged childbearing, its later attempts to reverse this trend have not led to a similar rise in fertility.

Building on the timeline outlined in Chapter One, this chapter focuses on two interconnected questions. The first part delves into the actual changes in China's fertility rate from the 1990s onward, highlighting how the fertility decline differed across the urban-rural context and how this divide initially widened before it began to close. The analysis focuses on the post-1990 period because it marks the point at which China's total fertility rate (TFR) fell below replacement level, initiating the sustained low-fertility regime that is the object of this study; earlier decades are discussed only as background. The second part shifts to the government's response to fertility decline, detailing the series of legal and policy reforms, from the reproductive rights framework of the 1990s to the pro-natalist measures planned for 2015–2025, which were implemented, at least partly, in reaction to the demographic realities discussed in the first part. Together, these insights shed light on why the shift from controlling births to encouraging them has yet to yield the demographic rebound that policymakers had hoped for.

4.1 The phenomenon: fertility trends and the urban-rural divide (1990s–2020s).

The birth control program and socioeconomic development are often seen as having played equally significant roles in the decline of fertility during the 1970s and 1980s, although the impact of the program seemed to wane in the 1990s and 2000s. China's fertility decline unfolded in distinct phases: a rapid decline in fertility from 1949 to about 1961 during the famine years, followed by a 'baby boom' rebound that pushed fertility back up to a peak TFR of around 7.5 by 1963, before the sharpest and most sustained decline began after 1968, and especially after 1972, driven primarily by the 'Later, Longer, Fewer' family planning campaign, that brought the TFR toward replacement level even before the One-Child Policy was introduced in 1980¹⁴⁹ (*Figure 4.1*).

Figure 4.1: China's Total Fertility Rate, 1960–2024.



¹⁴⁹ Jiang, Z. "Time and Pace of Fertility Decline in China." 1982. Abstract <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12265404/>.

Source: Realized by Charts.js based on World Bank / UN World Population Prospects (2024).

By the early 1990s, the TFR had already dipped below replacement levels, a decline that followed the launch of the One-Child Policy in 1980 but occurred sooner than most policymakers had anticipated¹⁵⁰.

Between the 1990 and 2000 censuses, China's population increased by 11.7% (about 1.07% per year), but from 2000 to 2010, the growth slowed to just 5.8% (0.57% per year), indicating a TFR likely below 1.5. Surveys revealed an average ideal family size of 1.34 children, with no respondents expressing a desire for more than two children¹⁵¹.

Chinese demographers at the time generally assumed that a TFR of around 1.8 children per woman represented a sustainable, moderate target for population size. At the time, even the more pessimistic demographic projections suggested that the TFR might fall below 1.4 by 2020, a threshold that would place China in the 'lowest-low fertility' category. Yet the 2000 census had already reported a TFR of just 1.22, two decades ahead of that projected timeline. Many in the academic community dismissed this figure as an undercount, however, leading to a lack of policy action well into the early 2000s¹⁵².

The government proudly asserts that its birth planning policy has prevented 400 million additional births¹⁵³.

¹⁵⁰ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p.7.

¹⁵¹ Ibidem.

¹⁵² Atkinson, Kelly, Tahina Montoya, Michael S. Pollard, and Agnes Xiangzhen Wang. "Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025. p.4. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4348-1.html.

¹⁵³ Quanbao, Shuzhuo, Feldman, *China's Population Policy at the Crossroads: Social Impacts and Prospects*, p.7.

According to the 2000 census, the average family size dropped to 3.5, with three-member households making up 30 percent and two-member households at 17 percent (22 percent in urban areas). By 2010, the average family size had further decreased to 3.1, with three-member families at 27 percent and two-member families exceeding 24 percent (28 percent urban). The phenomenon of “empty nest” families, where parents have only one child, became increasingly documented¹⁵⁴.

This estimate relies on the reverse survival method, a demographic technique that reconstructs past fertility levels from a single census's age-and-sex population structure, applying survival probabilities to infer the number of births that occurred in earlier years, without requiring direct birth-history data. A fresh look at China's total fertility rate using the 2020 national census data and the reverse survival method reveals that the official government figures likely underestimated fertility levels from 2000 to 2020. There were discrepancies of up to 0.5 points between the estimated and reported TFRs during the years 2010 to 2016. Even with this underreporting in mind, the estimated TFR has shown a consistent wave-like decline since 2010, confirming that the downward trend is genuine and not just a statistical glitch¹⁵⁵.

The urban-rural fertility gap does not, however, conform to the simple narrative of rural China resisting the One-Child Policy. This divergence predates the One-Child Policy itself. Fertility transition in urban China began far earlier than in the countryside: in Shanghai, urban TFR had already reached replacement level by 1965, and most other urban areas saw their fertility transition begin between 1964 and 1966, driven by early access to contraceptive services. By contrast, rural fertility remained close to a national average of 6 children per woman into the early

¹⁵⁴ Feng, Poston, Wang, *China's One-Child Policy and the Changing Family*, p.19.

¹⁵⁵ Li, Long, Guangzhao Jin, Xiaozhen Lai, Rize Jing, and He Zhu. "A Reassessment of Trends and Rural–Urban/Regional Differences in the Total Fertility Rate in China, 2000–2020: Analyses of the 2020 National Census Data." *Scientific Reports*, 2024. p.5.

1970s¹⁵⁶. When the 'Later, Longer, Fewer' campaign was introduced in 1973, the real turning point in China's fertility decline, more so than the One-Child Policy that followed in 1980, it formalized this gap by imposing different limits: no more than two children in urban areas versus three in rural ones. Urban and rural China therefore entered the One-Child Policy era from starkly different starting points, with urban areas already close to replacement-level fertility and the rural areas still in the early stages of transition¹⁵⁷.

This divergence stems in part from the so-called '1.5-child policy': in many agricultural provinces, rural couples whose first child was a daughter were permitted to have a second child after a waiting period of four to six years, a concession rooted in the reliance on male labor in farming communities. Urban residents, by contrast, faced near-universal one-child enforcement¹⁵⁸. Estimated TFRs in urban areas stayed below 1.5 children per woman throughout this period, while rural areas remained above 1.8, rural TFR peaked at 2.38 in 2014, exceeding the replacement level of 2.1 (reached between 2011, when it stood at 2.25, and 2014), before declining sharply thereafter¹⁵⁹. (*Figure 4.2*).

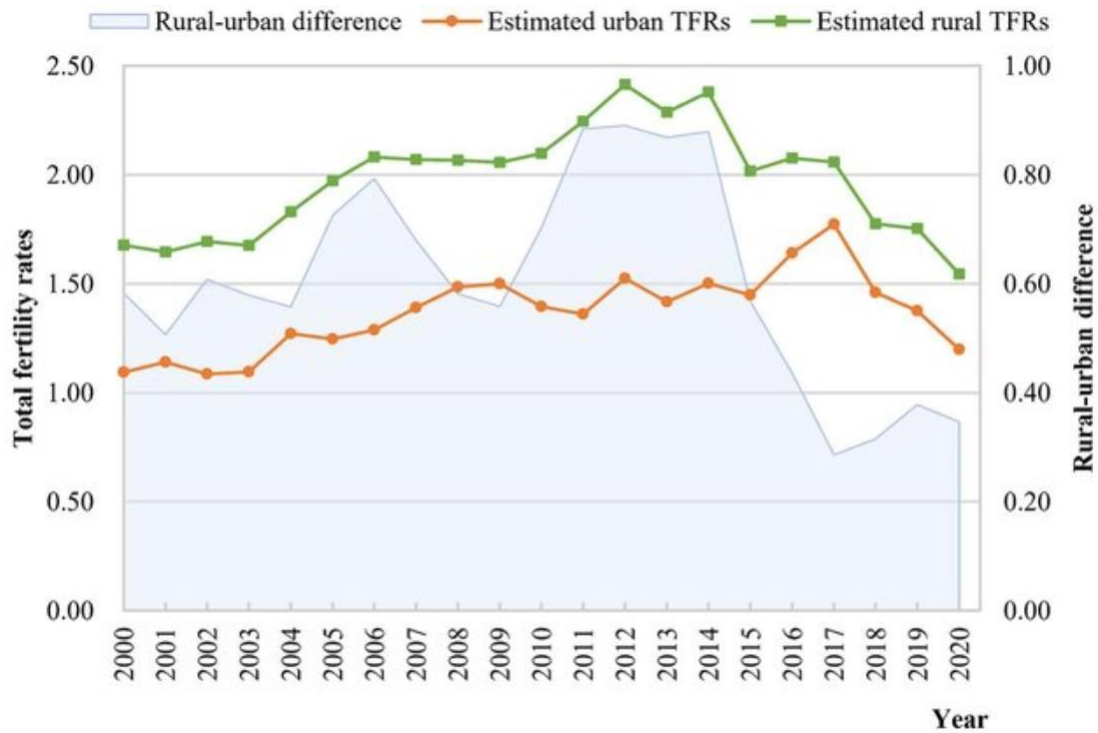
¹⁵⁶ Zheng, Zhenzhen. "Revisiting Fertility Transition in China." *China Population and Development Studies*, 2024. pp. 357-358. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42379-024-00169-0>.

¹⁵⁷ Gietel-Basten, Stuart, Xuehui Han, and Yuan Cheng. "Assessing the Impact of the 'One-Child Policy' in China: A Synthetic Control Approach." *PLOS ONE*, 2019. p.2. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220170>.

¹⁵⁸ Li, Jin, Lai, Jing Zhu, *A Reassessment of Trends and Rural–Urban/Regional Differences in the Total Fertility Rate in China, 2000–2020: Analyses of the 2020 National Census Data*, p.6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibidem.

Figure 4.2: Total fertility rate in urban and rural China, 2000-2020



Source: Long et al, (2024)¹⁶⁰

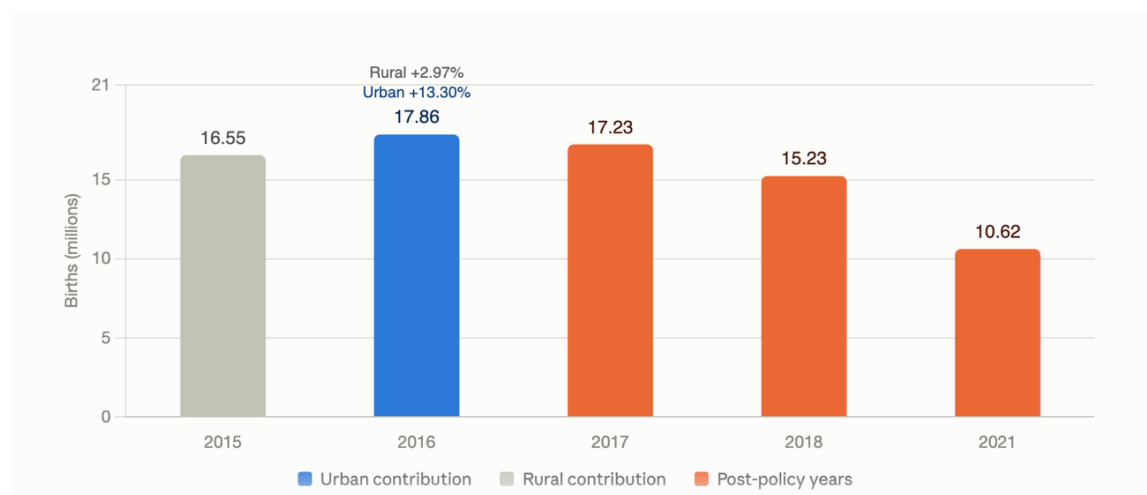
However, this gap did not stay the same over the decades; it actually widened from 0.58 in 2000 to a peak of 0.88 in 2014, a period coinciding with rapid urbanization and rising living costs that pushed urban fertility down faster than rural fertility declined, before narrowing sharply to just 0.35 by 2020, as the erosion of rural exemptions and the convergence of urban and rural life patterns closed the gap¹⁶¹. Urban areas, by contrast, never approached replacement level during this period.

¹⁶⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem.

The introduction of the universal two-child policy in 2016 highlighted this disparity: it led to a much larger increase in births in urban areas (a 13.30 percent rise in 2016 alone) compared to rural areas (2.97 percent). This was largely because the One-Child Policy had been enforced more strictly in cities, creating a larger backlog of urban couples eager to have a second child once they were allowed to. In contrast, rural areas had already been permitted to have two children under various local exemptions, resulting in a smaller pool of pent-up demand. This helps clarify why the policy's impact, while noticeable, turned out to be short-lived on a national scale: it was more of a one-time release of delayed urban fertility rather than a true change in family size preferences. This is confirmed by the trajectory in the years that followed: just two years after the policy, in 2018, births had already fallen to 15.23 million, two million fewer than in 2017 and already below the 2016 peak, and by 2021, five years on, they had collapsed further to 10.62 million, roughly 40 percent below the 2016 level¹⁶² (*Figure 4.3*)

Figure 4.3: China's annual births 2015–2021, the short-lived rebound after the 2016 universal two-child policy.



¹⁶² Ibidem.

*Source: Long et al, (2024)*¹⁶³

Two key structural forces are driving the narrowing of the urban-rural fertility gap since 2014. First, there is a noticeable shift in desired family size among both rural and urban residents. Even in the less-developed western rural areas, only a small percentage of people express a desire for three or more children. Second, the timing of childbearing is also converging. As more rural residents migrate to urban ones and educational opportunities improve in rural areas, rural women are increasingly adopting the trend of delaying marriage and childbirth that has long been seen in urban areas¹⁶⁴.

This evidence changes the way we should view the urban-rural divide in the context of China's declining fertility rates. It is not just a tale of two distinct, stable situations, one with low fertility in urban areas and the other with high fertility in rural areas. Instead, we are witnessing two paths moving toward the same low-fertility outcome, albeit at different paces and for various reasons. The fertility advantage that rural China once had is gradually diminishing as the socioeconomic factors that supported it, like large agrarian households, early marriages, and lower educational levels, start to fade away. This decline has implications that go beyond just demographics. Insights from Chinese demographers and fertility researchers highlight that even more than thirty years after the One-Child Policy was implemented, fertility rates have not recovered, despite the gradual easing of population controls¹⁶⁵. In fact, China began to see negative population growth in 2022, a milestone that came much sooner than most policymakers anticipated. This shift toward negative population growth complicates health-system planning: a shrinking

¹⁶³ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁵ Wang, Yuanyuan, Fei Kong, Yu Fu, and Jie Qiao. "How Can China Tackle Its Declining Fertility Rate?" *The BMJ*, 2024. p.3. doi:10.1136/bmj-2023-078635.

and ageing cohort of children makes it harder to size maternal and pediatric service capacity accurately, risking both under- and over-provision in different regions¹⁶⁶.

4.2 The response: from reproductive rights reform to pro-natalist measures (1994–2025).

After exploring the decline in fertility and its urban-rural aspects, this section shifts focus to the Chinese government's response. Interestingly, this response began well before the term 'pronatalism' was formally incorporated into official policy language. It began with a rethinking of family planning, emphasizing reproductive rights and the quality of services provided.

This section traces that evolution across six phases: the reproductive-rights-based reforms of 1994–2001; the persistence of rural-urban enforcement gaps through 2001–2010; the cautious expansion of birth allowances between 2010 and 2015; the decisive pro-natalist turn from 2015 to 2021; the intensification of subsidies and structural reforms from 2023 onward; and, finally, long-term projections to 2050. Throughout, particular attention is paid to how each policy phase was implemented and received differently across urban and rural China, since this uneven implementation is central to understanding why decades of policy reversal have yet to produce a lasting fertility rebound.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem.

4.2.1 1994–2001: From birth control to Quality Services and Reproductive Rights.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo back in 1994, the UN conference that shifted global population policy away from demographic targets and toward individual reproductive rights, along with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, really sparked a transformation in China's family planning policies. These two conferences emphasized that reproductive rights are fundamental human rights, closely tied to gender equality and empowering women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Beijing conference, highlighted key areas like women and health and human rights of women, reinforcing the idea that couples and individuals should have the basic right to freely choose how many children to have and when to have them¹⁶⁷. Starting in 1995, high-quality family planning services were tested and gradually rolled out across the country, marking a significant shift from merely controlling the population to focusing on reproductive health services. The previous mandatory intrauterine device (IUD) insertions and forced abortions were replaced with a commitment to informed choice¹⁶⁸.

In the early 1990s, with help from international donors, the Women's Studies Institute of China and several other research organizations, led by reproductive health scholars like Qiu Renzong, Zhang Kaining, and Zhang Beichuan, pushed forward research on reproductive health and advocated for NGOs in China. The 1993 Ministry of Health Notice, the 1994 Law on Maternal and Infant Health Care, and the 2001 Law on Population and Family Planning all made it illegal to determine fetal sex for non-medical reasons and to perform sex-selective abortions¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁷ Cai, Yiping, and Bohong Liu. "From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s." *Jindal Global Law Review*, 2024. p.275.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41020-024-00248-w>.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 277.

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem, pp. 279-280.

In 2004, the phrase “respect and protection of human rights” was added to China's amended Constitution. The 2001 Law on Population and Family Planning was a pivotal moment, explicitly connecting population policies to women's education, employment, and health (Article 3)¹⁷⁰. Article 31 of this law ensured that citizens could access reproductive technology services, while Article 22 prohibited discrimination against women who had daughters or were infertile. Article 39 banned non-medical sex determination, although these measures did not immediately change the rising sex ratio at birth. Indeed, by 2004, the sex ratio at birth had reached an alarming 121.2 boys for every 100 girls¹⁷¹. Additionally, Article 26 provided special labor protections for women who were pregnant, giving birth, or breastfeeding¹⁷².

Between 2001 and 2010, enforcement of family planning rules did not relax uniformly. The 2003 revision of the Chinese Communist Party's Discipline Regulations reinforced the 2001 Law on Population and Family Planning, tying party membership and local cadre careers directly to compliance with birth quotas, a mechanism that bore disproportionately on rural officials, since rural areas historically had higher out-of-quota birth rates. Throughout this decade, the rural-urban fertility gap remained wide and largely unaddressed by policy: TFR estimates suggest urban fertility hovered only slightly above 1.0 (excluding the floating migrant population), while rural fertility remained closer to 1.8-2.0, sustained in part by the '1.5-child' exemption discussed earlier. This persistence set the stage for the 2010 census, whose results, revealing a national TFR far below the assumed 1.8 target, finally pushed policymakers toward the relaxation measures discussed in the following section¹⁷³.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 276.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 281.

¹⁷² Ibidem, p. 278.

¹⁷³ Jiang, Quanbao, and Yixiao Liu. "Low Fertility and Concurrent Birth Control Policy in China." *The History of the Family*, 2016. p. 555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1081602X.2016.1213179>.

4.2.2 2010–2015: towards expansion

The 2010 census confirmed what the 2000 figures had already suggested: China's TFR remained persistently below the replacement-adjacent target of 1.8 long claimed by the National Population and Family Planning Commission (NPFPC), prompting officials and academics to finally treat the earlier 1.22 estimate as credible rather than dismissing it as an undercount. In response, the government took a cautious approach, initially easing restrictions with the “single two-child” policy, which allowed a second child only for couples in which at least one partner was an only child, followed by the universal two-child policy, decided in December 2015 and formally implemented in January 2016¹⁷⁴.

Chinese society experienced significant changes throughout the 2010s: preschool enrollment skyrocketed from 35% in 2000 to an impressive 88.1% by 2021; per capita GDP surged from 7,858 RMB to 80,976 RMB during the same timeframe; and infant mortality rates plummeted from 32.2 to just 5.0 per 1,000 live births. These developments had a profound impact on reproductive attitudes and behaviors¹⁷⁵.

Uptake of this 'selective two-child' policy, however, remained modest: by the end of May 2015, only around 1.45 million of the roughly 11 million eligible couples surveyed had applied for a second child, about 13.2 percent, despite nearly 40 percent expressing an intention to do so in national surveys¹⁷⁶. Applications were also unevenly distributed: eligible urban couples, who were more likely to be

¹⁷⁴ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.4.

¹⁷⁵ Cai, Liu, *From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s*, p. 282.

¹⁷⁶ Zeng Yi, Xinjie Zhang, and Lingchen Liu, “From ‘Selective Two-Child Policy’ to Universal Two-Child Policy: Will the Payment Crisis of China’s Pension System Be Solved?,” *China Finance and Economic Review* 5, no. 14 (2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40589-017-0053-3>.

aware of the policy and to have the financial means to act on it, applied at consistently higher rates than their rural counterparts, for whom the exemption offered comparatively little change given the pre-existing 'daughter-only' exemptions already in place in many agricultural provinces¹⁷⁷.

The 2012 *Special Regulations on Labour Protection of Female Employees* eliminated the clause that excluded women who had breached family planning rules, thereby extending labor protections to all female employees. This 2012 reform extended maternity protections, including a ban on dismissal during pregnancy, maternity leave, and prohibitions on reduced wages, to all female employees regardless of family-planning compliance, but enforcement remained concentrated in formal urban employment; women in rural or informal work had little practical recourse under the law¹⁷⁸.

4.2.3 2015–2021: From the second to the third child, the pro-natalist turning point

In December 2015, the *Decision of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Implementing the Universal Two-Child Policy* marked a significant shift, putting an end to 35 years of one-child restrictions. This document, issued jointly by the Communist Party's highest decision-making body and China's central government, formally ended the one-child restriction nationwide and directed provincial governments to revise their local family-planning regulations accordingly, while also committing to expand maternal healthcare and childcare infrastructure to support the policy shift. This was the first step towards moving from controlling births to encouraging them. In 2016, the NPFPC began transitioning

¹⁷⁷ Deccan Herald. "More Chinese Couples Opt for Second Child." July 10, 2015.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/archives/more-chinese-couples-opt-second-2138525>.

¹⁷⁸ Cai, Liu, *From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s*, p. 278.

from strict population control to focusing on demographic research and policy coordination, and by 2018, family planning responsibilities were fully integrated into the National Health Commission. Despite these changes, there was still a lingering concern among policymakers about a potential fertility “spring-back”, which was evident in the National Population Development Plan for 2016–2030¹⁷⁹.

After the introduction of the two-child policy, births, which had stood at around 16.55 million in 2015, the year before the policy took effect, initially increased to 17.86 million in 2016 and 17.23 million in 2017, but then they began to decline steadily, dropping to 12 million in 2020 and hitting a new low of 10.62 million in 2021¹⁸⁰. Unfortunately, fertility rates did not recover as expected after the policy change. The Seventh National Population Census in 2021 revealed that the TFR had plummeted to 1.3 in 2020, categorizing China as having “ultra-low fertility”¹⁸¹.

This national figure, however, concealed a persistent and substantial gap: by the late 2010s, the estimated TFR stood at around 2.0 children per woman in rural areas compared to just 1.2 in urban areas. The temporary birth increase following the 2016 policy change was itself geographically uneven, driven mainly by rural-to-urban migrant families and households in rapidly urbanising regions, where relaxed restrictions unlocked pre-existing high fertility preferences, while the policy had little to no effect in wealthy, highly urbanised provinces such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang, where urban residents' fertility preferences were already low regardless of the legal quota. In other words, the modest and short-lived 2016–

¹⁷⁹ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.6.

¹⁸⁰ Cai, Liu, *From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s*, p. 285.

¹⁸¹ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.6.

2017 rebound was less a sign of renewed nationwide fertility desire than a one-off release of rural demand that had been suppressed for decades¹⁸².

In response to this trend, the 2021 *Decision on Optimizing Fertility Policy* rolled out the three-child policy, and an amendment to the Population and Family Planning Law laid the groundwork for expanded parental leave, subsidies, and the removal of penalties for unauthorized births. Issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council following a May 2021 Politburo meeting chaired by Xi Jinping, this decision explicitly reframed population policy around 'long-term balanced development' rather than restriction, formally authorizing three children per couple and instructing local governments to design their own complementary support packages, the same mandate that would later produce the province-level subsidy schemes discussed in Section 4.2.4¹⁸³. The August 2021 amendment shifted the law's focus from “controlling” to “adjusting” the population. It allowed couples to have three children, abolished the social maintenance fee, and introduced various support measures for families, including fiscal, tax, insurance, housing, and employment assistance, as well as parental leave provisions¹⁸⁴.

Despite these efforts, the number of births continued to decline, reaching just 9.56 million in 2022, while the national population shrank by 850,000 that same year. Demographer Zhai Zhenwu pointed to several factors contributing to this decline: a decreasing number of women of childbearing age, delays in marriage and childbirth, and a waning desire for children linked to social development¹⁸⁵ (*Figure 4.4*).

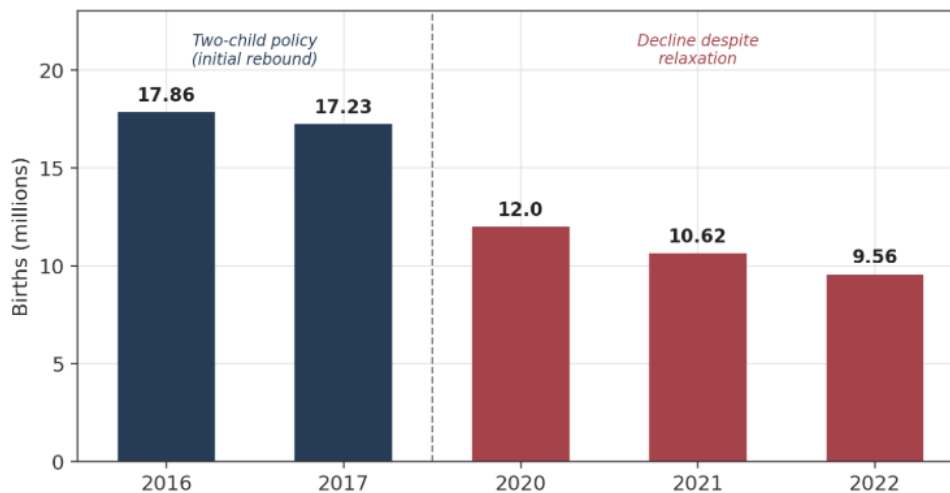
¹⁸² Du, Jane. "The Links between Levels of Urbanisation and the Effectiveness of China's Two-Child Policies." SOAS China Institute Blog, April 1, 2025. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2025/04/01/urbanisation-and-the-effectiveness-of-chinas-two-child-policies/>.

¹⁸³ Ibidem.

¹⁸⁴ Cai, Liu, *From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s*, p. 284.

¹⁸⁵ Ibidem, p.285.

Figure 4.4: Number of births in China, 2016-2022.



Source: Created by Charts.js based on Long et al, (2024)¹⁸⁶

4.2.4 2023–2025: Subsidies, Pensions and the Urban-Rural Difference in Implementation.

The 2023 *Implementation Opinions on Further Improving Fertility Support Measures* provided provinces and municipalities with a framework to test customized support programs. This was a State Council policy paper, not a law, issued by the *General Office of the State Council*, providing operational guidelines that encouraged provinces and municipalities to pilot support programs tailored to local conditions. Then, in 2024, the *Several Measures on Accelerating the Improvement of the Birth Support Policy System*, issued by the General Office of the State Council, rolled out 13 concrete interventions, including improved maternity leave provisions, tax subsidies for children's education, and housing benefits for

¹⁸⁶ Ibidem.

larger families. Declining fertility accelerates population ageing, which shrinks the future working-age population relative to retirees and strains the pension system's sustainability, prompting policymakers to pursue retirement-age and contribution reforms alongside their direct fertility incentives. In this context, starting January 1, 2025, the retirement-age reform will gradually increase the male retirement age to 63 by 2040, while the female retirement age will range from 55 to 58 based on occupation. Additionally, the minimum pension contribution period will extend to 20 years by 2030. This reform was passed surprisingly quickly, especially considering the pension system is projected to run out of funds by 2035^[36]. By March 2025, at least 23 provincial regions had rolled out specific childbirth subsidies, primarily aimed at families with second and third children. For example, Hefei (Anhui) offers a one-time payment of 2,000 RMB for a second child and 5,000 RMB for a third, Jinan (Shandong) provides 600 RMB per month per child until age three, and Ningxia combines a one-time payment with a monthly childcare allowance of 200 RMB. Most of these programs, however, exclude families with only one child. This provincial patchwork was subsequently superseded by a nationwide childcare subsidy program launched in July 2025, offering all families 3,600 RMB per year for each child under age three, regardless of birth order, extending support, for the first time, to first-child families as well¹⁸⁷.

The scale of the challenge that these subsidies face is highlighted by a comprehensive survey carried out in Eastern China shortly after the three-child policy was introduced. Out of 144,893 eligible participants who had at least one child under the age of three, only 15.1 percent expressed any intention to have another child before they were informed about a proposed subsidy.

¹⁸⁷ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.7.

When a hypothetical monthly subsidy of 1,000 RMB for 36 months was introduced, this percentage increased by 8.5 points, a noticeable but still modest change, especially considering the very low starting point. This finding puts a damper on the optimism surrounding national subsidy designs: even a significant and ongoing cash transfer only nudges the numbers slightly, revealing an underlying reluctance that the policy literature discussed in this chapter attributes to the high costs of housing, childcare, and education, rather than a lack of subsidies alone. Additionally, the authors of the study point out that there is a significant gap between fertility intentions and actual childbearing in China, with other research showing that about half of families who express a desire to have another child ultimately do not follow through. This intention-behavior gap compounds an already low baseline: nationwide surveys show the average ideal number of children has fallen steadily, from around 2.1 in the 1980s to around 1.7 today by the 2000s, with only about 11 percent of married adults expressing any desire for three or more children even after the three-child policy was introduced. This double constraint, low intentions to begin with, and a further gap between those intentions and actual births, further restricts the potential impact of even a successful subsidy in converting stated intentions into the actual births the government is aiming for¹⁸⁸.

Since 2015, national policy documents have portrayed China's shift towards pronatalism as a unified response to declining demographics. However, the way this shift is put into practice and how it is received varies significantly between urban and rural areas. This divide is related to, but distinct from, the fertility gap discussed in section 4.1. Surveys from western rural China reveal that the hesitation to have a third child is not just an urban phenomenon¹⁸⁹; women of childbearing age in rural areas express similarly low fertility intentions. This reluctance

¹⁸⁸ Dong, W.-H., X. Wang, F. Yuan, L. Wang, T.-M. Gu, B.-Q. Zhu, and J. Shao. "Will a Government Subsidy Increase Couples' Further Fertility Intentions? A Real-World Study from a Large-Scale Online Survey in Eastern China." *Human Reproduction Open*, 2024. p.2. doi:10.1093/hropen/hoae055.

¹⁸⁹ Lan, Jian, Xingchao Hu, Zihan Li, and Yuhao Ren. "Has the 'Three-Child Policy' Also Encountered Reluctance in Rural China?—Evidence from New-Generation Women of Childbearing Age in Western Rural China." *Journal of Rural Studies* 123 (2026). p.7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2026>.

stems from economic uncertainty, a lack of local support systems, and unstable job markets in rural regions, challenging the notion that rural fertility rates are inherently higher and require less intervention¹⁹⁰.

A look at childcare policies from both central and provincial levels after 2021 shows a clear disparity: wealthier, more urbanized provinces tend to offer more generous subsidies, parental leave, and housing incentives. In contrast, poorer, predominantly rural provinces provide only limited and inconsistent support, which reflects their local financial capabilities rather than the actual demographic needs^[41]. These disparities extend to the underlying leave and childcare frameworks. Since 2021, each parent is entitled to 5–20 days of non-transferable parental leave per year, alongside twice-extended maternity and paternity leave, but the exact duration remains province-specific, with wealthier provinces generally offering more generous terms. Provincial childcare provision itself clusters into distinct policy regimes combining familial and state support in different proportions, reflecting local rather than uniform national choices. This unevenness is compounded on the demand side: rural residence is associated with significantly lower reported demand for childcare services, a pattern that studies in less-developed rural provinces attribute less to lower need than to persistently inadequate local supply¹⁹¹.

This uneven approach further exacerbates the structural exclusion ingrained in the *hukou* system. Rural migrants living in cities often find themselves ineligible for local childbirth subsidies that are linked to household registration. This institutional exclusion appears to have measurable demographic consequences: one study found that among rural female migrants in 2018, the fertility rate specific to second births was remarkably low, below 0.8, and that obtaining

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁹¹ Wang, Shiyao, and Liuning Yang. "National Will in the Context of Low Fertility: Exploring the Chinese Childcare Policies after the Implementation of Three-Child Policy." *Policy Studies*, 2025. p.598. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2024.2339889>.

urban citizenship (and the associated access to local welfare benefits) significantly increased migrant fertility rates¹⁹². Meanwhile, those who remain in rural areas face significant gaps in childcare and healthcare infrastructure, which hinders their ability to take advantage of national support measures altogether¹⁹³.

4.2.5 Long-term projections (2035–2054)

According to the medium-variant UN World Population Prospects 2024, China's population is expected to drop from around 1.4 billion in 2024 to about 1.3 billion by 2050, and it could plummet to as low as 633 million by 2100. This marks the largest projected population decline for any country between 2024 and 2054. China now finds itself in the “ultra-low fertility” category, with a TFR of just 1.01 as of 2024¹⁹⁴.

These projections draw on PADIS-INT, a population-projection software developed by China's Population and Development Research Center using the cohort-component method, which is widely applied for national and sub-national demographic forecasting in China. They show that the aging rate in rural areas will nearly double, jumping from 13.49% in 2020 to 28.74% by 2050. This increase is primarily driven by the ongoing outmigration of young people from rural areas, rather than any improvement in rural fertility rates. As a result, the demographic

¹⁹² Cai, Tianxin, and Renyao Zhong. "Fertility Responses to the Citizenization of Rural Migrants: Evidence from the Hukou Reform in China." *BMC Public Health*, 2025. p.2.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-21753-0>.

¹⁹³ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.13.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results*. New York: United Nations, 2024.
<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4053940>.

divide between urban and rural populations is likely to widen further, as rural regions age at a substantially faster pace than urban ones even as the national fertility rate continues to decline¹⁹⁵.

China's trajectory places it alongside Italy, South Korea, and Spain in the 'ultra-low fertility' category, but its rural-urban aging divide has no direct equivalent among these comparators, whose populations are far more uniformly urbanized. This structural difference means that policy responses effective in more homogeneous ultra-low-fertility societies, such as universal childcare expansion or immigration-based labor force replenishment, may be considerably harder to implement uniformly across China's uneven administrative and economic landscape, where rural regions face both the fastest aging and the weakest fiscal capacity to respond to it¹⁹⁶.

4.2.6 *Evaluation of policy effectiveness.*

The end of the One-Child Policy and the rollout of the two- and three-child policies have created a noticeable gap between what the central government aims for and how policies unfold. Wealthier, more urbanized provinces tend to offer more generous benefits, while poorer, predominantly rural provinces provide only limited support. Most programs are still tied to families with local hukou, which means migrant and mobile populations often miss out¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹⁵ Dou, Wang, Cheng, Lei, Xu, *The Vision of Younger-Seniors-Based Elderly Care in Rural China: Based on Population Aging Predictions from 2020 to 2050*, p.4.

¹⁹⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (New York: United Nations, 2024), p.18.

¹⁹⁷ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.9.

This qualitative assessment is strongly backed by quantitative evidence from econometric research. A difference-in-differences analysis of panel data covering all 31 Chinese provinces, regions, and municipalities from 2005 to 2021 reveals that changes in fertility policies, including the two- and three-child policies mentioned earlier, did not lead to a statistically significant rise in birth or fertility rates on a national level. This finding remained consistent even after various robustness checks. Because the three-child policy was introduced only in 2021, close to the end of the 2005–2021 observation window used in this study, its effects can only be assessed over a short post-implementation period; this limits the ability to draw firm conclusions about its long-term impact and should be treated as a methodological caveat rather than a definitive evaluation. Importantly, the causal analysis from the same study indicates that these policy shifts did not significantly enhance people's willingness to have children, nor did they substantially influence other factors that typically affect household fertility decisions. These factors include prevailing marriage and childbearing norms and the rising opportunity costs associated with having children, rather than housing, childcare, or education costs alone¹⁹⁸. This directly supports the argument made throughout this chapter that pronatalist measures have focused on administrative and cost-related aspects without changing the fundamental considerations surrounding childbearing. Additionally, the study highlights that the impact of the comprehensive two-child policy was more noticeable in China's central region compared to its eastern or western areas. This pattern reflects the fact that family planning enforcement had historically been stricter in both the eastern and central regions than in the west; once the comprehensive two-child policy was introduced, this pent-up demand translated into a fertility response in the central region, whereas in the east it was offset by high urbanization and living costs, which continued to discourage additional births. In the western region, by contrast, looser historical enforcement, particularly

¹⁹⁸ Wang, Wei, Yalan Mo, and Yanxi Kuang. "Effect Evaluation, Prediction and Response Strategy Analysis of China's Birth Policy Adjustment." *PLOS ONE*, 2025. p.21. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0330308>.

among ethnic minority and rural populations, meant fertility levels had already been less constrained, so the policy change produced no significant shift¹⁹⁹. This regional disparity reflects, on a broader administrative scale, the urban-rural divide discussed in Chapter Three and Section 4.1 of this chapter, reinforcing the overall argument that a uniform national policy can lead to uneven outcomes across different parts of China²⁰⁰.

When it comes to fertility intentions, three main factors come into play: the socioeconomic costs and benefits of having children, societal norms surrounding family and marriage, and the wider cultural backdrop. Notably, China's marriage rate plummeted by 55 percent from 13.47 million registrations in 2013 to 6.11 million in 2024²⁰¹.

The rising costs of raising children, along with housing, education, and the struggle to balance career and family, especially for women, have led to more hesitant decisions about having children. Before the 2021 Amendment, policies mainly focused on norms and administration rather than addressing costs or benefits. This heavy emphasis on administration suggests that many pronatalist policies lack real substance and may not be visible to the public, which could be fueling skepticism²⁰².

From an intersectional viewpoint on reproductive rights and gender, population policy still aligns with traditional demographic and economic growth strategies. Feminist advocates are concerned that the pronatalist approach might limit reproductive rights, particularly access to abortion. Pro-family policies, like the

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰⁰ Zhu, Shengjiao, Jinsi Liu, Zhihua Wang, and Shixiang Chen. "Study on Regional Disparities and Influencing Factors of Public Health Service Supply in China from the Perspective of Fairness." *BMC Health Services Research*, 2025. p.5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-025-13292-6>.

²⁰¹ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.20.

²⁰² Ibidem, p.22.

“three educational policies” (三育政策), may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms by primarily targeting women within the household. This term refers to a policy framework organized around three stages of a woman's responsibility toward her children: childbearing, parenting/rearing, and education, each of which is treated as a distinct area for state-supported intervention and guidance. Because the framework is built around these three maternal roles, critics argue it implicitly frames childrearing as primarily the mother's domain, even as it is promoted as gender-neutral family support policy²⁰³.

Demographic trends have a significant impact on domestic politics, workforce makeup, economic growth, and social dynamics. China serves as a crucial case study to see if pronatalist interventions can actually reverse the decline in fertility within an authoritarian, resource-rich context offering insights for other nations that are contemplating similar policies.

4.3 Comparative synthesis: Maoism versus The Present Era.

When looking at China's two pronatalist phases side by side, the more lenient, albeit not entirely pro-natalist, approach of the early Maoist era and the policy shift that began in 2015, both similarities and significant differences emerge.

The similarities stem from the fact that fertility has always been viewed as a matter of state interest rather than a personal choice, no matter whether the approach was pro-natalist or restrictive at any given time. Even considering Mao's fluctuating stance during the 1950s and 1960s, both periods focus on fertility in

²⁰³ Cai, Liu, *From Birth Control to Pronatalism: Population Policy and Women's Reproductive Rights in China since the 1980s*, p. 286.

terms of broader state concerns: national productivity then, and the sustainability of the labor force and pension systems today, rather than on individual reproductive rights. This thread of continuity runs through the coercive family planning of the 1980s and the high-quality family planning services introduced during the 1990s reforms²⁰⁴.

However, the differences are quite significant. The methods have changed dramatically: during the Maoist era, population policy was largely based on ideological persuasion with minimal coercion, in a mostly agrarian society where large families made economic sense; in contrast, the post-2015 government uses targeted financial incentives, subsidies, parental leave, and administrative reforms in a society where having children comes with considerable and increasing opportunity costs²⁰⁵. The societal context has also shifted: China in the 1950s and 60s was mainly rural and agrarian, where children were seen as economic assets; today, it is highly urbanized, and factors like housing, education, and lost income for women are the key influences on fertility decisions. This shift helps explain why financial incentives alone have not been enough: the uptick in births in 2016 was just a temporary effect among older age groups, not a true increase in the desire for more children²⁰⁶.

It is important to note that the urban-rural divide is not a new phenomenon that emerged after 2015; it actually has roots going back to the Maoist era, albeit in a different form. The decline in fertility rates across China did not happen all at once. Urban fertility rates started to drop as early as 1964, dipping below three children per woman by 1966, while rural areas did not see a decline until 1972,

²⁰⁴ Whyte, Martin King, Feng Wang, and Yong Cai. "Challenging Myths about China's One-Child Policy." *The China Journal*, 2015. p.150.

²⁰⁵ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.6.

²⁰⁶ Atkinson Montoya, Pollard, Wang, *Pronatalist Pivot: Assessing China's Policy Efforts to Boost Fertility*, p.22.

eight years later. This early difference did not have a huge overall impact at the time since urban residents made up only about 20 percent of the population²⁰⁷.

The urban-rural imbalance explored throughout this thesis, from the strict family planning policies to the shift towards reproductive health services during the reform era, and now to the current pronatalist approach, is not just a result of any one policy phase. Instead, it is a consistent feature of China's demographic history. The mechanisms have evolved, from unequal access to family planning resources in the 1960s to today's disparities in subsidy eligibility based on *hukou*, but the underlying principle remains the same: the state reacts to national trends without fully recognizing the distinct needs of these two different populations. Looking ahead, projections indicate that the gap in aging trends between rural and urban areas will likely widen by 2050.

When we consider the current pronatalist shift, it may seem to echo the state-driven logic of the Maoist period, but the context has changed enough that historical examples may not be very helpful. Taken together, the evidence across this chapter indicates that policy implementation has never been uniform across the country: pace and depth of enforcement differed markedly between urban and rural China from the 1994–2001 reforms onward, and provincial welfare regimes today still cluster into distinct models rather than applying a single national standard. The success of the current pronatalist shift will therefore hinge on whether the government can move past this uneven, province-driven implementation and directly address the urban-rural divide as a long-standing structural feature of Chinese population policy, something it has always been, rather than a recent consequence of demographic mismanagement.

²⁰⁷ Feng, *The Future of a Demographic Overachiever: Long-Term Implications of the Demographic Transition in China*, p.178.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore the socio-demographic impacts of China's population policies, particularly focusing on the urban-rural divide. It also sought to understand why the government's shift towards pro-natalist policies since 2015 has not yet managed to reverse the ongoing decline in fertility rates. The analysis conducted across the four chapters allows the main findings to be synthesized and their implications for the existing literature and broader debate to be discussed.

A few key considerations emerged from the four chapters. First, the urban-rural divide China's demographic outcomes is not just a byproduct of any one policy phase; it is a deep-rooted structural aspect of how China manages its population. This divide has been around long before the One-Child Policy and has persisted through every policy shift since then. For instance, urban fertility rates started to decline back in the mid-1960s, a full decade ahead of rural areas. The 1973 'Later, Longer, Fewer' campaign did not create this gap; it simply formalized it by setting different birth limits for cities and villages. The One-Child Policy, influenced by an unequal system tied to the hukou residency permits, led to starkly different social outcomes: a skewed sex ratio and a marriage-market crunch that hit rural men the hardest, while the implications of the 4-2-1 family structure varied partly according to patterns of co-residence and geographical proximity between generations, and a pension and healthcare system that leaves rural seniors, especially those 'left-behind' or migrants, cut off from urban welfare, much more vulnerable than their urban peers. Research on the 4-2-1 family structure does not indicate that this family configuration was simply predominant in one setting; rather, urban-rural differences are more appropriately considered in relation to intergenerational co-residence, geographical proximity, and access to alternative forms of support. This same pattern continues with the recent decline in fertility rates and the government's pronatalist response: the gap in total fertility rates between urban and rural areas widened until 2014 before it started to close again.

Migrant fertility is still held back by the hukou system, which limits access to urban benefits, and today's childbirth subsidies are notably more generous in wealthier, urbanized provinces compared to poorer, rural ones. What changes over time are the specific policy tools used, from birth quotas to subsidy schedules, but the core issue remains the same: national population policies continue to interact with pre-existing institutional and socio-economic differences between urban and rural populations.

One of the key takeaways revolves around the paradox highlighted in Chapter Four's title. The Chinese government has shown remarkable success in curbing fertility rates: family planning initiatives managed to bring the total fertility rate close to replacement levels even before the official launch of the One-Child Policy. They even claim that their birth-planning efforts have prevented around 400 million births. However, despite having subsequently adopted a more permissive legal framework and introduced substantially greater financial and administrative resources for pronatalist measures, the government has struggled to boost birth rates in a similar manner. The 2016 introduction of the universal two-child policy led to a short-lived, uneven increase in births, primarily among rural-to-urban migrant families eager to fulfill their long-held desires for larger families. But soon after, birth rates began to decline again. The 2021 three-child policy has not shown any meaningful impact on national birth or fertility rates, as discussed in Section 4.2.6. A 2022 online survey conducted in Zhejiang and other parts of Eastern China, involving 144,893 respondents with at least one child under three years old, provides another indication of the difficulty of translating policy incentives into fertility intentions: when respondents without further fertility intentions were presented with a hypothetical subsidy of 1,000 RMB per month for 36 months, 10.0 percent changed their response to indicate an intention to have another child. This situation suggests that restricting births and promoting them are not simply two sides of the same coin: while restrictions can rely on administrative pressure in a society where larger families were once economically

viable, encouraging births now has to contend with the various opportunity costs associated with raising children, such as housing costs, education expenses, and the impact on women's careers, all in a society that has urbanized and modernized largely due to the very developments the One-Child Policy aimed to foster.

As explored in Section 4.3, the contemporary pronatalist movement differs markedly from that of the early Maoist era: there was no need for financial incentives to promote having more children in a predominantly agrarian society where children were seen as valuable economic contributors. In contrast, today's government is faced with the challenge of reversing a long-standing preference for smaller families, a trend that has been solidified by decades of policies and development. To do this, the government is increasingly relying on measures such as subsidies, tax deductions, childcare support, and parental leave policies.

When these findings are considered as a whole, the contribution of this thesis lies primarily in the way it brings together and compares evidence concerning different phases of China's population policy through a common focus on the urban-rural divide. Rather than proposing that the existing literature has overlooked the relationship between these policies phases, the thesis shows how evidence on the socio-demographic consequences of restrictive family planning and evidence on the more recent pronatalist turn can be read together when the institutional and socio-economic differences between urban and rural China are kept at the centre of the analysis. It reveals that both are influenced by the same institutional mechanism: a structure of implementation rooted in the hukou system, which has consistently distributed the effects of national population policy unevenly between urban and rural areas, whether the policy was about limiting births or now promoting them. This continuity is not immediately apparent when looking at each period in isolation; it only becomes clear when comparing the two phases against each other and the same body of evidence, which is the comparative perspective adopted in this thesis. In the same way, reading official census figures

alongside the reconstructed estimates discussed in the introduction allows the thesis to take into account the uncertainty surrounding the measurement of fertility and population change in China, rather than independently resolving questions about the accuracy of official figures. Lastly, by placing the post-2015 pronatalist shift alongside early Maoist pronatalism, through a comparative analysis of sources that typically are not discussed together, we can pinpoint what has changed and what has not: the belief that fertility is a state issue rather than an individual one remains intact, but the methods to enforce that belief have evolved, from ideological mobilization in an agrarian society to financial incentives in a more urbanized context, all without a corresponding increase in effectiveness.

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of the approach taken here. The first concerns the demographic data on which parts of the analysis rely. Official Chinese statistics have been subject to discussion in the literature regarding their reliability, particularly in relation to fertility reporting and population counts. The reconstructed estimates considered in this thesis provide alternative evidence, but they do not eliminate the uncertainty surrounding the underlying demographic data. This limitation therefore concerns the evidence available in the existing literature rather than an independent assessment of the accuracy of Chinese census statistics conducted by this thesis. Additionally, since the three-child policy and the subsidy measures for 2023-2025 are still quite new, the evidence we have on their effects only spans a short period after implementation. We will not be able to draw more solid conclusions about their long-term impact for several years. Finally, the thesis is based primarily on existing academic research rather than original fieldwork or primary data collection. This does not in itself constitute a limitation of the evidence, as the studies reviewed employ a range of methodologies and, in many cases, individual-or household-level data. Rather, the scope of the thesis means that it relies on the quality and limitations of the existing studies when assessing the evidence. In particular, the thesis cannot independently establish causal mechanisms at the

individual or household level, such as how hukou status, migration, housing and education costs, women's employment, and access to childcare or social protection interact to influence fertility decisions. These mechanisms are therefore discussed on the basis of the empirical findings and causal interpretations presented in the literature reviewed.

China's journey over the last seventy years presents a unique case study on how far state power can go in controlling reproduction and where it hits its limits. While the government has successfully prevented hundreds of millions of births, it has struggled to encourage a baby boom in return. The urban-rural divide, which this analysis has highlighted from the 1960s to today, has been a persistent, evolving aspect of this narrative rather than just a minor detail. The findings of this thesis suggest that understanding this divide as a long-standing structural feature of China's population policy is important when assessing the challenges facing the current pronatalist shift.

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