The Evolution of China’s Policy for Family Planning

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Abstract. It is imperative to understand factors of demographic and social issues, economic development, and global influences which have influenced China's family planning policy implementation through time from the one-child to three-child policy. To further explore how such factors influenced the evolution of China's family planning policy and to predict future policy outcomes, this research has extensively discussed demographic challenges, economic development, social issues, and global influences. The research has also analyzed how these factors influence China's family planning policy direction towards the future. For sustainability, in relation to family planning, this research has identified that the Chinese government could implement targeted and flexible approaches to childbirth control, implement social support and services to help couples meet their family goals, and enhance social awareness via education and family therapy. In sum, this research is important because it provides an elaborate discussion of the evolution of China's family planning policy and predicts the future direction of such policing to ensure sustainable family planning in China.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background information

China's policy on family planning has changed/evolved massively over time due to changing social conditions and economic turmoils. China introduced the one-child policy in 1979 to slow population growth [1]. However, most people considered the policy to be controversial due to its harsh implementation with forced sterilizations and abortions [2]. Later in 2015, the Chinese government relaxed the demands for family planning, allowing couples to have two children through a revamped one-child policy [1, 2]. The changes to this one-child policy were made due to the rapidly aging population experienced by China [1]. Nonetheless, China's birth rate continued to decline. In 2021, the government was forced to relax the one-child policy further to allow couples to have three children [3]. The reasons for the one-child policy's evolution are complex. However, the policy's initial objective was to slow population growth in China since the government saw population growth as a threat to economic development. The policy has also had several unintended consequences, such as a reduction in the productive youth population and a rapid rise in an aging population. The Chinese government was forced to relax the policy to address the challenges associated with productivity.

1.2 Research significance

The changes in China's family planning policy have significantly impacted China and other countries globally. The impact on China has included areas of social dynamics, family structures, and individual lives [2]. Also, the experience attained from the one-child policy has impacted strategies for population control in several countries globally. China's family planning policy garnered global criticism and attention for its coercive measures and human rights violations [4]. Therefore, the international community pressured the country to curb the challenges associated with its one-child policy and align its family planning policy to global standards.

Demographics is a crucial aspect of China’s family planning policy evolution. China’s immense growth in population in the mid-20th century led to concerns about social stability, environmental sustainability, and resource scarcity [4]. Therefore, the one-child policy addressed such challenges by reducing population growth. However, apart from new demographic concerns that China faced over time (like a shrinking workforce), the evolution of societal aspirations due to rapid urbanization and economic growth led to changes in cultural values such as individual freedom to have more children [2]. With issues such as gender imbalances from forced abortions and sex-selective practices, psychological effects of the one-child policy were felt among individuals leading to poor mental well-being [1]. Therefore, there was a need to recognize

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such issues and balance social/economic well-being and population control. This research will contribute to the current body of knowledge regarding family planning policies by specifically analyzing the reasons for China's policy evolution. Also, this research will forecast the future of family planning policy in China, considering the current trends.

1.3 Aims and objectives
This research examines how China's family planning evolved to analyze the reasons for such policy changes. Additionally, this research aims to predict future family planning policy developments in China and provide the reasons for such projected changes. The objectives of the research are:
- To discuss China’s family planning policies over time
- To explore the challenges that saw China’s family planning policy evolution
- To predict future outcomes around China’s family planning policy.

1.4 Research problem
There is a need to understand how and why China's policy around family planning evolved. The interplay of economic development, demographic challenges, global influences, and social issues and how they necessitated adjustments to the one-child policy for a changing Chinese society must also be examined. Therefore, by analyzing economic development, demographic challenges, global influences, and social issues and how they interact to influence China's family planning policy, this research will provide a comprehension of the reasons for China's policy changes. Also, by achieving the study objectives and addressing the problem outlined herein, this research will shed light further on the direction to be taken by similar academic discourses around family planning to help stakeholders and policymakers develop better population control strategies.

2 China’s family planning policy changes

2.1 The one-child policy
The one-child policy was implemented in China in 1979 as a population planning initiative to reduce the country’s population growth. The one-child policy, however, had several cultural, social, demographic, and economic effects on individuals, couples, and the Chinese society. For example, the policy’s efficacy in reducing the rate of reproduction/defensibility from perspectives around human rights issues made the policy to be subjected to controversies globally [3]. Also, China’s elderly population growth rate rapidly became a social and economic concern due to the inability of the government to ensure economic growth [1, 4]. Therefore, the government was forced to further provide adequate health and social services to elderly individuals, which prompted the need to relax the one-child policy.

2.2 The two-child policy
The one-child family planning policy was relaxed in 2015, which allowed Chinese couples to bear two children. The adjustment was to address the challenges discussed herein - including the need for labor supply, demographic challenges, and to create a more balanced population structure, among others. The two-child family planning policy also had several implications for the Chinese economy and society. The most significant implication was that the policy increased the birth rate. A year after the policy was implemented, China's number of births increased by approximately 2 million [5]. The population decline was halted but not reversed even as the age structure was changed as a result of the two-child policy [6]. However, with more children, the two-child policy strained China's social security system and raised concerns regarding the workforce's future [3]. When the government realized that the population still failed to grow as expected, the two-child policy was relaxed in 2021, with couples being allowed to have up to three children. The relaxation of the two-child policy was a measure to counter China's continued low birth rate.

2.3 The three-child policy
In 2021, China implemented the three-child policy, which saw significant changes concerning the one- and two-child policies. The three-child policy was meant to improve further China's declining growth rate, below the 2.1 births per woman replacement level [3]. However, the three-child policy had its implications. For example, the policy not only led to an increased birth rate but also altered the age structure of the Chinese population [7]. However, with more children, a strain was put on China's system for social security. Nonetheless, issues such as gender equality which resulted from cropping the one-child policy due to discrimination against female children and women forced to sterilize or abort their babies were reduced through the three-child policy [3,7]. Therefore, while the three-child policy's implications are likely to be massive, considering that it was implemented two years ago, issues such as gender equality and a change in age structure have already been felt. More implications are likely to be felt in the future.

3 The reasons for china’s family planning policy evolution

3.1 Demographic issues
The one-child policy largely impacted China's demographic structure. While the policy's main aim was to control the growing Chinese population, it led to several demographic challenges. The imbalance in demographic structure is one of the key challenges that emerged, associated with a shrinking population of
working individuals and an increasing population of older people [1]. Limiting couples to having only one child reduced the country's birth rate, leading to a reduction in young people compared to aging individuals [1, 4]. Such an imbalance placed a lot of pressure on China's productive capacity and hampered its efforts to address the labor market demands [6]. Providing adequate care to an aging population became a pressing matter for the Chinese government, which led to adjustments in resource allocation and policies to address elderly individuals' growing needs. With the relaxation of the one-child policy to allow couples to have two children in 2015, the birth rate was increased to reduce the strain on the working population [6]. As such, the two-child policy in 2016 aimed to rebalance the Chinese age structure. The government recognized the need for better measures such as expanding social security systems and healthcare, the positive view of elderly care, and promoting intergenerational support to address demographic issues caused by the one-child policy [5, 6]. Also, the government invested in training and education programs to improve labor productivity and human capital development. When the government of China further allowed couples to have three children, the government became more open to further reforms in its family planning policy by implementing delayed retirement and extended retirement to maintain the most suitable workforce. As such, the Chinese government recognized the demographic challenges associated with the one-child policy and made reforms to improve its social welfare, economy, and healthcare systems. Nonetheless, the one-child policy posed long-term effects that will further shape China's demographic space leading to a need for holistic strategies and sustained efforts to maintain a sustainable and balanced demographic structure.

### 3.2 Economic development

China has witnessed massive economic growth in the last few decades, which has also massively impacted the policy on family planning. As urbanization in China accelerated, and the economy expanded, the country witnessed cultural and social transformation [4]. The Chinese population became more urbanized and educated; thus, they increasingly desired to have individual freedom and make choices about childbirth for themselves [3, 5]. Also, improved living standards due to economic development led to greater access to healthcare services and education, which made families aspire to have more children and care for them to express their reproductive rights [5]. More significantly, most individuals considered having multiple children as a way to enhance or maintain their social status leading to happiness and a sense of achievement [5]. More significantly, due to new job opportunities from economic growth, increased demand for skilled workers led the government to reconsider its position on the one-child policy [3]. When the government allowed couples to have two children, the essence of individual choice was emphasized for economic growth. Therefore, the desire for more children inspired the Chinese population to change their social norms due to higher living standards and exposure to global influences.

### 3.3 Social issues

Social issues were also associated with the strict enforcement of the one-child policy. Social implications were felt in society, families, and the individual. Forced abortions were a significant social problem resulting from the one-child policy. Since couples were limited to having just one child, couples who exceeded the policy faced fines or job loss [8]. Government officials at local and national levels also resorted to coercive measures such as forced sterilizations abortions, which violated individual autonomy and reproductive rights leading to emotional distress among couples [4, 5]. Gender imbalance is another social issue that arose from sex-selective practices. The cultural preference for male children as heirs and limitations on the number of children made some couples resort to female infanticide or selective abortions to have a male child [6]. The gender ratio became skewed as a significant gender imbalance was witnessed [5, 6]. Allowing couples to have more than one child, therefore, was associated with the realization of the need to restore a more balanced demographic structure by the Chinese government by acknowledging family autonomy and reproductive rights [8]. In sum, the social impact of China's one-child policy discussed herein emphasized the need to reevaluate the policy's effectiveness in alleviating societal concerns and enhancing individual well-being, leading to the implementation of the two-children and further three-children policies.

### 3.4 Global pressure

International criticism marked the one-child policy's global perspective. Concerns were raised worldwide regarding the coercive contraceptive methods and human rights violations that the Chinese government employed. Organizations such as advocacy groups, governments, and human rights organizations raised their concerns about the violations witnessed by Chinese couples and directed their criticism to the Chinese government [1]. The global organizations asked the Chinese government to employ more lenient measures, such as reproductive choices for Chinese couples, and to recognize global human rights standards [1, 8]. Due to external pressure, the Chinese government revised the one-child policy to include responsive and moderate measures aligned with international family planning standards [6]. The revisions were also part of the government's effort to enhance the global image of China. The positive response of the Chinese government to international criticism highlighted its recognition of challenges associated with the one-child policy and its willingness to have the policy modified. Therefore, the perspectives of global organizations were a catalyst for change, which led to a more inclusive and moderate Chinese family planning policy.
4 The future of China's family planning policy

In the history of China, the family planning policy has been among the most consequential and controversial policies. China's family planning policy has been changed several times, from 1979's one-child policy to 2021's three-child policy. While it is difficult to predict the future family planning policy to be adopted by the Chinese government in the future, several factors have been witnessed from the policies already implemented. Such factors include a decline in the birth rate, China's high aging population, and gender imbalance, among other factors. China, concerning the declining rate of birth, is expected to implement more flexible family planning policies in the future [9]. However, issues such as the high cost of living, the changing social norms regarding family structure and size, and women's high educational attainment may further impact China's family planning implementation [3]. Regarding China's alarming rate of an aging population, the number of individuals above 65 years may double in 2050, putting a strain on China's social security system and leading to massive economic challenges [9]. Regarding gender imbalance, China currently has more men than women, caused by the one-child policy [9]. Such gender imbalance could negatively impact future family planning policies due to increased social unrest and crime [10]. Therefore, changes in China's future family planning policies could be around ensuring gender balance further. The Chinese government, for instance, may further relax the three-child policy to increase the country's birth rate. Also, the government may introduce new policy frameworks to address the stress on social security by reducing the aging population [11]. Therefore, the family policy may be relaxed further to allow couples to have multiple children (more than three children). Through more flexible family planning policy frameworks, the government may also focus on quality, not quantity, to address the pressure on social security systems. In such a case, the Chinese government may encourage couples to access healthier family planning programs to be better educated on how to treat their children [10]. Such predictions are based on the demographic, economic development, social, and global perspectives discussed herein.

On the other hand, China's future family planning policy could consider targeted and flexible approaches, social services, and support geared to helping families meet their goals, ensure environmental sustainability, and improve social awareness through family therapy and education. In areas where gender imbalance is greater, the government could implement incentives such as financial support and education to reduce gender-related stigma [10]. Through social services and support, couples in China could be helped to make the most appropriate choice regarding the number of children they need by being encouraged to explore enhanced education, healthcare, and childcare services [9]. The government could also encourage environmental sustainability by promoting healthy family planning through voluntary sterilization and empowering women and girls to create a balanced social structure [11]. More specifically, the government could implement holistic programs such as long-acting and reversible contraception (LARC) with long-term and effective contraception to encourage greater family planning control among couples by reducing frequent contraceptive use [12]. As a result, it is imperative to note that the strategies highlighted herein need the input of different stakeholders, including the Chinese government, Chinese couples, and international organizations, to ensure they come to a realization.

5 Conclusion

China's policy for family planning has evolved with time to reflect global influences, economic developments, and changing social conditions. While the government implemented the one-child policy in 1979 to slow population growth, the policy became controversial due to its harsh enforcement. Even after its relaxation in 2015, China's population continued to decline, which saw further relaxation in 2021 when Chinese couples were allowed to have up to three children. Several issues influenced China's policy evolution, including economic development, demographic issues, global perspectives, and social concerns. The issues caused an imbalance in the shrinking between the shrinking workforce and aging population, the desire to have more children due to changing societal aspirations and urbanization/economic development, aspiration for reproductive rights due to forced sterilization/abortions, as well as global pressure and criticism prompting adjustments to the policy.

On the other hand, while China's future strategies for family planning policy implementation are uncertain, factors like gender imbalance, a declining birth rate, an aging population, and changing social norms may shape future policy implementation direction. The government could consider targeted and flexible approaches, social services, and support geared to helping families meet their goals, ensure environmental sustainability, and improve social awareness through family therapy and education. As aforementioned, in areas where gender imbalance is greater, the government could implement incentives such as financial support and education to reduce gender-related stigma. Also, through social services and support, couples in China could be helped to make the most appropriate choice regarding the number of children they need by being encouraged to explore enhanced education, healthcare, and childcare services. More specifically, the government could implement holistic programs such as LARC to encourage better family planning control among couples by reducing frequent contraceptive use. While this research has provided an overview of China's family planning policy evolution and provided future direction to ensure sustainable family planning, the analysis has heavily relied on secondary sources like existing reports and literature, which might have been biased. Future research could employ primary sources involving interviews, surveys, or case studies with firsthand perspectives and information to avoid biases. Also, the research mainly focuses on China's family planning policy evolution/changes and their rationale, with little
exploration of future implementation plans and policy outcomes. Therefore, future research must delve into China's future policy change dynamics, including possible individual experiences. However, this research has provided a clear direction for future research on the identified research topic.

References