

# (Not) Becoming Mothers: Fertility Intentions and Reproductive Agency During the Three-child Policy in China

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**Abstract** This paper examines Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood following the implementation of the three-child policy announced in May 2021. Drawing on Minello's theoretical framework for analyzing declining fertility, I argue that the reproductive choices of Chinese women are not influenced by the possibility of having additional children, but rather by the disjuncture between the structural and cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese society. Market liberalization and the privatization of welfare services following the economic reforms of the 1980s created a disjuncture between the material needs of Chinese families and the traditional cultural assumptions regarding family and maternity, which was exacerbated by the introduction of the one-child policy and subsequently of the two-child policy. Against this background, the implementation of the three-child policy continues to stimulate forms of awareness and reflection concerning women's bodily autonomy, reproductive agency, and fertility intentions. Employing social media posts as case studies, this paper aims not only to underscore how birth rates are increasingly affected by economic and political structures, but also to stimulate reflection on material concerns and forms of dissent that, despite their cultural specificity, can serve as a bridge toward broader, non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood.

**Keywords** three-child policy; fertility intentions; motherhood; Chinese women; reproductive agency.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood following the three-child policy, implemented in May 2021, with particular attention to how women articulate reproductive agency through social media discourse. Drawing on Minello's (2022) theoretical framework for analyzing declining fertility in Italy, which emphasizes the necessary dialogue between structure (economic-political conditions) and culture (socially attributed gender expectations), I argue that Chinese women's reproductive choices are shaped not by the possibility of having additional children but by

the fundamental disjuncture between structural and cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese society. This disjuncture is characterized by simultaneous demands for women's productive labor in a precarious economy and cultural expectations that women fulfill traditional roles as mothers and primary caregivers.

Public debates around reproductive governance increasingly reflect these complexities. In their analysis of online discussions concerning state natality policies, Chen et al. (2023) observe that themes related to women's reproductive rights, employment discrimination, and shifting perceptions of marriage and parenthood rank among the most frequently discussed issues — second only to the economic costs of childbirth.

Following this multifaceted perspective and building on feminist demographic principles that emphasize the need to bring demography into dialogue with disciplines concerned with structural inequalities (Williams 2010), this study employs a multidisciplinary approach. This approach combines quantitative data and qualitative analysis of social media discourse to capture both structural dynamics — such as demographic policies and economic conditions — and everyday discursive practices through which women negotiate reproductive agency. For the analysis of social media discourse, I adopted an approach that finds its basis in critical discourse analysis (CDA), which conceptualizes language as a form of social practice and emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in processes of meaning-making (Wodak 2001: 1–2). CDA investigates how discourse is shaped by relations of dominance, how it is historically produced and embedded in specific temporal and spatial settings, and how power structures are both reinforced and challenged through linguistic practices (Wodak 2001; Van Dijk 2015). Within the context of this study, CDA offers a particularly suitable framework for examining how Chinese women employ social media discourse to contest state-led reproductive governance and articulate bodily autonomy in a setting where institutional discourses justify demographic control through appeals to national interests and traditional family values. My analysis draws on CDA to conduct a qualitative, context-oriented content analysis. In doing so, I focus on recurring themes through which users articulate their positions on motherhood and state reproductive governance. The paper examines not only the textual content of posts but also the social processes and structures shaping their production — including the historical context of reproductive governance in China. Within this framework, the language of social media reveals itself as a particularly significant site of power and struggle, where women negotiate

possibilities of resistance to unequal power relations through discursive strategies that may appear as everyday conversation yet carry profound political implications.

I searched Sina Weibo for posts using hashtags #三孩政策# (three-child policy), #三孩生育政策来了# (the three-child policy has arrived), and the combination of words 三孩政策+女性 (three-child policy + women), focusing on posts published from May 2021 onward. The posts and comments analyzed as case studies were selected from fifty-four posts based on thematic relevance to reproductive autonomy, fertility intentions, and critiques of pronatalist policies. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and narrative framings through which users articulated their positions on motherhood and state reproductive governance.

It is important to acknowledge this study's limitations. Access to Weibo from outside China presents significant technical challenges, and censorship mechanisms affect post visibility. Consequently, the number of posts analyzed is limited. To address these constraints, I supplement social media analysis with findings from academic studies conducting extensive surveys and interviews on fertility intentions (Zhang et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2022; Chen et al. 2023) and incorporate analysis of feminist activist discourse published outside mainland China.

This study should be understood as exploratory and preliminary — an initial approach to examining how Chinese women negotiate reproductive agency through digital discourse. Rather than claiming definitive conclusions, this research aims to illuminate emerging patterns in women's articulations of reproductive refusal and contribute to broader, non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood.

## 2. Women, Motherhood and Reproductive Policies in Contemporary China

### 2.1 From “Virtuous Mother” to “Mother of National Citizens”: Gender and Nation-Building in the Early Modern China

Female gender roles, and motherhood values in particular, have always constituted integral components of what can be defined today as traditional Chinese culture. Following a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal structure, traditional Chinese women's role and virtues were organized around the “Three

Obediences”: to their father, to their husband, and finally to their son (Leung 2003: 361). Within this framework, the Confucian concept of filial piety also played a crucial role in defining social and gendered relations: women were first expected to be dutiful daughters who cared for their parents; after marriage, they would move to their husband’s household and serve their in-laws. Widowed women were expected to defer to their son’s authority in matters of family leadership. Women’s roles were further summarized by the Confucian principle of *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母, which literally translates as “virtuous wife and good mother”, demonstrating how motherhood constituted a fundamental component of women’s identity construction (Weeks 1989: 597).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the conceptualization of a new China, which sought to distance itself from outdated traditional cultural norms and political structure, led progressive intellectuals, as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, to advocate for female economic independence and education. They believed that educated working women could serve as fundamental active agents in the development of a new State. It was deemed essential to guarantee women the opportunity to pursue professional careers to contribute to national development and, as educated mothers, to positively influence their children’s education (Cheng 2000: 110; Liu et al. 2013: 33; Mann 2011: 21): “Children’s education begins with the mother’s teaching, which is itself rooted in women’s education. Therefore women’s education fundamentally determines whether a nation will survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness.” (Liang 2013[1897]: 194). Despite the spirit of enlightenment that was forewarning the May Fourth Movement, the maternal function was nonetheless understood as women’s innate biological vocation and celebrated as part of the broader nationalist project. Indeed, women were praised as “mothers of national citizens” (国民之母), an expression that merged the traditional image of the virtuous mother with that of the modern nation (Zhu 2015: 29).

## 2.2 The Gendered Labor of Revolution: Women between Emancipation and Reproductive Expectations

With the advent of the Maoist period women assumed a key role in revolutionary objectives. This new perspective on gender roles was fully portrayed by the slogan “Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too” (男同志能办的事情, 女同志也能办) and by the image of the Iron Girls (Yang & Yan 2017: 64), tireless workers and revolutionaries who

had abandoned all aesthetic characteristics associated with the female gender and were considered equal to men, with whom they shared labor responsibilities. Yet even as these women were called to their revolutionary duties, they could not ignore their roles as mother and wife in the family. This entailed active participation in revolutionary processes without neglecting reproductive labor and care responsibilities (Leung 2003: 366). The tension inherent in this dual expectation — full participation in productive labor alongside continued responsibility for reproductive labor — created challenges for women.

Between 1950 and 1970, China's population grew dramatically from 540 million to over 800 million, creating significant concerns about resource allocation and economic development. In response, the government introduced the Wan xi shao (晚稀少) policy in 1970 (trad. later, more spaced, fewer), which encouraged later childbearing, longer spacing between children, and fewer children overall. This policy functioned more as an awareness campaign than as a coercive measure, relying on education and persuasion rather than punishment.

## 2.3 Economic Reforms and the One-Child Policy

The advent of Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization policies marked a watershed moment not only in China's economic trajectory but also in the reconfiguration of gender roles and reproductive governance. The concept of "femininity" and the figure of the sexualized woman, previously rejected as bourgeois, returned to prominence through mass media representation (Yang 1999: 47). According to Wang (2017: 221), the shift from the positive perception of the Iron Girls to the rejection of this model of Chinese womanhood "parallels the transition from socialist to capitalist ideals of gender, class, and ethnicity". This shift entailed also a reconfiguration of responsibilities considered "feminine": on one hand, it emphasized the necessity of working to ensure family welfare and access to increasingly privatized services; on the other, it renewed social pressure surrounding traditional roles of mother and wife, passing from "iron women" to "socialist housewives" (Leung 2003: 368). The dismantling of state-provided social services led to a renewed emphasis on the household as the primary economic unit. As a result, access to high-quality infant and maternal care became increasingly dependent on the ability to pay, while women were expected to embody a model centered on commitment and devotion to family responsibilities (Leung 2003: 368).



It was precisely at this moment of profound economic and cultural transformation that the Chinese government implemented its first reproductive policy. In 1979, despite the demonstrable success of the previous *Wan xi shao* campaign in reducing fertility rates from 5.9 to 2.9 children per woman between 1970 and 1979 (Zeng & Hesketh 2016: 1930), the government announced the one-child policy. The policy prohibited couples from having more than one child, with exceptions for ethnic minorities, and violations resulted in sex-selective abortions, female infanticides, and forced sterilizations (Cai & Feng 2021: 592–593; Mann 2011: 63). To ensure compliance, a control system was established through the existing elaborate bureaucratic organization of CCP officials throughout the national territory (Mattingly 2020).

Within Chinese culture, bearing children, particularly male children, has always been a prerogative to ensure patrilineal lineage and the presence of labor force in the fields. This is one of the main reasons why, especially in rural areas, where families relied heavily on offspring to carry out agricultural work, the policy was unpopular (Mattingly 2020: 273). Furthermore, following the Confucian concept of filial piety, offspring represent an important source not only for labor but also for the care of the elderly population.

The one-child policy, therefore, appeared in direct opposition to the traditional cultural assumptions that the CCP itself was simultaneously bringing back into prominence, and women's bodies became the primary site where this contradiction was violently enacted.

## 2.4 Traditional Family Values and Pronatalist Governance in Xi's China

Within this socio-moral framework, themes concerning the role of the family, its values, and women's family responsibilities have returned to prominence as fundamental to social harmony (Wu & Dong 2019: 8). These themes have acquired an increasingly prominent role in official political discourse, contributing to the identity construction of the nation. Against this background, population aging, decline in the labor force, and persistently low fertility rates were the long-term consequences of the one-child policy.

First announced in 2013, the conditional two-child policy initially allowed the possibility of having a second child only if at least one member of the couple was born under the one-child policy. In 2015 the universal two-child policy was announced, giving the opportunity to all couples to have a second child. However, according to data reported by the National Health and Family

Planning Commission, by May 2015 only 13.2% of couples eligible for the new policy had applied for a second child (Zeng & Hesketh 2016: 1932). Among these families, young couples with high incomes and a first-born daughter were predominantly represented — a pattern that itself reflects the persisting cultural preference for male children alongside economic calculations about the costs of child-rearing. The collapse in birth rates reveals that the possibility of procreating more than one child was not actually the cause of declining fertility. Women found themselves caught between escalating economic pressures requiring dual household incomes and intensifying cultural expectations requiring their devotion to family and childcare. In early 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics announced that the number of newborns in 2021 was 10.62 million, representing a decrease of 1.38 million from 2020 (Ning et al. 2022).

The decline in birth rates revealed the failure of the two-child policy, leading to the introduction of the three-child policy in May 2021. What distinguishes this policy from previous ones, beyond the possibility of having a third child, is the official announcement by the CCP regarding the implementation of a system of subsidies dedicated to childcare and natality: “The decision lays out supporting measures in three areas: strengthening child nursery services, reducing the cost of childbearing and improving prenatal and postnatal services” (The State Council of the People Republic of China 2021).

In addition to abolishing fines for those who exceed the three-child limit, on July 20, 2021, the PRC government announced planned support measures, including: tax deductions for childcare and medical assistance expenses for children under 3 years of age; strengthening childcare services to support dual-income families at affordable prices, with particular reference to establishing community childcare facilities such as nurseries; increasing care services within schools to facilitate work-life balance; implementing extended maternity leave; enacting policies against workplace discrimination of women, such as establishing public services for women’s reintegration into the workforce for those who interrupted their careers following pregnancy. Between May 2021 and June 2022, a total of nineteen support policies for the three-child policy were made public through media channels, both at national and local levels (Peng et al. 2024). One example is the policy enacted on March 28, 2022, which announced the possibility of deducting childcare expenses for children up to three years of age for a maximum of 1,000 RMB per month per child. One of the most recent measures was announced on July 28, 2025, according to which,

starting from January 1, 2025, regardless of whether families have one, two, or three children, every child in each household will receive a state subsidy of 3,600 RMB annually (Xinhua News 2025). The importance the government places on these issues is exemplified by the announcement on October 2025, by the All-China Women's Federation and major official media outlets of the publication in several foreign languages of two books containing Xi Jinping's most important speeches on women, children, and family: "one on studying and implementing Xi Jinping's discourses on work related to women, children, and women's federations, and the other on studying and implementing his discourses on family, family education, and family values" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2025).

This intensified emphasis on traditional family values has been accompanied by campaigns such as the "Looking for the Most Beautiful Family Campaign" (寻找最美家庭), launched by the All-China Women's Federation in 2020 with the aim of promoting, among various family virtues, marital harmony and filial piety. The campaign description, accompanied by a photo of a family consisting of parents and two children — a boy and a girl — specifically states that it seeks to highlight "the unique role of Chinese women in social and family life and helps to manifest family virtues in the new era" (All-China Women's Federation 2020). The Federation's website also contains a section entirely dedicated to stories of virtuous Chinese families that fully embody family values and promote them through dedicated activities<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, fundamental contradictions persist. On one side, despite the announced measures, the deeply privatized nature of China's economy means that the cost of child-rearing remains prohibitively high for many families, while workplace discrimination against mothers continues to threaten women's professional advancement. On the other side, the Xi administration's promotion of traditional family values places ever-greater pressure on women to fulfill roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers — pressure that is fundamentally at odds with the economic necessity for women to maintain professional careers to afford the childcare and educational services.

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<sup>1</sup> The Family section of the English-language website is accessible at the following link <https://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/In-depth/family/2108/3111-1.htm>



### 3. Fertility intentions and Reproductive Agency during the Three-Child Policy

The data presented in the previous section clearly reflect a demographic landscape characterized by declining fertility intentions and realized fertility rates. According to the Official Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China for 2024 (中华人民共和国 2024 年国民经济和社会发展统计公报), the birth rate in 2024 was 6.77%. This represents an increase compared to 2023 (6.39%), but remains lower than the 2021 figure of 7.52%, the year in which the three-child policy was enacted.

However, a purely quantitative analysis of data is insufficient to investigate the causes of declining birth rates and to analyze how natality policies are received by the population — that is, in this case, the extent to which the three-child policy can effectively meet the needs and aspirations of the Chinese population. In pursuing this objective, it becomes evident that the gender component plays a fundamental role within this analysis. Indeed, as demonstrated in the first section, there exists a profound relationship between the socially constructed figure of women and all responsibilities encompassed within the “maternal,” including reproductive and care work. Recognition of the intimate and complex link that exists between gender issues, demographic data, and natality policies reveals the necessity of employing qualitative tools that attend to the implications that gender has for the constitution of society in its broadest sense.

In analyzing the causes of low birth rates in Italy, demographer Alessandra Minello (2022) found that for desired and realized fertility to coincide, it is necessary to attend to the dialogue between structure and culture. Understanding “structure” as the economic-political framework within which societies operate and “culture” as the dimension encompassing, among various aspects of life, socially attributed expectations and responsibilities regarding gender, Minello suggests that it is necessary to account for the synergy between these two aspects in order to effect change in birth rate trends. Structure and culture influence each other. The lack of complementarity between them produces systemic social and economic imbalances that amplify gender inequalities, sustaining women's subordinate status across both the productive and reproductive spheres.

According to Huang and Wu (2022: 144), the negative trend in fertility rates is not unique to the People's Republic of China but reflects a broader

pattern across East Asia. These scholars note that, despite increasing governmental concern over declining birth and marriage rates, most states in the region have failed to allocate sufficient resources to implement meaningful family support. East Asia exhibits a tendency toward what Ochiai (2014: 214) defines as “familistic individualization,” in which governments appeal to citizens’ individual responsibility toward the traditional family and marriage in times of welfare crises and demographic change. This is, to some extent, what is also happening in China, where institutions have focused on promoting a traditional heteronormative family system grounded on Confucian values as a response to declining fertility rates. The historical analysis presented previously demonstrated how, in China, successive reproductive policies from the one-child through the three-child policy have consistently failed to align material support with cultural expectations, creating persistent contradictions that have intensified under conditions of economic neoliberalization.

Applying Minello’s framework to the Chinese case reveals how the support actions for reproductive policies, interconnected with the economic changes that accompanied them, did not correspond to the socio-cultural assumptions of the Chinese population. The implementation of the one-child policy coincided with a fundamental period of economic transition: the opening of markets and the consequent move toward privatization of companies and services. From a cultural perspective, institutions pushed for the revival of traditional family values and childcare. Furthermore, following the Confucian concept of filial piety, the offspring represents an important source not only for labor but also for care of the elderly population. The implementation of the one-child policy therefore appeared in opposition to the traditional cultural assumptions that the CCP itself brought back into prominence beginning in the 1980s. This lack of correspondence between political directives and cultural systems led to practices such as infanticides, selective abortions to ensure a male heir, and forced sterilizations, with severe material and psychological repercussions for women. The collapse in birth rates that followed the two-child policy is emblematic as it reveals how the possibility of procreating more than one child was not the cause of declining fertility anymore. The necessity for families to have access to dual incomes to ensure educational and care services for their children, combined with cultural and social pressure requiring women to maintain their role as mothers and caregivers toward the family, does not incentivize the population to have more than one child. Under a cultural point of view, the Xi administration’s promotion of Confucian family values — including campaigns celebrating ‘virtuous’ families, official speeches

emphasizing women's familial roles, and media representations of ideal motherhood — creates intense social pressure for women to fulfill traditional maternal and caregiving responsibilities. However, the cultural landscape of contemporary China is not monolithic. The Xi Jinping era began during a historical period in which Chinese society, following economic openings, experienced rapid transformation in lifestyle and consequently in ways of thinking and approaching social issues (Scarpari 2014: 823). It is within this heterogeneous cultural context that a crucial additional dimension emerges: the growing awareness among Chinese women concerning bodily autonomy, reproductive agency, and the historical pattern of state control over fertility.

### 3.1 “The Three-child Policy Has Arrived, Are You Ready?”: Structural Barriers to Fertility Intentions

Considering that the three-child policy is a recent measure, it is instructive to examine studies conducted on fertility intentions following the policy's officialization. A survey conducted from June 10 to July 12, 2021, among 15,332 participants aged 20 to 45, found that only 22% expressed willingness to have a third child. Among the reasons preventing the remaining 78% from this choice are difficulty reconciling work and childcare, rising costs of child-rearing, and lack of public childcare services. The results also demonstrate that as participants' age increases, willingness to have large families decreases (Zhang et al. 2021). Another study, conducted from August 30 to September 28, 2021, surveyed 6,680 young people aged 18 to 25. The results demonstrate that 40% would like to have two children (46.5% of these responses from men, 36.2% from women), while only 2.8% of male participants and 1.6% of female participants expressed desire for three children. Notably, 26% of respondents indicated they do not want to have children at all (Zhang et al. 2021).

These data appear to resonate with the reactions expressed by some Chinese users on Weibo, one of China's main social media platforms.

Following the announcement of the three-child policy, all institutional social media channels disseminated the news. Specifically, Xinhua News Agency conducted a poll on Weibo asking: “The three-child policy has arrived, are you ready?” (三孩生育政策来了你准备好了吗). However, of 32,000 respondents, 29,000 answered that they would “absolutely not consider it” (完全不考虑). According to posts by several users published on May 31, 2021 (the date of the policy's announcement), the agency allegedly deleted the poll immediately: “Xinhua News Agency deleted this vote, giving the impression of

a mess of chicken feathers and a group of bastards” (新华社把这个投票删了，给人的感觉是一地鸡毛，一群混蛋) (Weibo 2021a). Moreover, the agency apparently also disabled users’ ability to comment on the main post announcing the policy. A post by a female user published on May 31, 2021, which garnered significant engagement (10,000 likes and 761 comments), remarked: “Did Xinhua News Agency shut down its official comments for fear of being criticized? Not to mention having three children. Look at how many young friends of appropriate age around you are still unable to get married due to issues with household registration, cars, and houses” (新华社官方的评论是怕被骂才关了吗？可别说生三个孩子了看看身边多少人适龄年纪的青年朋友们还因为户口、车子、房子问题不能结婚). She continued: “By the way, when I was a child, the national family planning policy was in place. I grew up and the government encouraged me to have three children. So, for someone like me, do we have to support 4 grandparents and our parents in the future + Raising three children? After checking the prices, forget it, I don’t deserve it. I just want to love happily, live well, and talk less nonsense. After all, living is not just about passing on the family line” (顺便提一句，我小时候国家计划生育。我长大了政府鼓励 3 胎。所以和我同样的人，以后难道要赡养 4 和父母+抚养 3 个孩子吗。看了看物价，算了，老娘不配。我只想开开心心恋爱，好好生活，少说屁话。人活着毕竟不只是为了传宗接代的) (Weibo 2021b).

A qualitative study by Liu et al. (2022), interviewing subjects from various social backgrounds, underlined that a structured system of childcare services would alleviate the stress of balancing work and parental life and would increase inclination to have more children. Among the most pressing requests are implementation of public and private educational and care institutions with flexible hours, as well as economic subsidies dedicated to natality. The requests expressed reveal an evident connection between Chinese women’s fertility intentions and the adequacy of gender policies currently applied in China. The implementation of women’s rights and interests at the occupational level — such as extended maternity leave and promotion of gender equality in the workplace — emerges as fundamental to reversing the fertility trend. The persistent low fertility intentions, with their associated reasons, suggest that according to a substantial portion of the population, many necessary measures have yet to be adopted (Zhang et al. 2021; Chen et al. 2023).

The inadequacy of the measures adopted following the enactment of the three-child policy also emerged when Xinhua News Agency disseminated the implementation plan for the childcare subsidy system (育儿补贴制度实施方案) in a postdated July 20, 2021 (Weibo 2021c). Among the various comments,

several from skeptical and critical users regarding the new birth policy stand out. One of the most-liked comments (127 likes) stated: “Please care about women before talking about childbirth” (请关爱女性再谈生育吧). Another user replied: “With a mortgage of over one million yuan, I am not considering having a second or third child” (还有一百多万房贷压着，二胎，三胎就不考虑了) (Weibo 2021c). By framing reproductive decisions through economic calculus — mortgages, household registration costs, housing prices — the users render visible the material contradictions that state pronatalist discourse obscures through appeals to national interest and traditional family values.

According to Gao et al. (2024), as implementation of the three-child policy proceeds, women’s employment and promotion trajectories are predicted to become increasingly difficult. This anticipated deterioration exemplifies the structural dimension of the contradiction: policies ostensibly designed to support fertility may paradoxically increase workplace discrimination against women of childbearing age, as employers anticipate extended absences and divided attention. The economic calculation families must make thus becomes even more unfavorable: not only must they afford direct costs of additional children, but women must also factor in likely career penalties they will incur.

On November 8, 2024, the Weibo account of the Chinese magazine *Sanlian Life Weekly* (三联生活周刊) published an article entitled “Who will pay for the working mothers?” (谁来为职场妈妈买单?), which received 1,428 likes. The piece recounted the story of Xu Zhi, a working woman who, upon returning to work from maternity leave, was denied a promotion on the grounds that she would still need to breastfeed; her supervisor therefore preferred to give the opportunity to a male colleague. The article explained how this is a very common condition for working mothers: “The common limitations and problems they face include insufficient access to childcare institutions, low involvement of husbands in child rearing, and increased physical and cognitive labor due to having a second child” (她们面临的共同局限和问题包括托育机构可及性不足、丈夫育儿参与度低，以及因二孩增加的体力和认知劳动) (Weibo 2024). Among the 155 comments on the article, some users acknowledged the disparity in caregiving roles between mothers and fathers and called for greater balance in care responsibilities: “How to balance? Family or career? The father of the child must also take responsibility. Don’t blame the child’s mother all the time...” (如何平衡？家庭还是事业？孩子他爸也得有担当，别一股脑全推给孩子他妈...); “What used to be a problem has become a major issue, and relevant regulations need to be introduced at the national level, including amending labor laws, to effectively protect the rights of female



employees to have children and take care of their children.” (曾经不是问题的问题成了大问题，需要从国家层面出台有关规定，包括修改劳动法，切实保障女员工生育、保育权利。); “While the decision to have children is a joint one between men and women, it’s ultimately women who bear the risk and costs. If men don’t contribute to fertility insurance and provide financial support, and only donate sperm, they’re effectively getting a child for nothing, a typical ‘gold-diggin man’...” (生育是男女双方共同参与决定的，最后却主要是女性在承担风险成本，男性如果不贡献生育保障金，承担物质保障，只出一个精子，那无异于白捞一个孩子，典型“捞男”...). This last comment received 438 likes. The need to guarantee better working conditions for women and a major involvement of male partners in domestic and care work emerges clearly. The burden of the double shift that women must perform — productive labor and reproductive and care work — is acknowledged, as it penalizes women in the workplace, depriving them of adequate material conditions and economic autonomy.

These are some of the structural barriers that prevent the realization of fertility intentions. The testimonies analyzed here reveal how the lack of structured and effective support services, combined with persistent gender inequality in the workplace, fails to encourage Chinese women to have children. However, this structural dimension coexists with the experiences of those who choose not to have children as a personal decision or as a deliberate stance against women’s social subordination.

### 3.2 “Without a uterus, there is no right to speak”: Reproductive Agency within Contemporary Chinese Cultural Contexts

According to Federici (2020), the development of the capitalist system requires labor power, but also new workers and that is the reason why “no sector of capital can be indifferent to whether women decide to procreate” (2020: 17). For this reason, women’s bodies have been subjected to a dual process of mechanization: the first is connected to productive labor, whether paid or unpaid, performed outside and inside the home; the second is manifested in reproductive labor, in which women have been expropriated from their own bodies, socially conceived as reproductive machines.

This perspective resonates with the common sentiment of many Weibo women users who perceive motherhood as a burden, an obligation to be fulfilled in order to maintain the country’s harmony, to the point of urging other women not to marry and not to have children. While not explicitly discussing

bodies, the presence of comments such as “It’s better that no one gets married and has children” (大家不婚不育就好了) and “Live happily, don’t have children” (快乐的活着吧啊那就不生孩子) in response to the Sanlian Life Weekly post (Weibo 2024) testifies to a strong sense of dissatisfaction toward the socially conceived prospect of motherhood. The encouragement by some users not to have children is effectively an invitation to reclaim the reproductive function of one’s own body.

This phenomenon can be understood through what Brown (2019) conceptualizes as a ‘birth strike’ — an uncoordinated yet collective refusal by women to reproduce under conditions they deem untenable. Women are individually deciding to have fewer children or none at all, not merely as personal choices, but as responses to systemic failures: the lack of childcare support, insufficient parental leave, inadequate healthcare, and the broader incompatibility between motherhood and economic survival. Crucially, Brown frames reproductive control as a tool of political power: “we need to stop thinking about birth control and abortion as just individual choices or ‘our most personal health care decisions’ and start thinking about them as a tool of political power that women, the childbearing workforce, must control” (2019: 153). This grassroots resistance, though unorganized, creates collective pressure on the power structure, revealing the indispensable value of women’s reproductive work. The Chinese case demonstrates how, despite pronatalist policies and economic incentives, women maintain control over their reproductive capacity by refusing to bear children under conditions that would intensify their exploitation.

This articulation of bodily autonomy as central to reproductive freedom resonated powerfully in online discourse. Over the past few years, discussions around ‘fertility fear’ (kongyu 恐育) have become increasingly visible among young, unmarried Chinese women, especially within the social media sphere. According to Han (2024), among the issues discussed in the context of fertility fear, in addition to the structural reasons analyzed previously, there is also reproductive freedom (2024: 306). As a representative example, a Weibo post from May 31, 2021, responding to the three-child policy, starkly asserted: “Regarding #ThreeChildPolicy#, the most fundamental point is that without a uterus, there is no right to speak. Secondly, the uterus belongs only to its owner, not to men, not to the government, not to the state, and should not be coveted, controlled, or divided by any non-uterus owner” (关于#三孩政策#首先最基本的一点，没有子宫就没有发言权。其次，子宫只属于其拥有者，不属于男性、不属于政府、不属于国家，不应该被任何非子宫拥有者觊觎、掌控和

瓜分) (Sina Weibo 2021d). This statement, that reached 192 likes, directly challenges the state's claim to regulate women's reproductive capacity, asserting that reproductive decision-making authority belongs exclusively to those with the bodily capacity for reproduction. It reflects how users are translating the structural contradictions analyzed above into an everyday political language of refusal, asserting ownership over their reproductive labor and rejecting its instrumentalization for demographic goals. This assertion is highlighted by the repetitive structure “不属于男性、不属于政府、不属于国家” (not to men, not to the government, not to the state), that produces a striking rhetorical effect, evoking both indignation and empowerment.

This critical stance is amplified in transnational feminist activism, where activists positioned outside PRC censorship can articulate more explicitly oppositional discourse. A similar perspective appears in the article “Non-reproduction as Women's Free Choice and as the Ultimate Means to Halt the Operation of Patriarchy” (不生育是女性的自由选择，也可以是停止父权制度运作的最终方案), written by activist feminist writer Lü Pin and published after the announcement of the three-child policy, in October 21, 2021, on the blog 歪脑 (Why Not), a USA-based online magazine addressing new generations of Chinese readers. The activist writes:

Feminism must maintain its own public agenda. Its opposition to employment gender discrimination and its demands for public childcare are not aimed at encouraging women to have more children or allocating more benefits to childbearing women, but rather at ensuring that reproduction remains a free choice for women — a principle that is inseparable from ensuring the freedom to have fewer or no children. However, it is conceivable that the enhancement of women's reproductive freedom will herald a further decline in birth rates, serving as a marker of the tension between women and the state (Lü 2021).

Lü Pin directly emphasizes that feminist opposition to employment discrimination and demands for public childcare are not intended to encourage women to have more children. Instead, these demands aim to ensure that reproduction remains genuinely voluntary. States facing demographic decline often introduce measures such as extended parental leave, childcare subsidies, and protections against workplace discrimination for mothers. While these policies adopt the rhetoric of feminist demands for better working conditions and gender equality, their ultimate objective remains demographic: to increase birth rates in service of national interests. In the Chinese context specifically,

the state's appropriation of feminist discourse serves to advance its bio-political agenda of population management, with patriotic rhetoric encouraging women to bear more children — a strategy that has evoked strong resentment among women who recognize the patriarchal nature of these population planning policies (Zhang et al. 2024). By asserting that enhanced reproductive freedom will likely result in further declining birth rates, Lü Pin reveals the fundamental incompatibility between authentic women's liberation and state demographic management.

The overseas Instagram account @feministchina, managed by Chinese feminists living outside the PRC, collects content addressing gender inequalities in China and publicizes demonstrations and support events for Chinese women. A post from May 31, 2021 — immediately following announcement of the three-child policy — affirms: “Women are not reproductive tools and will not and should not change their personal decisions to have no or fewer children for the sake of national interest.” (女性不是生育工具，不会也不应为“国家利益”而改变个人不生少生的决定), “Based on human rights rather than birth rate considerations, the state should thoroughly abolish birth control and abolish family planning” (基于人权而非生育率考量，国家应彻底取消生育控制，废除计划生育) (Instagram 2021).

This statement centers the body — specifically, the refusal of women's bodies to function as ‘reproductive tools’ serving national wellbeing and state objectives. This perspective represents what can be characterized as grassroots feminist critique, articulated through social media by activists positioned outside mainland China borders, thereby enabling expression of explicitly anti-state positions. Crucially, this framing identifies the three-child policy not as an isolated measure but as the latest iteration of a historical pattern in which reproductive policies — whether restrictive or incentivizing — instrumentalize women's bodies for state demographic management.

## 4. Conclusions

This paper examined Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood under the three-child policy, demonstrating how reproductive choices are shaped not by the possibility of having additional children but by the structural-cultural disjuncture characterizing contemporary Chinese society. Applying Minello's (2022) framework to the Chinese context reveals how market liberalization and welfare privatization following the 1980s reforms

created a fundamental misalignment: structurally, families face prohibitive child-rearing costs and intensified workplace discrimination against mothers; culturally, the Xi administration's promotion of Confucian family values creates intense pressure for women to fulfill traditional maternal and caregiving responsibilities. This lack of complementarity — where economic conditions require women's full participation in wage labor while cultural expectations demand devotion to family — produces a tension between Chinese women and Chinese Government's policies.

Drawing on CDA's understanding of discourse as socially situated practice, social media posts have been examined as discourses historically situated within China's specific context of reproductive control (Wodak 2001: 3). Posts explicitly rejecting state control over reproduction — asserting that “the uterus belongs only to its owner, not to men, not to the government, not to the state” — demonstrate a growing consciousness around bodily autonomy that challenges ideologies of demographic nationalism. Comments encouraging reproductive refusal, critiquing the double burden of productive and reproductive labor, and demanding male participation in care work articulate collective resistance to state demographic management. This counter-discourse represents women's assertion of reproductive agency against biopolitical governance.

By centering Chinese women's voices and analyzing their context-specific strategies of resistance, this study seeks to contribute to non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood. While Chinese women negotiate reproductive agency within a landscape shaped by Confucian patriarchal kinship systems, authoritarian demographic management, and post-socialist neoliberalization, the material conditions underlying their reproductive refusal resonate across borders. Whether in China or Europe, women confront inadequate parental leave policies, prohibitive childcare costs, systematic workplace discrimination against mothers, and the persistent gendering of care responsibilities. These structural similarities, manifesting through different political and cultural frameworks, suggest that feminist resistance to reproductive instrumentalization addresses fundamentally shared contradictions of contemporary capitalism: the simultaneous demand for women's productive labor and their reproductive work, without providing the material conditions for either. Such an approach seeks to offer a modest contribution by drawing attention to both the historical specificity of women's struggles and the shared material conditions that shape feminist resistance across different contexts.



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